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MESSANTIA - CITY OF RICHES



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BOOK I:
GAMES MASTER'S
GUIDE

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Credits

The Chroniclers of Our Time

AUTHOR

Greg Lynch

EDITOR AND LINE DEVELOPMENT

Richard Neale

COVER ART

Scott Clark & Chris Quilliams

INTERIOR ARTISTS

Anthea Dilly, Sergio Villa Isaza, Vitor Ishimura, Celso Mathias, Chad Sergesketter, Ronald Smith & Alejandro Villen

STUDIO MANAGER

Ian Barstow

PRODUCTION DIRECTOR

Alexander Fennell

PROOFREADING

Ron Bedison

PLAYTESTERS

Adam Brimmer, Andre Chabot, Simon Galea, Kenneth Gatt, Robert Hall, Trevor Kerslake, Alan Marson & Sam Vail

SPECIAL THANKS

Theodore Bergquist & Fredrik Malmberg at Conan Properties.

SUPPORT

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Introduction

Welcome to the Messantia

MESSANTIA STRETCHES BEFORE you, though take heed; for beyond the salt-rimed timbers, weathered quays and gilded towers of Argos' greatest city lie the and clapboard shacks, riotous bazaars and cramped alleyways, lit only by the flash of knives. Messantia is a city of intrigue and peril, a city of lords and merchant houses, all scheming their way through The Thousand Faces behind the gates and doors of their barricaded villas. While honest men labour and toil to earn an honest wage and greedy merchants hoard their gold desperate refugees and fugitives, gladiators and adventurers kill for copper. So make ready lads, toss a purse of silvers to the harbourmaster and make ready to enter the Golden City itself.

Like a gilded pearl gleaming in the sand that rises above the surf, Messantia, the Golden City, capital of Argos and home to one of the mightiest navies of the Hyborian Age, glitters on the shore of the Western Ocean.

Standing astride the banks of the Khorotas River and blessed with a wide, deep-water harbour, Messantia is perfectly suited to be the trading capital it has become. In an age as vital and deadly as the Hyborian Age, however, it takes more than mere geography to build and hold a seat of power like Messantia. It takes strength, it takes cunning, it takes avarice and above all, it takes gold.

Downriver on the Tybor and the Khorotas from Aquilonia, along the famed Road of Kings and from the streets of Messantia itself, flows enough wealth to seize a throne or cast one down. From the city's busy docks, however, that wealth, stowed in the holds of trade ships, sails out into the rest of the world.

This shining metropolis, whose wealth and glory only partially hide the underbelly of crime and corruption, is as integral to the Conan stories as are weird beasts and scheming sorcerers, but Messantia is far more complex than either of those when presented in a roleplaying setting. Conveying the bustle, the people, the very feel of a great city is a true test of a Games Master's abilities. 'How do people act?' 'Where is the best place to buy a sword?' 'What is there to do here?' 'What kinds of inns are available?' All of these are questions familiar to Games Masters when the characters enter a city for the first time. Whether the Games Master is bringing the characters through Messantia's port on their way to their next adventure, is planning to run a single city adventure or even an entire campaign based in Messantia, the difficulties of convincingly depicting a fantasy city will arise. Games Masters who have experience running a city know the devil is in the details, and the details are in this sourcebook.

What is really going on behind Messantia's guided façade? These sourcebooks endeavours to answer that question. Within is a treasure trove of detail to bring the city of Messantia roaring to life at the gaming table. This series of books is devoted entirely to this fascinating city, revealing its history, culture, customs, points of interest, economy, intrigues and people.

It is an unfortunate fact that Robert E. Howard, Conan's creator, left us with only a handful of details about golden Messantia. In the writing of this sourcebook we have striven to include all we could from both his works and those of his successors. As for the rest, it is all of this author's creation. With new material carefully constructed to fit seamlessly with the old, both players and Games Masters will find *Messantia – City of Riches* a tremendous boon to their own campaigns in the Hyborian Age.



History of Messantia

The Birth of the Golden City

MESSANTIA HAS ITS beginnings in the early days of the Acheronian civilisation, when it was founded as a trading post at the mouth of the Khorotas. With the fall of the Acheronians beneath the swords of the Hyborian barbarians, the small city where Messantia now stands was destroyed. Many battles were fought between the Hyborians and Sons of Shem for the land now known as Argos, but ultimately the Hyborians were victorious.

As the years passed, Messantia lapsed into a simple fishing village. In time, it waxed again, attracting more and more settlers due to its sheltering harbour, abundant seas and position at the mouth of the river. It became again a small city, and its people began to discover the knowledge of engineering and architecture left behind in the ruins of the city they had inherited from the Acheronians.

The fishermen of Messantia were adept at their craft, and soon they were bringing to port more fish than the citizens demanded. Preserving fish by packing it in salt or pickling it was an old trade even in those days, having been practiced as a means to stave off hunger in even the leanest of times. Barge traffic began to flow upstream along the Khorotas, the first pale beginnings of a trade route along which wealth unimaginable would one day flow. A busy river trade began, as barges of trade goods were hauled upstream to the land-locked peoples to the north. The barges returned laden with iron and meat, as well as more settlers to swell the burgeoning population of Messantia.

As demand grew, the fishermen of Messantia cast their nets farther each year, feeding the hunger of not just their city, but that of dozens of tribes and villages inland as far as the Aquilonian border. Soon, they found themselves competing with the fishermen of southern Zingara for the best fishing grounds, the first sparks of an enmity which still blazes today. As time passed and more people came to settle in Messantia, they discovered the other wealth the land had to offer.

Inland lay wide, flat plains ideal for grazing or farming. In the hills along the coast were hidden iron and gold. Combined with the wealth of the sea and the deep, sheltered harbour,

Messantia became a small, booming city. Wealth like this, however, always attracts those who wish to take it by the point of a sword. Raids from barbarous tribes and nearby lands began to increase, and there were threatening rumbles from Shem. The pirates plying the seas also came to see Messantia as a plump fruit, ready for picking. It was in this time that the land of Argos first formed itself into a nation, with Messantia as its capital and Danaus as its first king.

To protect the capital, a low stone wall was constructed, shielding it from the depredations of the barbarian raiders. More importantly, however, the Messantian shipwrights began to turn their attention to the art of maritime warfare, the advent of which led to the founding of the strongest navy of the Hyborian Age. The shipwrights turned their skills to developing faster ships that sat low in the water and were powered by the oars of slaves. This period also saw the experimental use of bronze plated hulls, specifically designed for ramming, and deck-mounted light catapults. With such defences in place, the city was kept safe, and continued to grow.

The growth of Argos' navy demanded more and more space in Messantia's harbour for shipbuilding and dry-docking. Finally, King Cassius commanded that the city's shipyards be moved elsewhere. After considering several of the other cities on the coast, Cassius decided instead to use a natural harbour located only four miles west of Messantia. Ringed with brief cliffs that all but prevented access inland, it was unsuitable as a site for a city, but would serve well as a shipyard. As an added bonus, relocating the naval yards there would keep away the smugglers who were fond of using it to evade Messantia's taxes and tariffs. The place still goes by the name the pirates and smugglers gave it, but Freecove is now home to several hundred shipwrights, workers and slaves who build and repair the ships of Argos' mighty navy.

It was during the reign of King Gellius that the city's growth spilled over the old wall, homes and businesses mushrooming up outside the ancient line of defence. Gellius, whose father Menetus lived to a ripe old age, had come late to the throne and took the crown with years of experience riding the borders and treading the decks of warships. He was wise in the ways of battle and reasoned that Messantia had

little to fear from a land-based attack – that if a hostile host marched overland to the city, the land of Argos itself would have already been conquered, its army vanquished. It was from an attack by sea that Gellius reasoned Messantia must be defended. Despite numerous entreaties and proposals by the Merchant Houses to build another wall for the city's defence, Gellius resisted, instead focusing his efforts on creating an ever more powerful navy.

It was also during this time that Argos was wrestling with Stygia for mastery of the seas and the pirates of the Barachan Islands, growing ever bolder, began to harry the merchant ships of both powers. Weary of sending warships out to fruitlessly hunt these pirates, Gellius hit upon a simpler, far more effective plan. He offered the Barachan Pirates, mostly Argossean by blood anyway, safe harbour in Messantia in exchange for safe passage for Argossean merchant ships. After only brief consideration the pirates agreed and so began a strange, sometimes tenuous, relationship that continues still. The heads of the Merchant Houses, whose cargoes had been stolen and ships sunk or taken by the pirates, howled with rage at this truce, but the gold which flowed to them more steadily than ever before soon silenced their cries.

THE BLACKBLOOD PLAGUE

The history of the coming of the plague has never been written, and is known only to a privileged few within the gilded halls of Messantia's palace, the Dome of the Sea and some of the older Merchant Houses.

Intent upon reclaiming sole mastery of the seas from the upstart Argosseans, the Stygian sorcerer Amenkuhn had travelled north to the burgeoning city of Messantia. With false promises of wealth and alliance he arranged a secret meeting with Karnes Accertius, the head of the Accertius Merchant House. Karnes' hopes for easy wealth and power died only seconds before he himself was slain by the wizard. Using an item of dark power known as the Orb of Semblance, Amenkuhn took the form of Karnes and assumed leadership of the House. His new guise enabled him to come and go from the palace as freely as any noble, even presenting him with the opportunity to meet with Calemos, the then king of Argos. His plan was simple, to use the orb once again to take the throne from the old king.

Calemos was a cagey old monarch and ever concerned of the strength of his grip on the crown, knowing full well that a throne was a dangerous place to sit. Even in his disguise as Karnes, Amenkuhn found it difficult to earn the king's trust. The wily Stygian had prepared for this possibility,

however, and offered up to Calemos advice and counsel which led to the unmasking of false Stygian plots laid by Amenkuhn himself, in the event he should need to convince Calemos of his loyalty and the value of his counsel.

Calemos began to trust the disguised sorcerer, but his son Miklus grew more and more wary of this man who constantly bent to his father's ear. He gave orders to those guards loyal to him that he was to be informed whenever Karnes met with Calemos, and began to consult with Padrishia, an improbable priestess of Mitra who hailed from Vendhya. It was she who began to pierce the veil the Orb had drawn over Amenkuhn's true features, yet she could not piece together all that had happened. She could only warn that if left too long alone with the man who seemed to be Karnes, Calemos would perish.

What made Miklus bide his time still is unknown, though those few who do know this part of the story suspect that he, like many others, had his eye on the throne. The Accertius family watched with glee as their fortunes waxed on the counsel of the disguised sorcerer, ignorant that he was not one of their number at all. Privately, they began to whisper of the possibility of King Karnes, and the wealth that title would bring, both him and his entire House. They were not alone in this. The other Merchant Houses saw, or so they thought, all too well what the future would bring with Karnes whispering in Calemos' ear and began moving to block and discredit him. More than once, the galleons of these rival Houses broke into open battle on the wide sea, the first skirmishes of impending war.

Before war came to Messantia, word came to Miklus that Karnes had sought and been granted a sudden and unexpected audience with Calemos in the dead of night. He gathered a handful of loyal men and approached the king's chambers stealthily, quickly incapacitating the pair of surprised guards who stood their posts outside the royal doors. Miklus and his men burst inside to confront the sorcerer, who had forsaken Karnes' appearance and was in the midst of stealing Calemos' visage. When the struggle was over Calemos and half of Miklus' guards lay dead and Amenkuhn had fled.

Exactly how Calemos died, or whether the prince could have reached the chambers in time to save him, are questions few have asked and none have answered. Miklus took the crown that very night, and each of the surviving guards was granted a knighthood by the new monarch, but nothing more is known of the events in Calemos' chambers. It is here the secret parts of the tale end and more commonly known history begins, though none but those who know the first part

The black plague stalked through the streets of Belverus, striking down the merchant in his stall, the serf in his kennel, the knight at his banquet board. Before it the arts of the leeches were helpless. Men said it had been sent from hell as punishment for the sins of pride and lust. It was swift and deadly as the stroke of an adder. The victim's body turned purple, then black, and within a few minutes he sank down dying, and the stench of his own putrefaction was in his nostrils even before death wrenched his soul from his rotting body.

Robert E. Howard, *The Hour of the Dragon*

understand the reasons behind what followed. Amenkuhn was not slain that night by Miklus or his men, but rather escaped, loosing as he did a terrible curse on Messantia, its people and even its beasts, which were the first to fall.

Starting with the livestock on the ranches outside Messantia, then spreading swiftly to the ranchers and into the city itself, came a terrible plague. It was called 'Blackblood', a wasting disease affecting the blood itself, causing it to turn black and foul within the body.

No one knew how it moved from victim to victim, but as it began to spread through the city, Messantia found itself in an involuntary quarantine. Trade barges stopped coming downriver, and the tall ships that had once brought goods from throughout the world now turned their sails in favour of other ports. Even the fishermen of Messantia looked to flee, but knew their lives would be forfeit if the Zingarans, Stygians or the Black Corsairs caught them on the ocean. More, with the livestock dead and traders staying away from the city for fear of the plague, the fishermen supplied the only source of food still available to the stricken city. Now the king, Miklus sent his chamberlain first to command, then to plead with the fishermen to stay. They reluctantly agreed and travelled only as far as they felt they must to be safe, out to a shallow sandbar jutting into Messantia's harbour. There they dropped anchor. At night, they watched the fires burning in Messantia, as building after building was put to the torch in an attempt to stomp out the plague.

As the plague continued, the fishermen continued to ply their trade, scooping from the ocean the food that would see those not laid low by the

plague through this ordeal. Still unwilling to enter the city, they would sail close enough to the docks that buckets of fish could be handed across on the tip of an oar, and payment returned in the same manner. The plague continued to eat away at the city and the fishermen began to worry how long this terrible sickness would go on. Led now by an old man named Parsion Duchis, they started to construct one of the oddest settlements in the known world.

Using what timbers and equipment they could find, the fishermen drove stilts down into the rock that capped the sandbar, and began constructing buildings atop them. Eventually the plague subsided, but most of the fishermen's homes had been burned during the purges, leaving them nothing to return to in the city proper. Many chose to remain, and their ramshackle settlement grew. Seen from the shore, one merchant whose name has long been lost likened it to a village standing on legs like a crane, earning it the name Cranetown.

As the months and years passed, Cranetown grew in size and complexity. Today, hundreds make their home on the waves, in an unplanned sprawl of homes, taverns, brothels, markets and quays. It is not uncommon for someone to spend his entire life in Cranetown, never touching solid earth.

Nearly five months after the hideous disease claimed its first victims, the city of Messantia was trembling on the edge of collapse. Its people were angry and terrified, a thousand prophets of doom decried the plague as Mitra's vengeance upon the city for every conceivable sin, and it was all the Patrol and Royal Guard and soldiers could do to hold the city back from absolute anarchy.

Amenkuhn had let his rage at the newly crowned King Miklus overrule his reason, and rather than fleeing the land of Argos, remained in hiding near Messantia. He intended to renew the terrible magic driving the Blackblood Plague again and again, entertaining himself with visions of King Miklus watching helplessly as the people of Messantia were exterminated, one horrible death at a time. Meanwhile, King Miklus had agents hunting tirelessly for any news of the sorcerer, and it was these men who brought him word of Amenkuhn's lair outside the city.

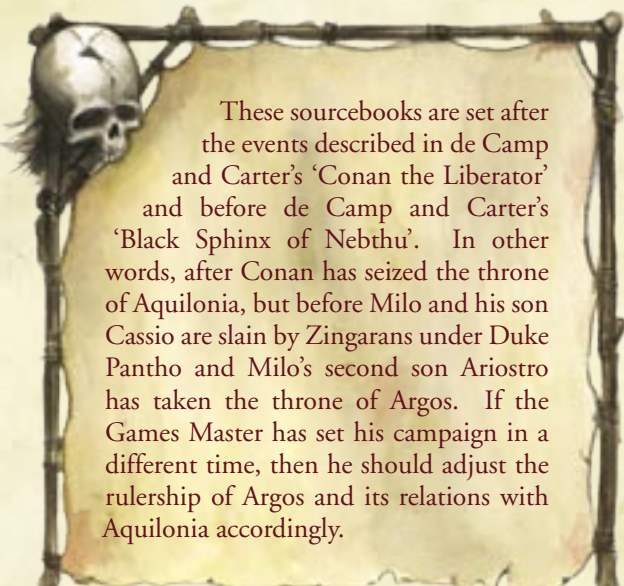
With his troops and Patrol staving off Messantia's utter collapse, King Miklus had no men in his service to lead against Amenkuhn. Ignoring the pleas of his advisers, Miklus assembled a group of desperate men and women, adventurers and cut-throats, gladiators and thieves, and led them against the Stygian's hidden base. Amenkuhn was not alone, nor was he unprepared, and the battle between Messantia's saviours and the sorcerer's forces was bloody and

brutal, immortalised now in dozens of songs and stories. At the battle's end, King Miklus and Dersagrena, a female Cimmerian gladiator, slew Amenkuhn. His body was dragged back to Messantia and impaled on a pike outside Miklus' palace. The cloven skull of the Stygian sorcerer is still kept in the treasure vaults of Argos' kings, held in a golden cage.

Once the plague had passed, Messantia was a shell of its former self. Nearly 10,000 souls had perished from the disease. Fortunately for the city and its future, King Miklus was a ruler of vision and determination. A lesser man might have been content to withdraw and nurse the city slowly back to health, but Miklus saw opportunity in disaster. Before any new construction began to replace the stretches of the city that had been put to the torch, he set himself to renovating the city in its entirety, beginning with expansion and improvement of Messantia's rudimentary sewer system.

Dozens of slaves perished in the construction of the new sewers, whether from exhaustion or the frequent cave-ins brought on by soft mud and the weight of the nearby river. Work on the sewers had only just begun in earnest when Miklus ordered construction of two score more wells and fountains within the city to provide his subjects with fresh water. The lack of such basic supplies was widely, if incorrectly, hailed to be the reason for the long endurance of Amenkuhn's plague.

Still unsatisfied, Miklus went further, commissioning a park, now known as Miklus' Garden, which lie at the border of Dockside and Bazaar Prefect, and ordering renovations to the old arena, making possible the full suite of games Messantians still enjoy. None of these projects,



These sourcebooks are set after the events described in de Camp and Carter's 'Conan the Liberator' and before de Camp and Carter's 'Black Sphinx of Nebthu'. In other words, after Conan has seized the throne of Aquilonia, but before Milo and his son Cassio are slain by Zingarans under Duke Pantho and Milo's second son Ariostro has taken the throne of Argos. If the Games Master has set his campaign in a different time, then he should adjust the rulership of Argos and its relations with Aquilonia accordingly.

save the new wells, were completed by the time of Miklus' peaceful death, and the coffers of Argos were stretched thin when his son Tirus took the throne. Tirus, at the urging of some of the Merchant Houses (mostly those who felt they had profited too little by Miklus' projects), considered cancelling or abridging some of what his father had put in motion, but Miklus' enduring popularity with the people of Messantia made such ideas impossible.

THE MODERN CITY

In the years since Miklus unmasked Amenkuhn's plots Messantia has known little but peace. There are, of course, the occasional clashes with Black Corsairs or even the infrequent and unacknowledged battles with the ships of Stygia, but these have so little impact on the common people of the city that the citizens often remain wholly oblivious to them. Far to the west, at the border of Argos, there is often trouble with Zingara, but this too is generally a limited affair.

Early in the reign of King Costans, Milo's father, trouble came from the most unlikely of places: Cranetown. By now grown into a floating city of more than a thousand people, Cranetown all but governed itself, which was generally acceptable to the crown, so long as the fish and the tariffs continued to come. But among the independent-minded men of Cranetown, a leader named Arcadius arose. A fiery speaker and charismatic leader, he preached secession from the city of Messantia and independence for Cranetown. This was too much for Costans to countenance, and he sent a dozen warships to blockade Cranetown and seize Arcadius. Arcadius was crucified on the prow of Messantia's flagship, the *Pride*, which dropped anchor off Cranetown, bobbing in the waves for four days with the rebel leader nailed to her bow as a lesson to the others. There have been, in the years since, occasional rumblings of dissatisfaction from Cranetown, but the lesson Costans taught has been well-remembered and only a tiny fringe of Cranetown's population would seriously consider any kind of uprising.

Today, King Milo rules over his feudal kingdom with a light hand, and Messantia is at peace. The relationship with mighty Aquilonia has been bitter in the past. Early in Milo's reign, King Vilerus III of Aquilonia invaded northern Argos and seized a parcel of land at the mingling of the Alimane and Khorotas Rivers. Since Milo helped Conan achieve the throne, however, relations with Aquilonia have been amicable. Secure in its wealth, its allies and its unparalleled navy, Argos and its capital Messantia have little to fear.

Avenues & Alleyways

The Prefects of Messantia

FROM AFAR, MESSANTIA seems a city of glittering gold. The gilded parapets of the Dome of the Sea, the shining marble of the Merchant House dwellings, the Mitran temple and the bright spires of the arena gleam across the distance, causing the city to appear as a bright and glorious jewel. As one draws closer to the city, however, a sharp divide becomes obvious – the Khorotas River, which winds its way through artificial banks of worked limestone on the final rushing steps of its journey to the sea.

The river is more than a physical divide, however. It is a financial and cultural border. Only on the western bank do the buildings glow with marble and gold. To the east lie the warehouses, brothels, taverns and tenements built of wood and dull tiles. While there is wealth aplenty to the east of the river, it is mostly in the hands of fences, crime bosses and petty slumlords. The west is where the real wealth abides and where those of important social standing make their homes, the nobles, Merchant Houses, guilds and master craftsmen of the city.

Messantia is further divided, unofficially, into a number of different regions, commonly known as prefects. These prefects are Dustbiter, Redboots, Dockside, Bazaar Prefect, River Prefect, King's Prefect, Arena Prefect, Hilltop and Cranetown.

King Prius found these nebulous, crudely named regions annoying. In perhaps the only act of his reign not ordered by the Merchant Houses, he undertook to redistrict the city into eight prefectures, four on each side of the Khorotas, quartering each half of the city equally. In each prefecture he installed a prefect, who was to oversee the happenings in his area, solve what problems he could and report to

Prius anything he could not. Prius' idea, derided by the people, met with complete failure, due in large part to his own poor planning and ineptitude.

Few in the city understood the Byzantine system of rules and chains of command Prius had created for the prefectures, and most citizens simply ignored the new

Far south of Aquilonia, a slender war galley cleft the stormy waters of the Western Ocean. The ship, of Argossean lines, was headed shoreward, where the lights of Messantia glimmered through the twilight. A band of luminescent green along the western horizon marked the passing of the day, and overhead, the first stars of evening jewelled the sapphire sky, then paled before the rising of the moon.

Lin Carter and L. Sprague de Camp,
Conan the Liberator

rules and prefects, continuing to live and work exactly as they had before. Upon ascending the throne, the first act of Prius' daughter Queen Penellia was to disband the prefectures and fire the prefects. Instead, she created the position of Consul, who was to oversee the city as a whole, attending to those issues beneath the royal attention. Perversely, the name 'prefect' stuck and now, long years after King Prius and his plan have been forgotten by the people of Messantia, it has become the word by which they refer to the different regions of the city.

Below is a detailed description of the different prefects of the city including a short history of the area, often explaining its name, an overview of the people who live there, as well as a catalogue of businesses, homes and points of interest within the prefect. Some of the businesses and points of interest are described in detail, while others are left open for the Games Master to personalise and expand. Obviously, in a city like Messantia, there will be many more businesses than those mentioned here and Games Masters are encouraged to create new businesses, homes and other points of interest to further populate the Golden City and make it fit more neatly into their campaign.

DUSTBITER

On the north-eastern outskirts of the city, alongside the anchor point of the Road of Kings, lies the wide area known to the citizens as Dustbiter. It is comprised of caravan staging yards, the various pens and corrals where livestock is kept upon first arriving in the city and a host of taverns, liveries, brothels, craftsmen and hostels which serve the constant stream of caravans arriving and departing Messantia. The eastern areas of the prefect are given over to holding facilities for livestock belonging to the city and the guilds, such as the oxen that pull the carts of the Street Sweepers Guild.

The region takes its name from a group of caravan workers who called themselves the Dustbiters. When Messantia was first truly coming into its own as a capital of trade and the caravans began to roll constantly into this anchor of the Road of Kings, the Dustbiters were the unofficial rulers of the caravan yards. After years of guarding wagon after wagon of trade goods from roving bandits, in the days when they still plagued this area of Argos, these men saw an opportunity to make much more money with much less work. At first through a network of association with everyone in the Messantia who made his living directly from the caravan traffic, then with threats, intimidation and outright violence, the Dustbiters created a crude but effective criminal network with hands in every coin purse in the caravan yards.



Although the crown was well aware of what was happening with the Dustbiters, they were ignored for some time. Indeed, Queen Darina almost welcomed their presence, as they dramatically reduced the level of crime in the yards. No longer were the travellers and tradesmen in any real danger of violence or theft and only those who did not pay the Dustbiters protection had anything to fear. Some of the Merchant Houses grumbled about the thin slice the Dustbiters were taking from their profits, but Darina felt the additional security was well worth it, even going so far as to dramatically reduce the Patrol's presence in the area.

As their power grew, however, so did their greed. The levies taken by the Dustbiters became heavier and heavier, enough so that caravaneers began to rethink making the stop at Messantia at all. This was too much for Darina to bear and in one swift blow, the Patrol fell on the Dustbiters like a hammer. After two bloody days of searching, fighting and terror, those leaders of the gang who could not escape dangled from nooses all about the caravan yards. Ever since, the Patrol has guarded the yards in force, but the name Dustbiter stuck to the area.

The Patrol is particularly visible along the Palisade, a flagged road that runs from the edge of the caravan yards around the perimeter of the Dustbiter to the Coin Bridge, and then to the north of River Prefect and finally into the wealthy western city. Thickly lined with cedar trees to obscure the sight of the eastern city, the Palisade is used by wealthy arrivals to move from Dustbiter to their destinations in the western city without having to pass through the more unsightly areas of Messantia.

Those who make their homes and livelihood in Dustbiter are all tied directly to the caravan trade. Its businesses are simple and straightforward, catering to the immediate needs and comforts of caravans and the men that work them.

The hostels are just that, simple, two-storey structures with no individual rooms, simply long rows of beds available for rent to the caravan workers who want to sleep on something other than earth for the night. The brothels are staffed with tired, bored women who usher men through as quickly as they can. The taverns are the busiest businesses in the prefect, usually filled with men drinking away their wages. The one element of luxury in the prefect is a bathhouse, built by the Caravaneers Guild for the use of its members. Although it cannot compare to the sumptuous bathhouses in the western city, it provides all the basic services free of charge to men who want to wash themselves clean of the dust of the

trail, or the smells of a night in the taverns and brothels of Dustbiter.

Any place filled with men just off the trail, with silver jingling in their purses and only a short time to spend it, is certain to attract the kind of person eager to help. In the dirty alleys of Dustbiter lurk pickpockets, gamblers, loan sharks and con men, all anxious to ply their trade.

Unlike the rest of the city, there are very few sewer pipes running into Dustbiter, whose citizens generally make do with chamber pots. The bathhouse and a few of the larger inns and taverns have rudimentary sewer access, as do the government buildings found in this prefect, but the remainder of the people here must do without.

POINTS OF INTEREST

All of the following points of interest are appended by a number bracketed by parentheses. This number correlates to the feature's location on the map of Messantia provided with this product.

For Want of a Nail (1): This oddly-named shop is the largest store in Messantia. It is owned and operated by Hadrian Tamarlin, a Messantian of Aquilonian descent and the shop has been in his family for five generations. It takes its name from an old piece of wisdom, which teaches that even the greatest enterprise can fail for the lack of a simple thing. Employing a staff of 20, Nail (as it is more commonly called) stocks hundreds of items, almost everything a caravan could conceivably need on its journey, from nails to tack, dried foods to spare wagon wheels. Hadrian also stocks a number of frivolous or luxury items and has fresh bread, milk and fish delivered daily. Combined with his staff, about half of which are made up of young, attractive women, and the store's location next to the bathhouse, Nail is a favourite stop of caravaneers both before and after the trail.

The Bathhouse (2): Open only to members of the Caravaneers Guild, this bathhouse was built and is maintained by the guild.

The Broken Spoke (3): Duccino Cavirus is the owner of this large wainwright and wheelwright shop, based in an old warehouse. The interior of the shop and the wide yard behind it are commonly littered with a score or two of wagons and wheels in various states of repair.

Duccino's young son and daughter, Nebrotto and Meldina, are the *de facto* craftsmen of the shop now. Duccino's wife Solavita left him without a word

for one of Duccino's apprentices, a handsome man named Gamberino, nearly a year ago and he now spends most of his time and money drinking at the Dusty Throat. Duccino fired his remaining apprentices, though Nebrotto and Meldina have managed to save enough money to retain two new ones. First-time visitors to the shop often get a laugh out of seeing Meldina, a delicate-looking eight-year-old, shouting orders to the apprentices who are three times her size. Despite the siblings' best efforts, however, business is dropping off, as many potential customers do not trust the workmanship of a shop effectively run by two children and are taking their business to one of the other wainwrights or wheelwrights of Dustbiter.

Last Stop (4): A rowdy, noisy tavern filled with men coming off the trail or about to go back on. While not a brothel, the street prostitutes of Dustbiter commonly work it. Brawls are common here, often started over an argument about one of the women. It is owned by Gusme Bonolan, a retired caravan guard who is bowlegged from three decades spent in the saddle.

Two Bones (5): A gambling den and tavern, where many men coming off the trail lose and spend all the silver they have earned.

Dustbiters' Rest (6): A simple inn, offering nothing more than a good night's sleep on a cot and a hot meal. Though used almost exclusively by caravaneers, it is open to anyone without the silver for a better inn, or simply too tired from the trail to bother with finding one.

Rencius Stables (7): Caravans owned and operated by Merchant Houses have private stables for their own use, but for everyone else, there is Rencius'. In its stalls and paddock, Rencius Stables can keep and feed approximately 150 horses.

Claudio's Fine Tack (8): This small shop offers all the tack and leather goods a caravan might need in its journey. Claudio Solavivus, who owns the store along with his two sons Lello and Oddo, can also repair most broken tack.

First Comfort (9): This brothel is poorly named, as it offers little in the way of comfort. It is, however, cheap and does a good business with men who are not discriminating.

In the Saddle (10): A provision store, stocking various preserved foods that will keep for months on the trail.

The Bent Cup (11): This tavern, now owned by Amannito Panfilivus, was once the headquarters and stronghold of

the Dustbiters and narrowly avoided being burned to the ground during Queen Darina's purge of the gang.

Well Shod (12): A farrier.

The Dusty Throat (13): A tavern, which is also the primary place of business for Caius Hemeklos, the most well-connected fence in Dustbiter.

The Golden Road (14): A tavern near the entrance to the Palisade. It features a long, open area in the front, from which patrons can watch caravans coming in and the wealthy heading toward the western city. The Slavetaker, Giovanni Eres (see page 78) likes to keep an agent here to watch for potential quarry.

Broad Back (15): A porter service, offering transport of goods throughout the city.

Perfume and Silk(16): Brothel, which is noticeably lacking both elements of its name.

Fine Mounts (17): Horsetrader and farrier. Also offers training for horses.

Silver Embrace (18): A notoriously crooked gambling house owned by Letitia Maridonnus, which still sees a brisk business, as the upstairs area is a brothel with better accommodations and employees than any other in the prefect.

Prefect Tariff Office (19)

Prefect Patrol Station (20)

Five Knives (21): A tavern and dancing hall, famous throughout Argos for the strange, erotic and dangerous dance that has given the establishment its name.

To the Hilt (22): A weaponry store, which stocks weapons of almost every sort that can be used from horseback. All the store's stock is simple and functional; those wanting a better-crafted or exotic weapon will have to try River Prefect or Dockside.

The Barracks (23): A tavern owned by the Caravaneers Guild, where guards and drivers looking for work congregate.

Safekeeping (24): A sturdily-built stone warehouse owned by the Loreca Merchant House. Safekeeping offers storage space for expensive items belonging to merchants

or travellers passing through Messantia. It is always under heavy guard by House Loreca's retainers.

The Sturdy Wagon (25): A porter.

The Perfect Poultrice (26): A shop owned and operated by Marcus Pellino, a leech and herbalist. The only man of his profession in Dustbiter, Marcus works on both humans and animals. He also does a brisk business selling compounds and cure-alls to caravans. He will sell herbal compounds, but not the raw herbs themselves.

Trail's End (27): A simple tavern.

Caravan Master (28): This city official maintains, as well as is possible, a schedule of incoming and outgoing caravans. He also assigns yards to incoming caravans.

REDBOOTS

Adjacent to Dustbiter, in a thin crescent along the eastern edge of the city, lies the prefect known to the locals as Redboots. It is an ugly, utilitarian place of warehouses, abattoirs and tanneries formed of clapboard and mud bricks which takes its name from the blood that runs from the slaughterhouses into the sewers, staining the boots of anyone walking the streets.

Those not employed here do their best to ignore the existence of Redboots, aided somewhat in that by the prevailing sea winds, which blow east from west and carry the charnel smell of the abattoirs and tanneries away from the city. On the rare occasion the winds blow the other way, all the city is rudely reminded of Redboots.

No one makes their home in this prefect. Even the most destitute avoid the rat-haunted streets of Redboots at night, making it a perfect spot for illicit dealings for those brave enough to venture there. The oldest sewers in the city lie beneath Redboots, barely touched during King Miklus' extensive renovations and it may be that even the guildmaster of the Sewer Workers Guild is ignorant of the full extent of tunnels, pipes and crawlways which lie beneath Redboots.

What is known is that there are areas of the Redboots sewer system where none of the Sewer Workers Guild workers will go. It is easy to find a slaughterhouse worker who, late at night and deep in his cups, will describe the scurrying and slurping noises that echo up to the surface when a day's



worth of blood and offal is poured into a rusted, heavily-locked sewer grate.

Despite what may be going on beneath Redboots, above the surface it is a place of men working a hard living. Though the rest of the city may prefer to ignore them, they are all too glad of the fresh meat and fine leathers delivered to their markets. Redboots slaughtermen, while hardly immune to the city's culture of avarice, are less defined by it than the rest of the city. They care little for the politics and intrigues of the city's wealthy, spending their days in hard, gruelling labour and earn little for it. The primary concern of these men is how to feed their families and, if possible, provide a better future for their children than a life spent in Redboots.

The Merchant Houses that own the slaughterhouses and tanneries of Redboots once employed slave labour as their workforce here. A bloody and expensive rebellion taught them the error of providing large numbers of slaves with cleavers and teaching them not to mind the sights, sounds and smells of slaughter. Since then, the slaughtermen of Redboots have all been free men.

POINTS OF INTEREST

There are no points of interest within Redboots.

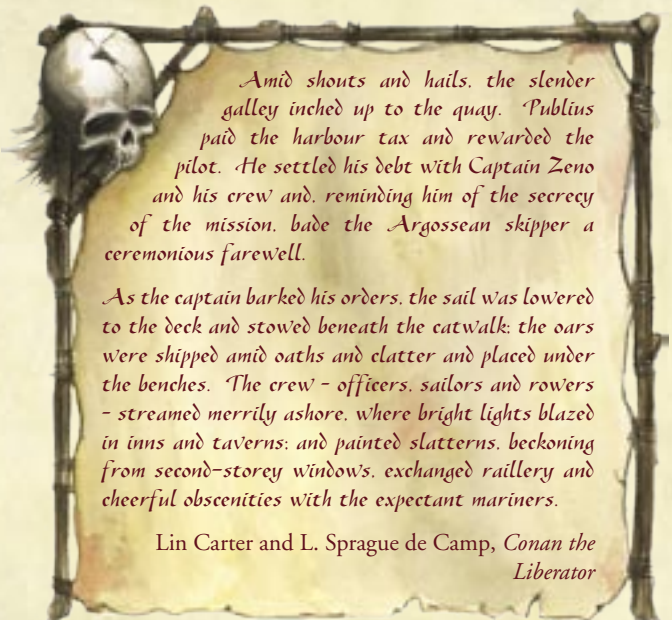
It is an awful place, full of the sounds of screaming cattle and bleating sheep and awash with the stench of offal, excrement and rendering vats.

DOCKSIDE

Dockside stretches along the eastern side of the waterfront from Redboots to the Khorotas River. Its northern border is generally agreed to be the long curve of Ten Coins Road and the southern edge of Miklus' Garden. In many ways, it is to seamen what Dustbiter is to caravan workers.

Along the shore a series of quays and wharves of weathered wood and wave-smoothed stone jut out into the water. Merchant ships of every sea-faring nation in the western world bob at their moorings alongside the swift ships of the Barachan pirates and an armada of cargo barges. During the day, the docks are abuzz with activity. Ships slide in and out of their berths; men scurry back and forth, shouting to the labourers loading or unloading the stream of cargo which is Messantia's lifeblood. Cargo barges make their slow, clumsy way to and from Cranetown or to a ship too large for any of the empty quays; Patrol officers prowling the boards, eyes open for anything suspicious. Beggars, thieves, pilgrims, merchants and travellers mix in a throng whose density varies with the time of year, walking with the easy familiarity of a citizen or the gape-mouthed wonder of someone seeing golden Messantia for the first time.

At night, the docks are only slightly less busy. Sea traffic still comes in, directed by signal lanterns at Cranetown or guideboats, which lead ships to the quays. Sentries stand guard over their masters' ships. Raucous noise echoes from the taverns that line the waterfront and from the second



Amid shouts and hails, the slender galley inched up to the quay. Publius paid the harbour tax and rewarded the pilot. He settled his debt with Captain Zeno and his crew and, reminding him of the secrecy of the mission, bade the Argossean skipper a ceremonious farewell.

As the captain barked his orders, the sail was lowered to the deck and stowed beneath the catwalk; the oars were shipped amid oaths and clatter and placed under the benches. The crew - officers, sailors and rowers - streamed merrily ashore, where bright lights blazed in inns and taverns; and painted slatterns, beckoning from second-storey windows, exchanged raillery and cheerful obscenities with the expectant mariners.


Lin Carter and L. Sprague de Camp, *Conan the Liberator*

storey painted prostitutes wave and call to potential customers. Hours before dawn breaks, men are already making ready to catch the morning tide out of the harbour.

Viewed in total, Dockside is a polyglot of people and occupations. Most of the workers who spend their days in Redboots live quietly enough in the northern regions of this prefect, in alley after alley of tenements and small houses. They are mostly family men trying to provide as best a living as they can for their wives and children. As they live simply and have little to steal this area has less crime than any other part of the eastern city. Many dock workers who have, with age and family, grown weary of the tumult near the sea now choose to make their homes here as well.

This part of the prefect is bounded on the south by the remnants of the ancient city wall, now mostly gone but for the odd broken tower or warehouses where it has been used as the fourth wall of one of the prefect's many warehouses. There are several rows of these, marching further southward, in which are stored goods just arrived or about to depart the city by sea.

Between the warehouses and the sea lie the jumbled alleyways and salt-flecked buildings that give the entire prefect its rowdy reputation. It was once known as Briney, but that name quickly fell out of use. Here are the tenements of the dock workers, the taverns and dancing halls that clash with sound late into the night. Among these lie a throng of shops, big and small, selling rope, sailcloth, nets, line, hooks, planks and assorted other things for which a ship's captain often finds himself in need. Many of these are merely storefronts, representing an inventory held in storage in one of the warehouses farther north. As for the other shops, most are small, ramshackle affairs that can easily be divided into two categories. One category is the cheap, second-hand shop, where a sailor without much coin can find himself a pair of used boots or a dull old sword or stocked with strange objects, charms, herbs and spices brought to Messantia by sailors from other lands. Often advertised as 'Mysterious Wonders of Distant Lands' or something similar, most of these items are pure chicanery – the relics, charms and artefacts mere broken or useless baubles, the herbs little if anything more than simple weeds. A potential customer would be wise to ask himself why, if this merchant possesses such treasures, is he sitting in a creaking shack in the midst of Dockside?



The harbour boat, a gig rowed by six burly Argosseans, approached the galley. In the bow a cloak-wrapped figure wagged a lantern to and fro, and the captain waved an answer to the signal.

Lin Carter and L. Sprague de Camp, *Conan the Liberator*

A number of these shops, and a few of the others besides, are little more than fronts, pulling a mask of legitimacy over the merchant's true avocation as a fence. Some work independently, others as part of a larger criminal organisation, but all offer a service which is frequently of pressing importance for an adventurer with stolen or illegal goods.

In the taverns, brothels and dancing halls on the wharves and quays of the Dockside, there is always activity. People from a dozen kingdoms mingle and the babble of a dozen languages can be heard. It is a dangerous place, only lightly manned by the Patrol, and its alleys can be as perilous as a battlefield. Press gangs from ships short on both crew and morals sometime kidnap or coerce new crewmen from among the denizens of this prefect. Among the beggars and drunkards lurk pickpockets and cut-throats, and for the man who knows where to ask, the service of a dozen murderers can be bought with a pouch of silver.

POINTS OF INTEREST

House of Servio (29): A dingy, ill-famed den, the House of Servio is a shambling building of stone and heavy ship-beams on Messantia's waterfront. In the strictest sense, it is an inn, but is avoided by all but the most desperate of men, or those who seek to make their way through the city unnoticed. It is a den of thieves and cut-throats, and many men have been murdered there for naught but a handful of coppers.

Sailors' Rest (30): A tavern where a sailor might find anything but rest. It is a drunken, rowdy place where brawls are nearly constant.

Anu's Horns (31): An inn and tavern owned by a Shemite named Noam, it is a favoured gathering place of Shemite sailors while in port. In the cramped basement Noam maintains shrines to the gods of the Shemite pantheon.

Paulus' Imports (32): A small-time fence, Paulus Bondinus maintains his front here by selling worthless charms.

Drunken Sea (33): This tavern, which was once known as Port of Call, is built on an old wharf jutting out into the eastern end of Messantia's harbour. The wharf itself is unsteady with age, and when the seas are rough, the entire building

shifts back and forth with the tide, an unsettling sensation which has given the tavern its new name. It is owned by Brogio Sapyas, a former dock overseer of half Argossean and half Shemite heritage, who supplements his income from the tavern as a smuggler. The storeroom in the back of the Drunken Sea has a large, concealed trap door in the floor, enabling smuggled cargo to be brought in and out of the tavern from small boats or barges which can fit underneath the wharf. It has also served as an escape route for criminals fleeing from the Patrol, though Brogio demands a substantial payment in advance (100 sp) for the right to use the trapdoor in this manner.

The Surf's Kiss (34): Tavern and brothel.

A Clear Hold (35): The largest porter service in Messantia is owned and operated by Crespin Demetros, the current guildmaster of the Porters Guild. In addition to its fleets of wagons and barges, A Clear Hold offers its clients guards for hire and warehousing facilities. Its employees are skilled in handling and transporting all manner of cargo, including wild animals brought to Messantia for use in the arena and one of its warehouses has rows of cages built inside to hold animals and slaves for its clients. Crespin is not overly discriminating as to who he does business with and a fair amount of the goods smuggled into Messantia pass through his hands.

Fine Fishing (36): A large store offering every manner of fishing gear imaginable. It is owned by the Bonaserus family, a large clan of fishermen with deep roots in Dockside, being part of the minority of fishermen who returned to the mainland after the Blackblood Plague. While the men of the family spend their days and nights fishing and maintaining their four fishing boats, the women of the family run and manage Fine Fishing. Sovrana Bonaserus is the current matriarch of the clan, and is firmly in charge at Fine Fishing, directing her daughters, nieces and other female relations as she manages the store.

Inn of the Nine Swords (37): An inn and dancing hall, which has degraded into mediocrity in recent years. It was once among the most popular in the prefect, when a long-limbed, lush-figured beauty with eternally deep emerald eyes attracted patrons from as far as King's Prefect and Hilltop. She left one night with Conan as he was mustering his army outside

The sailors laughed jeeringly - stocky, bearded Argosseans to a man - and one, whose richer dress and air of command proclaimed him captain, folded his arms and said domineeringly: "We found you lying on the sands. Somebody had rapped you on the pate and taken your clothes. Needing an extra man, we brought you aboard."

Robert E. Howard, *The Hour of the Dragon*

Messantia, and with her went, so went the fortunes of Nine Swords. The dancers today are a pale reflection of her and the crowds of wealthy patrons are but a memory in this place.

Traders' Own (38): A relatively quiet inn and tavern, at least for Dockside, Traders' Own caters to the endless flow of foreign traders coming through Messantia. It prides itself on offering a variety of food and drink from many different nations.

Quick and Safe (39): A porter.

Acestes Shipwrights (40): A small shipwright service owned by Callosus and Ferenc Acestes, two brothers who inherited the business from their father. Under competition from the Merchant Houses, the brothers have been forced to abandon building new ships almost entirely and now make their living repairing fishing vessels and other ships small enough to fit into their two docks.

Sails and Line (41): Accurately if unimaginatively named, this small shop acts as a front for large inventories of sailcloth, rope, rigging and sundry other needs the captain of a merchant ship might have. It is owned by the Idaeus Merchant House and operated by Lerino Hostolan, the



grandson of Napolo Hostolan, the man who opened the store. Lerino suspects his father and grandfather would be disappointed in him for selling it to House Idaeus, but was unable to turn down the offer when it came.

Shoreline (42): This tavern and brothel is owned by a degenerate worm of a man named Bernabo Sibilius, who comes from a long line of degenerate worms who have owned Shoreline for five generations. Men of the Sibilius family never marry; they find it easier to have their children by the employees of Shoreline. In the last few years, Bernabo has found it difficult to keep employees, as they all want to find a position at The Dove, the nearby brothel owned by Elena Yardotos. Bernabo hates Elena with a passion and wants to see The Dove burned to the ground. Then Elena would be forced to take a job at Shoreline, but Bernabo does not have the courage to act on his wishes. He has begun to speak to Canaffo Verdolan, owner of the nearby Seven Sails and Eight Banners, about the situation, hoping he can convince the former mercenary to act in what he views as the best interest of them both.

Sea's Fortune (43): Tavern and gambling hall. Located in perhaps the poorest area of Messantia, the Sea's Fortune and its owner Chimento Gulielmo serves to make the local population even poorer with watered beer and crooked games.

The Dove (44): Once indistinguishable from almost any other Docksider brothel, The Dove has changed dramatically in the last seven years. Once owned by a loathsome man named Provius Trankotos, The Dove was a hellish place for the women who worked there. Beatings were a regular occurrence, but that was one of the lesser worries. Provius used his smuggling contacts to import drugs from the southern kingdoms, which he secretly administered to the women until they were addicted. Once that was done, he would cut the woman's wages and rations, forbidding her to leave The Dove and exhorting her to work harder if she wanted her next dose. Into this nightmare fell Elena Yardotos, a woman of high birth but low means, whom desperation had forced her into this life. She recognised, after only her first night, what Provius was doing, and when he tried to give her the drug, she killed him with a stiletto to the back of his neck. Provius had no family, nor did he have the backing or patronage of a Merchant House; and as the Patrol knew him for the vile worm he was, Elena was never charged. Instead, she took ownership of the brothel and changed it. Now, the women who work there are healthy and lively; and as Elena shares the profits with them on a merit-based system, they are very enthusiastic as well. The Dove is now among the

most popular brothels in the city, attracting business from the Bazaar Prefect and beyond.

Seven Sails and Eight Banners (45): Tavern, brothel and dancing hall owned by Canaffo Verdolan, an immigrant from Polopponi in Corinthia. He had a romantic passion for the wide ocean, a sight he had never seen, and after amassing a respectable amount of money in his 14 years as a mercenary, moved to Messantia, intending to become a sea captain. He bought a ship, outfitted and crewed it, and was dismayed and humiliated to discover he became helplessly seasick when upon the waves. He sold the ship and instead opened Seven Sails and Eight Banners. The odd name is taken from the sails of Canaffo's ship, which now hang about the roof of the main room, and the eight banners under which he served as a mercenary, which now decorate the walls. Canaffo's past as a mercenary is well-known, and Seven Sails and Eight Banners is a popular spot for mercenaries coming through Messantia. His business is feeling some of the impact of The Dove that has Bernabo Sibilius so upset; he too has lost some of the women from his brothel, though his dancers have remained loyal. He has not yet agreed to any of Bernabo's hinted plans at removing The Dove and Elena Yardotos, but he has considered it.

Wharftop (46): The tenement where Sigurd of Messantia makes his home.

Illian's Lost Treasures (47): Among the largest of the prefect's second-hand shops, this place doubles as a front for Mulciber Maksym, the city's most successful crime lord (see page 86). From a heavily-guarded cellar room with two escape routes, Maksym runs his small empire of extortion, protection, thievery and smuggling. He has risen as high as he has, and stayed alive as long as he has, because of his willingness to work with the Merchant Houses. He has also been willing to work with the Black Corsairs, though that remains his most carefully-kept secret.

Wavebreak (48): A large tavern with a view of most of the city's wharves. Giovanni Eres, the Slavetaker, likes to keep an agent here to look for potential quarry.

The Cutting Prow (49): This shipwrights is owned and operated by Franco Vicinius, guildmaster of the Shipwrights Guild, a man renowned throughout the city as a skilled and assiduous bootlick to House Dulcia.

Dockmaster (50): Employed by the city and managing a staff of 30 harbourmen, Dockmaster Nunzio

Daphnas oversees the constant sea traffic in and out of Messantia's harbour, assigning quays and wharves to incoming ships and overseeing the loading and unloading of cargo, water, provisions and ballast. The guideboats that escort ships into and out of the harbour at night are also co-ordinated from here.

Prefect Tariff Office (51)

Prefect Patrol Station (52)

Fish Market (53): This is where the House Drusus barges from Cranetown unload, and where many of the city's merchants, inns and restaurants come to buy their fish every day. This is also, unsurprisingly, where half the cats in Messantia make their home.

The Purple Pearl (54): A large inn and tavern which is a frequent stop for visitors to the city who cannot afford accommodations elsewhere, as it does offer better lodgings than almost any other inn in Docksider. Anyone looking for the Slavetaker will eventually be directed to speak with the owner of the Purple Pearl, Nepsius Hali. Nepsius does not know where the Slavetaker lives, or what his real name is, but is able to get in touch with him by leaving two lanterns burning in a window in the back of the Purple Pearl. A single lantern left burning indicates a trap, a simple code that has worked well for Nepsius and Giovanni in the past. The Slavetaker pays Nepsius a commission of five percent on any work Nepsius brings him.

Home Argos (55): As tolerant and cosmopolitan as Messantia is, not every one of her citizens enjoys the sight of foreigners in her streets. For them, there is Home Argos, a tavern frequented only by Argosseans and owned by a scowling bully named Bettuccio Lenius. Though the patrons generally keep to themselves, people of other nations learn to avoid it, as from time to time, a passing foreigner will incite a crowd of drunken Argossean men to rush out and start a brawl.

Second Chance (56): This small, second-hand store is almost hidden in one of the prefect's many narrow alleyways. Rarely frequented by customers, it is the storefront of Quinton Savill, an associate of the Pephredo Merchant House and Messantia's foremost fence for sorcerous items and components.

The Pen (57): This group of thick-walled warehouses has no official name, but citizens of Messantia universally know them as The Pen. Maintained by the city and the Merchant Houses

with interests in slaving, this is where slaves are kept who are either working on city projects or awaiting sale or transfer outside Messantia. When there are no ongoing city projects requiring large amounts of slave labour, they are mostly empty.

House of Txanton (58): Inn, tavern and brothel

Blades of the Sea (59): Weaponry shop, catering to sailors and pirates. Giusafa Picchin, a former pirate, arena fighter and adventurer, a man who has made and lost a dozen fortunes, owns this store. Time has caught up to this former warrior at last and he has contented himself with a retirement of spinning stories for customers and selling them the tools to a life he can no longer indulge in.

Wind and Water (60): A shop offering sailcloth, rigging and ship repair.

Cup and Trident (61): One of the quieter inns of Docksider, offering hearty food and a warm, merry atmosphere.

By Barge and Brawn (62): Porter service operated by a Kushite named Amboola. Brought to Messantia in chains 15 years ago, Amboola fought for years in the Arena before earning his freedom. He had intended to return to his homeland, but found he had grown too fond of the trappings of civilisation.

The Dancing Fish (63): Tavern and dancing hall

The Golden Wheel (64): This tavern and gambling hall is the unofficial bookmaker on the annual Seabreaker races. Usually catering to sailors, dock workers and other inhabitants of Docksider, The Golden Wheel spends most of the year dealing in copper. During the two days of Seabreaker, however, the copper turns to gold as Merchant House princes, guildmasters and visiting nobles throng inside to place their bets.

Havrio's Fine Herbs and Tinctures (65): One of several herbalists who ply their trade in this prefect, Havrio Guardi is rumoured to have access to lotus extracts.

The Victor's Edge (66): Weaponry shop, which includes in its stock a number of exotic and experimental weapons for a would-be gladiator who wishes to be distinctive.

The Blue Demon (67): The sign on this tavern, owned by a half Argossean, half Shemite man named Chanoch Hadar, seems designed to drive business away. Most of its patrons are smugglers and thieves and beneath the tavern,

in an abandoned chamber of the old sewers, lies a large temple to Bel, the Shemite god of thieves.

Tradewinds (68): Tavern and gambling hall. Though the Golden Wheel has all but complete control over the bookmaking for Seabreaker, Tradewinds is the preferred gambling spot for the dozens of minor and unofficial ship races, which take place frequently in Messantia's harbour. Its owner, Calviano Loritus, won the Seabreaker some 20 years ago in the single-masted ship category. Virtually every customer since has endured repeated retellings of the tale. His ship, the Shark's Fin, still rides at anchor nearby, and Calviano still races it often.

Lady's Favour (69): Tavern and brothel.

Three Corners Keep (70): Messantia's dungeon, as well as headquarters for the Patrol and billets for soldiers. It is actually named for its triangular design, rather than its position near the corners of Dockside, Bazaar Prefect and River Prefect. Before the construction of the Dome of the Sea, this sturdy, weathered building was the Argosian court and palace of Argos' kings. Prisoners serving their first term in the dungeons here are often surprised at the opulence of their surroundings, as the area housing the cells was once the royal crypt of Argos. The bodies of the dead monarchs were disinterred and moved to the Dome of the Sea once it was completed, but the intricate stonework and coloured murals remain in the depths of Three Corners Keep, marred now by the addition of thick iron bars.

BAZAAR PREFECT

This prefect takes its name, obviously, from the huge, sprawling open-air bazaar that lies at its centre. The prefect is occupied almost entirely by merchants, their homes and their businesses, whether within the bazaar itself or elsewhere in the prefect. It is one of the two prefects to occupy both sides of the Khorotas River, though those on the west side prefer to think of the portion on their side as a different prefect altogether, calling it Merchants' Prefect. Connecting the two sides of the prefect is the enormous Bridge of Chimes, a mammoth collaboration of the Order of Engineers, the Clockmakers Guild and the Musicians Guild. The shops of the Bazaar Prefect offer almost anything imaginable, from worn-out cast-offs in the east to splendid luxuries in the west.

It is the bazaar that gives the prefect its name, though, that is most interesting. The bazaar has existed in this location since Messantia was young, though it has grown much larger through the years. It is a twisting maze of alleys and paths, winding their way between hundreds of booths

and stalls. Every language spoken in the western world can be heard, as travellers gawk and point at the sights while merchants and customers haggle over the price of a pair of boots. In the south of the bazaar is a small stage where tumblers, jugglers, fire-eaters and the like perform for coppers thrown from the crowd.

Most of the stalls in the bazaar are individually owned, either by independent merchants or by one of the Merchant Houses and all pay a tax to the city of four silver pieces every month for space at the bazaar. The city also maintains a 'fleet' of 100 mobile stalls, available for rent to the seasonal or itinerant merchant, for a cost of one silver piece per day.

Haggling is normal, even expected, among the stalls of the bazaar and most other shops in the eastern prefect. In the west, it is much less common and in the truly high-class shops, the merchant is likely to eject a customer who argues over his prices. Even in the east, there are some limits to haggling. The bazaar merchants are experts at haggling and expect some level of competency from a customer who engages them in it. A ridiculously low offer will probably be met by an equally ridiculous inflation in the original price.

A Games Masters should bear in mind that the bazaar is a busy, noisy place that is often bustling with people. Characters may have trouble finding their way around in it, and there are dozens of distractions of all kinds. The bazaar is a particularly favourite haunt of pickpockets and cut-purses, and a native Messantian will usually wear his purse on a cord around his neck whenever he enters this place.

Characters looking for illegal items, such as various lotus extracts, or seeking to fence items, would have better luck in Dockside, as the Patrol maintains a conspicuous presence in the bazaar. Which is fortunate, for it keeps the thieves under control.

Shops and businesses dominate this prefect and businesses, even outside the bazaar itself. The buildings are mostly stone on the ground floor, elevated several steps above the street level like most of Messantia's structures, and have one or two additional storeys built of wood. Most merchants make their home in living areas above their shops.

In addition to the ubiquitous stores, the Bazaar Prefect is home to many of the eastern city's inns. Most of the business these inns attract is thanks

to the itinerant and seasonal merchants renting booths in the city's bazaar. They also offer a comfortable alternative to the traveller with the wisdom to avoid Dockside, but without the coin to afford a room in the western city.

POINTS OF INTEREST

Bridge of Chimes (71): This enormous bridge, a 50 foot wide span crossing the Khorotas River and linking the east and west sides of the Bazaar Prefect, is a massive collaboration of the Clockmakers Guild, the Musicians Guild and the Order of Engineers. It carries pedestrian and wagon traffic, and like all Messantia's bridges, is high enough that river ships can pass beneath it. On either side are four foot high, intricately carved walls, depicting trading ships, dolphins and gladiators all indicative of Messantia. Centred on either wall, at the highest point on the bridge, the wave and coin sigil of the city is inlaid in gold. The central 20-foot area of the bridge is covered by a squat stone tower, supported on either side of the bridge and by a row of columns running along the middle. Housed in this tower is the largest water clock ever created by the Clockmakers Guild. It has four huge faces, easily visible from a distance, and atop the tower whirls an astrolabe showing the phases and position of the moon, as well as the changing of the seasons. The clock includes a series of metal tubes, which are struck to chime at the hour, giving the bridge its name. Something so huge and complex requires near-constant tending by the Clockmakers Guild, the Musicians Guild and frequent structural checks by the Order, but it has become a source of great pride to the people of Messantia since its creation.

The Bazaar (72): This place is a warren of alleys and paths, booths and stalls, which frequently change and are far too numerous to list. Nearly anything can be found in the bazaar; a wandering shopper might buy himself a fried eel on a stick, a pair of boots, a charm for good fortune, a used lamp and a new knife before passing a dozen stalls. The bazaar also serves as Messantia's rumourmill. The city does not employ criers or heralds to trumpet news throughout the prefects though public pronouncements are made in the Plaza of Peace (see page 28) for the benefit of the wealthy and on the stage in the bazaar for the benefit of most of the city. It is said that a secret whispered in the bazaar at noon will be known from Hilltop to Redboots by nightfall. Though easy to become lost in for new arrivals, the bazaar has two major landmarks which people use as meeting places or a means of orientation. One is a large fountain near the centre, the other is the stage near the southern edge, which is also used for slave auctions.

Agalaia's (73): A bakery operated by Agalaia Cyma's daughter, Elpida. It is famous in the city for its dark breads and fish pies.

First Step (74): A cobbler.

Bathhouse (75): The only public bathhouse in the eastern area of the city. It is constantly busy and many of the nearby eateries deliver food to it several times each day.

The Silver Dolphin (76): Inn and tavern owned by Mesinos Diotrephe, the current guildmaster of the Hostellers Guild. Though it does a steady business throughout the year, during trading season rooms are scarce.

The Laden Cart (77): A porter.

The Gilded Page (78): Sells writing implements, books and maps of Messantia, Argos and the western world. The maps of Messantia are very accurate, the maps of Argos close enough to useful and maps of distant regions like Cimmeria are all but useless.

The Silken Thread (79): A clothier catering to the middle class of the city, particularly those wishing to follow as well



as they can afford the fashion trends of Messantia's wealthy. Bonasia Marcutius, the wife of a wealthy sea captain, owns it. Accounted a great beauty in her youth, she now struggles to recapture her attractiveness with dozens of tonics, herbs and more and more elaborate dress.

Day's End (80): A tavern popular with the merchants of the bazaar. A slender, jolly man named Lapaccio Meglius, who may be the most well-known man in the bazaar, owns it.

Wages Won (81): Tavern and gambling hall.

Fire and Sand (82): Glassblower and glazier. This shop, owned by Scelto Bettinus, is actually more of a storefront, showroom and demonstration hall. The majority of Scelto's stock is kept in a warehouse in River Prefect.

A Dozen Blades (83): Weaponry store, with significantly more stock than its name suggests.

Shade at Noon (84): Tavern and eatery with a wide awning in front, which gives the place its name.

Shrine (85): A small shrine maintained and staffed by the temple of Mitra.

Aldighieri's Wondrous Creations (86): A toy shop with a long history. Now owned and operated by Aldighieri's grandson Aparado Cantes.

Perfect Pitch (87): Instrument maker, specialising in flutes and pipes.

Treasures to Tread (88): A rug merchant.

Above the Din (89): With as many as a dozen languages being spoken in the bazaar, communication between customer and merchant is never assured. Above the Din offers translators for hire, at rates of one silver piece for an hour or five silver pieces for a day.

On the Page (90): Next to Above the Din, this shop offers scribe services for the illiterate.

Nine Smoke Rings (91): Pipe maker and tobacco seller Labrencis' Market: A grocer's store run by Labrencis Nikothenes, which stocks meat, vegetables and bread.

Finely Shorn (92): A barber.

Prefect Patrol Station (93)

Fluvio's Timepieces (94): Maker of simple water clocks.

The Bronze Idol (95): This inn, owned by Khossos Lot of Koth, is a favourite place for wealthy caravan masters. Khossos seems to know half the men driving caravans in from the east. The Bronze Idol caters to many more foreign than Argossean guests.

The Fighting Bull (96): Inn and tavern.

Domenico's Fine Leathers (97): Leather shop, offering everything from belts to jerkins. Santore Domenico represents the fourth generation of his family to keep this shop. He is adept at curing and preparing the skins of all manner of exotic beasts and uses the tanneries in Redboots owned by House Pluvius.

Healing Hands (98): Leech and apothecary.

Varian's Meats (99): Shop of Varian Illius, the current guildmaster of the Butchers Guild.

The Sturdy Shoe (100): A cobbler.

Miklus' Garden (101): On the border of Bazaar Prefect and Dockside, this park is a popular gathering place for the locals.

Linia's Clothiers (102): Generally accounted the finest clothier in the city, and priced to match. However, its reputation is in danger, as the Ingradius family, which owns Linia's Clothiers, has always been close to House Tullus. With the Clothiers Guild in the hands of House Eurus for more than a decade, the guild's priorities and loyalties lie with other businesses, particularly Aldiana's Grace.

Ristoro's Gallery (103): A small but elegant artists' gallery owned by Ristoro Tamburin. It offers art for sale and portrait-painting services.

The Marble Hearth (104): Inn and tavern named for its enormous, circular hearth that dominates the middle of the common room.

Bathhouse (105)

Tide of Times (106): Maker of exquisite water clocks that are as much art as timepiece. Owned and operated for seven generations by the Orbalis family, its current owner, Bongiani Orbalis, is the guildmaster of the Clockmakers Guild.

The Perfect Touch (107): A shop owned by three families of woodcarvers and artisans, who craft various furnishings for those who can afford their prices.

Weavings (108): A rug shop carrying an inventory of terribly expensive Iranistani and Vendhyan rugs.

Vintage Taste (109): A wine shop selling wines from many different nations by the bottle or cask.

Divine Delight (110): A pastry shop.

The Fox Afoot (111): This large tavern has a number of small rooms in the back, available for those who wish to discuss business in private.

Aldiana's Grace (112): Clothier vying with Linia's as the best in the city. Its operator, Aldiana Forese, just became guildmaster of the Clothiers Guild, giving her something of an advantage. The Forese family is distantly related to the Eurus Merchant House.

Spun Silk (113): Ladies' barber, catering to women who are well-to-do but unable to afford servants to manage this task for them.

RIVER PREFECT

The River Prefect, bordered on the south by Dockside and Bazaar Prefect, and on the north by the palisade, is the home of most of Messantia's industry. The banks of the river are lined with waterwheels, driving the huge machines that dominate this prefect. Mills, grinding wheels and bellows are all powered by the current of the Khorotas River, which has been narrowed at this point by the Order of Engineers to increase the speed of the water. Iron beams driven into the riverbed form a crude but effective fence and keep barge traffic from colliding with the waterwheels.

Between the grain dust, coal smoke and thunderous noise of massive, grinding gears, the role this prefect plays in the life of the city seems obvious, but as with most things in Messantia, it is not so simple. Many of the Merchant Houses have large investments in the area, owning and operating much of the industry here. In addition to the obvious activities of milling and smithing, the River Prefect is also the site of spying, sabotage, double-dealing and back-stabbing and is the primary battleground for the various Houses.

The western parts of the prefect are dominated by a series of grain mills, owned and operated by the Dulcia Merchant House. Grain brought downriver from the Farmlands is ground into various kinds of flour and then transported to the city's bakeries, most of which are in the southern region of the prefect, next to the bazaar.

In the middle of the district lie Messantia's breweries, which are owned, variously, but the Dulcia, Florens, Mycaelis and Onoria Merchant Houses. The grain that does not go to the mills is bound for the breweries, which use ox-driven presses and deep well-water to brew the multitude of ales enjoyed by Messantians and exported throughout the west.

To the east of the grain mills on the river, near the borders of Dustbiter and Redboots, stand the tall brick chimneys of the smelting forges and smithies. Here the raw iron ore imported from other nations or dug from Argos' own mines is smelted and purified into steel in roaring furnaces. Nearby, the city's blacksmiths and weaponsmiths take the newly-made steel and work it, turning out the endless array of nails, wire, horseshoes, swords, pots and a thousand other metal items the city uses and exports every day. The chimneys of these huge forges pump black smoke and dust into the air throughout the day, which would have long since become an issue were it not for the fact that nothing lies downwind except Redboots. Additionally, the gold ore and dust collected and mined from the low hills nearby is melted down in this prefect, purified and carried under heavy guard to the smiths of the western city.

Although the most expensive shops and finest craftsmen tend to ply their trade in the western city region of Bazaar Prefect, there is one industry for which that rule does not apply. In the southern regions of the River Prefect the weaponsmiths of Argos craft death with fire and anvil. These smiths are of varying quality and expertise. While most any of them can create perfectly functional weapons, there are some who can forge items of such beauty and grace that they are as much art as weapon. This same southern region is the site of most of the recent commercial growth in the city as well, as old buildings are converted to serve the people of Bazaar Prefect and northern Dockside.

POINTS OF INTEREST

The Last Laugh (114): Indisputably, the best of Messantia's weaponsmiths is Athicus Mecedon, an immigrant from Shem who learned his craft in Akbitana. Generally friendly and open, he does not discuss his reasons for leaving his homeland. Though the steel available in Messantia is of quality, it is not sufficient for Athicus to create true Akbitanan weapons. Still, his weapons are things of

beauty, items of such lethal grace his shop operates under a constant six-month backlog of jobs.

Domingo Arkashan's Proving Ground (115): Domingo Arkashan, an expert swordsman from Zingara, fled to Messantia with three students after choosing the wrong side in a war between two Zingaran barons. He struck up a quick friendship with fellow immigrant Athicus Mecedon, and opened a training school in an old warehouse next to The Last Laugh. He has also befriended Bertoldo Jacobas, one of Messantia's most esteemed tutors, and the two of them have hatched a plan to open an academy in Messantia, where students would be taught everything from philosophy to swordplay, but their attempts to find financial backing thus far have been fruitless. A graduate of the finest fencing schools in Kordava, Domingo and his apprentices can teach almost any feat or style of fighting. Some of the Merchant Houses send slaves here to be trained as gladiators for the arena.

Five Harts (116): Tavern and gambling hall, which is credited with creating the popular card game of the same name.

The Silver Shark (117): This inn's most distinctive feature is the monstrous set of shark jaws hanging from the ceiling. Currently employed as a chandelier from which eight lanterns hang, the jaws are locked in place fully distended, and are some 10 feet apart from hinge to



to hinge. Iacopao Salomius, the ancestor of the inn's current owner Lattanzio Salomius, purchased the jaws some 250 years ago from the bloody pirate Zelone the Mad. Zelone claimed they were the jaws of a beast that attacked his ship, which might be true, but Zelone was never well-acquainted with the truth. The Silver Shark has attracted customers on the basis of the impressive jaws alone, which the family claims are the largest shark's jaws in the world. For the past century, the family has offered a standing reward of 300 silver pieces for a larger set of jaws, but no one has been able to collect.

The Anvil's Edge (118): Before the arrival of Athicus Mecedon and opening of the Last Laugh, the Anvil's Edge was acclaimed the finest weaponsmith in Messantia. Master smith Miniato Dionegeus greatly resents the upstart Shemite who has stolen the crown his family held for so many years, the well-deserved reputation of the Akbitanan smiths notwithstanding. He is convinced Athicus is hiding some dark secret about his reasons for coming to Messantia and would very much like to know what that secret is, hoping it will give him the leverage to remove the usurper from his city.

Giuseppe's Fine Cauldrons (119): Blacksmith specialising in metal pots, pans and cauldrons. The owner, Larione Bonasius, is Giuseppe's seven times great grandson. Larione is also the only remaining bellmaker in the city and does a busy business casting fog bells for ships of all descriptions.

Malatesta Porters (120): A busy porter service, mostly employed in moving goods from mills, breweries and smithies to the businesses that require them.

The Bulwark (121): Master craftsman Pietro Mabilius represents the third generation of his family to own and operate this armoury. Able to craft and repair any type of armour, Pietro's main focus is on heavier armours like plate and scale.

Born of Steel (122): Blacksmith, owned by Chaucor Nequan, guildmaster of the Blacksmiths Guild, and operated by his three sons.

Prefect Patrol Station (123)

A Place for Everything (124): Run from a converted warehouse, this second-hand shop specialises in used furnishings and other bulky objects.

Spun of Clay (125): Large shop providing clay pots and urns of all sizes.

Boon of Health (126): Saldo Carlutos, leech and herbalist, runs this shop. He provides a dozen beds for rent to patients and is rumoured to have access to lotus extracts and other exotic ingredients.

Rosanos Instruments (127): This instrument maker is not in the finest area of Messantia, but still attracts the business of the wealthy due to the quality of its wares. For five generations, the Rosanos have crafted beautiful string and wind instruments in this shop, importing raw materials from as far away as Vendhya and Hyrkania to create the finest instruments made in Argos. Miglino Rosanos, the guildmaster of the Musicians Guild, currently runs it.

Traders' Hearth (128): A simple inn.

Cosimo's Seconds (129): This second-hand store, which specialises in clothing, was opened only two years ago by Cosimo Frosius and his family and has quickly become a favourite shop for the women of northern Docksides.

The Golden City (130): This recently-opened inn does not have many customers and Figlio Cicalan, an immigrant from Napolitos, is beginning to regret his choice of location. Too far from both Dustbiter and the Bazaar Prefect and too close to the tenement housing of the Redboots slaughtermen and dock workers, most people looking for lodgings find them long before they reach the Golden City. Figlio is currently maintaining his business through the guests who do come here when Messantia is flooded with travellers, such as during the Fortnight of Trials, but his wife Incasa, already angry about moving from her home in Napolitos. She is unsatisfied with such a 'hand to mouth' existence and has been merciless toward Figlio about finding some way to bring in more business. Figlio has considered making the Golden City a brothel or gambling hall as well as an inn, but Incasa will not hear of it. He is starting to become desperate.

Alamanno's (131): Alamanno Nentus is a cobbler and amateur inventor. Shortly after opening his shop here some 40 years ago, he created a treatment for leather that renders it almost completely waterproof. He found an immediate application for this in making boots for the workers of Redboots, but the word spread quickly and his boots were soon in demand from people throughout the city, from sailors to sewer workers. Thus far, he has been unwilling to sell the recipe to anyone, though he is growing

old and is beginning to seriously consider selling his knowledge and retiring.

Alesso's Market (132): Serving northern Docksides, this grocer offers a selection of inexpensive bread, cheese and fish. Any food purchased here which requires preparation can be cooked on site for a small additional fee.

Labourers' Rest (133): This quiet tavern owned by Manente Ghillus is very popular with Redboots workers. Manente is a former Redboots slaughterman with no family and who used his entire savings to purchase an old River Prefect building and convert it into a tavern. The men who come here to drink are all slaughtermen and tanners. They are unused to sharing their tavern with anyone who is not of Redboots, but they are not a hostile bunch and will quickly warm up to a friendly stranger.

Giusto's Oven (134): This is the bakery to which most Redboots women bring their flour every afternoon, where they pay to have it baked into bread for the evening meal and for breakfast the next day.

Leather and Maille (135): Specialising in light and medium armours, Tamerighi Contigius has developed a booming business for the shop his father Istagio opened. Eagerly working with the Patrol and the Merchant Houses, Tamerighi now holds contracts for making the simple, functional armour used by the Patrol, as well as the sometimes outlandish armours in which arena gladiators are garbed.

The Coin's Edge (136): Tavern and gambling hall.

ARENA PREFECT

The massive arena dominates this prefect, its enormous spear-shaped spires thrusting into the sky higher than any building in Messantia save the Spire of Argos.

The arena overlooks the river, on the bank opposite the grain mills of River Prefect, and is otherwise ringed with a narrow park of trees and sculpture known as the Arena Gardens, where any Messantian is welcome during daylight hours. The stone walls and iron gates that surround the garden are guarded by the Patrol at night and entry after dark is forbidden, but are sometimes used illegally by criminals who scale the walls looking for a little peace and quiet in which to conduct their business.

The western areas of the prefect are dominated by expensive inns and rental houses, used year-round by wealthy visitors to the city, but particularly busy during major gaming events at the arena. Wealthy citizens of Messantia, who



do not have the funds to afford a villa in King's Prefect or Hilltop, also make their homes here.

The inns in this prefect are the most luxurious and expensive to be found in Messantia. During the games, they cater almost exclusively to visiting nobles and wealthy merchants, but a well-to-do or famous adventurer could easily find accommodations for himself in one of them. Arena Prefect inns commonly offer their guests a wide range of services which, with the occasional exception at one of the better inns in Bazaar Prefect, are absent elsewhere in the city. These amenities might include a personal servant assigned to each guest for the duration of his stay, meals cooked to order, laundry service, stables, separate accommodations designated for any servants brought by the guest and the service of an armed guard, should the guest require it. As a general rule of thumb, the horses in the stable of an Arena Prefect inn have better quarters than are available to people in most Dockside inns.

When the arena is not active, this prefect is relatively quiet. The guests at the inns and rental houses go about their business, the Arena Gardens are empty except for people looking for a little peace and quiet in a cool place. At night, the Gardens are locked tightly.

When the arena is active, however, this prefect swarms with activity to rival the bazaar. People of many different

racess and social standings mix freely under the watchful eye of several score of Patrolmen. The Arena Garden is a riot of noise and sights, as tumblers, jugglers, musicians and dancers perform for the crowd waiting for admittance into the arena itself. From wheeled carts, vendors hawk seat cushions, cotton parasols to block the sun and food of every description. Never missing a chance to make money, the city maintains a fleet of 100 rental carts in Arena Prefect, just as it does in Bazaar Prefect. Outside the dozen different gates of the Arena Garden, bursars sell the crowd tickets to the arena and bookmakers take bets on every event of the day.

The Merchant Houses, nobles and of course the royal family all have canopied boxes reserved for their use on the western side of the arena. Everyone else has to buy a ticket. Prices range from half a silver piece up to five silver pieces, depending on where in the arena the seat is located.

The beginnings of Messantia's love for arena sports have been lost to history. Some believe it is a relic of the Acheronian civilisation that once occupied the land, while others contend it is a direct descendant of the feats of strength and prowess with which the Argosseans' barbarian ancestors occupied their time. Whatever the truth, the end result is clear – Argosseans, and Messantians in particular, love the arena.

The earliest known arenas in the city were wooden structures in the area that became Dustbiter. It was King Demetrius, an avid fan of all the games, who commissioned the building of the current arena. This was among the greatest projects the Messantian engineers had yet attempted, and the construction took 15 years. Yet even when it was finished, it was but a shadow of what it is now. King Miklus' remaking of Messantia involved almost completely rebuilding the arena, creating the awesome monument that has made Messantia's games famous throughout the Hyborian kingdoms and beyond.

THE ARENA

The arena is the largest building in Messantia, a colossal oval of granite, marble and limestone reaching nearly 100-feet into the air. Atop the carved walls, like a crown, 48 spear-shaped metal spires thrust skyward another 30-feet. The arena can accommodate 25,000 spectators, who come and go easily through three dozen entrances. It is widely considered to be the crowning achievement of the Order of Engineers, surpassing even the Dome of the Sea.

The arena hosts games for two days in the middle of every month, and hosts four annual major events. The largest of these is the Fortnight of Trials, held every summer at the height of trading season. In both the spring and fall the arena hosts seven-day events, known as the Opening and Closing Games, as they tend to bracket either end of the trading season. In the winter, for the last 10 days of the year, the arena is home to the Last Days Games. Naturally, in a month with one of the four main events, there is no two-day session of games.

The games in Messantia's arena are of nearly infinite variety, as Messantians would become bored if they were only offered the same contests at every event. Still, there are a few traditional games that Messantians always expect to see.

Slave Matches: Probably the most common games at the arena, these matches encompass a variety of themes. Slaves are usually pitted against each other, wild beasts or free adventurers in brutal fights to the death. These matches allow the games' planners to indulge their most grisly, bloodthirsty imaginings, as a slave can be made to take on odds which a free adventurer would refuse. Still, they always strive to make sure the slave has at least some chance of victory, as impossible matches quickly bore the crowd. One of the things that makes these matches so exciting, and guarantees enthusiastic participation on the part of the slave, is that a slave who wins enough matches is granted his freedom.

Criminal Matches: Convicts sentenced to combat in the arena face matches much like those faced by slaves, but the planners are less scrupulous about giving them a fighting chance. These men are usually murderers or pirates and there is little mercy for them. Ostensibly, it is possible for a man to earn his freedom with enough victories, but it has only happened once.

Free Matches: Another major part of any series of games is the inclusion of free men, usually adventurers. This kind of match can be either lethal or nonlethal, depending on the opponent faced. Against slaves and convicts, the match is to the death, though the odds are strongly in favour of the free man. Matches between free men are rarely lethal, though still bloody. Usually fought with practice swords, these bouts are more displays of skill and prowess than true battles. The number of women competing in these matches has increased in recent years and they are proving to be very popular with the crowd.

Beast Matches: Not as exciting to Messantians as other matches, but still a staple of the arena are the matches between two or more half-starved beasts.

Naval Matches: Part of King Miklus' renovations to the Arena involved the creation of a series of pipes leading between the arena and the Khorotas. These pipes allow the arena to be flooded to a depth of up to 20-feet, making naval battles possible. Usually involving slaves rowing shoddily-constructed warships, these matches are extremely popular with Messantians. They are usually held on the last day of the games, to give the arena a chance to dry out again. A side benefit is that the water can be sluiced out through the pens and kennels beneath the arena, cleaning out the filth and blood that accumulates there during the games.

Athletics: Messantians love their gladiatorial bouts, but they are not an obsessively bloodthirsty people. For one afternoon during the monthly games or for a day or two during the quarterly festivals, the arena is given over completely to competitions and displays of athletic prowess. The most common events are running, wrestling, jumping, javelin, archery and shot put.

Adventurers who see athletics or combat in the arena as an easy (if grisly in the case of slave and convict matches) way to make some coin are right, at least at first. They will soon find there are complications they had not anticipated. Gambling on the games is a huge business in Messantia, Merchant Houses and crime bosses alike have their hands in the till. Though they are unlikely to interfere in an adventurer's first few bouts, once they have his measure they will become far more active, in their attempts to recruit him into their stable of gladiators.

This can happen in any number of ways, but usually, the first step is to put the adventurer in their debt, an easy task given that most adventurers beggar themselves at an astounding speed the moment they reach a place where they can spend their hard-won silver. Once that is done, the adventurer will find his benefactor coming to him with one or two 'small favours', which he will likely do, all the while falling deeper into debt. Eventually, he will not even be truly competing in the arena any longer, instead he will be more of an actor playing the part his new boss and former 'friend' has given him. If an adventurer can somehow remain independent of these people, he would be wise to watch his back.

POINTS OF INTEREST

The Arena (137): See above.

Arena's Favour (138): This gambling hall features a roof modelled to look like the crown of the arena itself. Its former owner, Rossello Fius, is now a convict sentenced to arena combat, after it was discovered he was using marked cards and loaded dice to cheat his noble customers. House Florens purchased Arena's Favour and intends to expand it, perhaps even opening a small gladiatorial pit in the basement, much like House Florens has at its villa. Rossello's crime would usually not warrant such a punishment, but the judge, with some urging from the nobles, decided this would be an appropriate punishment. Rossello barely survived his first match, however, and the bookmakers who used to work for him do not expect him to last through another fight.

Tavern of Trials (139): Tavern and gambling hall owned by House Gabrio. Several gladiators who were once famous competitors in the arena, but have passed their prime, are kept on as staff here to greet and mingle with the guests. All of them have incurred debts to House Gabrio too large to ever pay off and are now little more than indentured servants to the House.

The Great Contest (140): Tavern and gambling hall.

The Lazy Dragon (141): This is probably the least impressive inn in Arena Prefect, though still superior to most other Messantian inns. It is also the oldest inn in the prefect, and was built at the same time as the original arena was constructed, during the reign of King Demetrius. Its name is derived from the stuffed 'dragon' that was slain in an arena match hundreds of years ago and now hangs, moth-eaten, above the long, polished bar. The inn has changed owners many times over the years, and is now the property of Pasquino Tomas and his wife Contessa. Through all the owners, the 'dragon' has remained and all have adamantly insisted it is the real article, though anyone with a pair of eyes can see it is made up of the bodies of four crocodiles stitched together and a sabre-tooth head mounted on the front. A crest of eagle feather once graced the head, but most of them have fallen out.

Prefect Patrol Station (142)

Rental House (143, 144, 148, 149, 153, 156 & 158)

The Golden Pheasant (145): This is considered to be the finest inn in the Golden City. Perfumed Vendhyan rugs line the floors, the windows are paned with clear glass and hung with drapes of Khitan silk. The inn maintains a wine

cellar stocked with almost any wine or ale imaginable and employs a group of six chefs to cook any meal requested at any time, day or night. Most impressive of all, the Golden Pheasant boasts a library and reading room with nearly 2,000 books available for the use of its guests, as well as free translation in case a guest is interested in a book in a language they do not speak. This inn is so luxurious and famous that Baron Mainardo Loreno once remarked that he receives better service here than from his servants at home. Service like this obviously comes at a price. The minimum charge for a night here is 10 silver pieces. The inn is managed by a snobbish, sycophantic and extremely capable man named Guglielmo Laldomius.

Statue of Captain Stroza (146): Atop a marble pedestal at the intersection of Golden Torch Road and Sailmaster Street is a statue of Captain Meglio Stroza, who commanded the Argossean fleet that defeated the Zingarans in the Battle of Crushing Waves. His descendants still live nearby when not at sea.

The King's Table (147): Once, this was the finest inn in Messantia, but it is now overshadowed by the Golden Pheasant. During his reign, King Oderigo, grandfather to King Milo's grandfather, came here once each month for a meal of wild boar. The table at which he sat has remained a prized possession of this inn, but has grown unsteady with age and is currently being restored by the artisans of the Perfect Touch. The King's Table has been owned and operated by the Navilius family for generations. Its current owner, Vettoria Navilius, a woman who takes the Argossean trait of stockiness to new extremes, spent years trying futilely to reclaim the inn's place as the best inn in Messantia, but has recently resigned herself to second best.

Bathhouse (150 & 160)

Meticulous Care (151): Gold and Silversmith and jewellery store owned by House Gilroy.

Sundries (152): Grocer's market.

The Loom's Art (154): A clothier.

The Broken Trumpet (155): A simple tavern.

The Noble Gentleman (157): Sedate and distinguished brothel catering mostly to the wealthy traveller.

The Finest Art (159): The best of Messantia's gold and silversmiths,

this shop is owned and operated by the tremendously wealthy Felice Consolius, guildmaster of the Finesmiths Guild. He, or more likely, one of his staff, will gladly examine any gems brought in for sale, but will only consider buying truly flawless stones. For more than 20 generations, the Consolius family have been gold or silversmiths, and it was Felice's ancestor who crafted the intricate diamond signet ring for the royal family of Argos, a ring that currently resides on King Milo's finger.

The Finishing Touch (161): Men's haberdasher and glovemaker.

KING'S PREFECT

This large prefect is, unsurprisingly, the centre of political power in Messantia and indeed all of Argos. It is home not only to the nobles and Merchant Houses of the city, but also of the royal court. The prefect is bounded to the east by Bazaar Prefect, the north by the Arena Prefect and the south by Hilltop. It extends west to the edge of the city, encompassing the amphitheatre.

King's Prefect is a place of wide, smoothly-cobbled boulevards lined with lemon trees and dotted with fountains. Dominating the sides of these boulevards are the walled estates of the Merchant Houses. Scattered here and there are a few clusters of extremely expensive shops and grocer's markets, which stock exotic foods from other lands. The northernmost region of this prefect is where wealthy Messantians without noble blood or Merchant House connections, and without enough money to build an estate on Hilltop, tend to make their homes.

Scattered here and there throughout the prefect are public baths of incredible opulence, manned by squads of attentive servants. In theory, any citizen of Messantia can use these baths, but in practice they are basically the property of the Merchant Houses, who use them despite the fact they each have private baths in their villas.

Toward the southern end of the prefect lies the Dome of the Sea, the palace of King Milo and the seat of Argos' government. Directly north of the palace is the Avenue of Nations, a street on which stand the walled compounds of the envoys of nations like Shem, Aquilonia and Zingara. The absence of a Stygian envoy is obvious; after Amenkuhn loosed his plague on the city, King Miklus had the building razed and the space it occupied used to create a wide, tiled plaza. Directly south of the palace are the buildings housing the city's bureaucracies, such as the central tariff office, the central licensing office and the civil and criminal courts. The southern border of the prefect is the Street of Guilds, lined with the city's guildhalls.

Even in Messantia's infancy, this prefect was the home of the city's wealth and the abode of its fledgling Merchant Houses. Before Argos coalesced into a nation, and for a short time afterward, the monarchs of Messantia made their home on the eastern side of the river in a series of fortified structures, the most recent of which is Three Corners Keep. It was King Aeneus, the son of King Gellius, who finally chose to move the royal seat to the western side of the river, beginning construction on the Dome of the Sea.

To a casual observer, most of King's Prefect seems placid, safe and sedate. Here, as elsewhere in Messantia, appearances deceive. These are the corridors of power in the trading capital of the world, where lives and fortunes can be won or lost on nothing more than a gentle nudge or a careless word in what the Merchant Houses refer to as



The Thousand Faces. The gilded halls and carpet-strewn chambers where the lords and ladies of Merchant Houses sip wine and discuss trade winds are every bit as dangerous as the wharves of Docksider on a moonless night. Beneath this prefect lie the most complex and intricate sewers of Messantia, providing service to multiple points in every building. There are also networks of crawlways and passages known only to the Sewer Workers Guild, an advantage the guild has used over the years to learn things the Merchant Houses would prefer be kept secret, and thereby insuring the guild's independence.

Once, long ago, when Messantia was still a fledgling city defended by a stone wall, this area of the city was no wealthier than any other, housing its share of warehouses, raucous taverns and crude dwellings. In those days, when the kings of Argos still lived on the eastern shore of the Khorotas, what is now King's Prefect was known as Westend.

POINTS OF INTEREST

Santi's (162): This shop has been passed from father to son for four generations, but each new owner changes the shop's name from his father's name to his own. The current owner is Santi Toccius, a very distant cousin of the Anchises Merchant House. Rather than the customary finemith wares of rings and other jewellery, Santi's specialises in crafting gold, silver and bejewelled hilts for weapons. Though ostentatious, these hilts are fully functional, as are the weapons themselves.

The Sated Lion (163): This tavern caters only to the very wealthy of Messantia. It features a large number of wines from various nations, a wide variety of ales and meads and a large kitchen providing a constant stream of exotic foods and delicacies for the tavern's patrons. There is entertainment every night at the Sated Lion, but Madore Lisius, the owner of the tavern, chooses it very carefully. Only the finest entertainers are chosen, and no loud or flashy entertainers (such as fire-eaters or tumblers) are considered. Musicians, singers, orators and poets have the best chance to secure a booking at the Sated Lion, a coveted opportunity that has led directly to fame and riches for some.

Rare Imports (164): Market featuring spices and preserved foods brought from distant lands. It is owned and operated by Bertacchin Cimas, the son of Captain Libero Cimas, who in life was one of the most widely-travelled seamen in Messantia. Most of the goods Bertacchin has to offer come along trade routes maintained by his father to such distant lands as Iranistan and Vendhya.

Bathhouse (165, 171, 182 & 192)

Temple of Mitra (166): This square marble structure is unadorned, save for a single marble spire, capped with a gilded pinnacle, which rises from the centre of the temple. There are five priests, 14 monks and a score of acolytes acting as the clergy of this temple, led by the High Priest Valerus Barucci.

Onoria Merchant House villa (167)

Gilroy Merchant House villa (168)

Tarchon Merchant House villa (169)

Loreca Merchant House villa (170)

Ruberta's: Ladies clothier (172)

Impassable Fastenings (173): Locksmith shop owned by Ciardo Isottus and staffed with four apprentices. Ciardo and his assistants can craft locks of any quality, up to and including locks with an 'amazing' rating. Ciardo's shop is the source of most locks used by the wealthy citizens of Messantia. He does not sell lockpicks.

Prefect Patrol Station (174)

Pluvius Merchant House villa (175)

Eurus Merchant House villa (176)

Abasantis Merchant House villa (177)

Florens Merchant House villa (178)

Drusus Merchant House villa (179)

Gabrio Merchant House villa (180)

Temple of Trade (181): Despite its name, Temple of Trade is actually a statue and fountain at the intersection of Merchant March and Avenue of a Thousand Jewels. It depicts a gilded merchant ship riding the waves.

Pompilius Merchant House villa (183)

Corvara Merchant House villa (184)

Idaeus Merchant House villa (185)

The Palace (186): Hardly the home of King Milo, this place is a brothel

for the wealthy men of King's Prefect run by an unctuous, degenerate man named Basilio Veronus (see page 83). It is officially a tavern, but the secret is well known.

Lapo's Creations(187): Now owned by Lapo's great-grandson Galeazzo Pagolan, a silversmith who also makes small toys of precious metal for the children of the wealthy.

Tullus Merchant House villa (188)

Pephredo Merchant House villa (189)

Brencis Merchant House villa (190)

Dulcia Merchant House villa (191)

Pancia's Pastries and Confections (193): Bakery and pastry shop.

Mycaelis Merchant House villa (194)

Anchises Merchant House villa (195)

Mazentius Merchant House villa (196)

Actaeus Merchant House villa (197)

Vigour (198): Leech, apothecary and herbalist shop owned by Morello Planus and his children. Morello has many smuggling contacts, through which he acquires rare ingredients like golden lotus to heal his wealthy clients. He also supplies poisons to those who know how to ask for them.

Sanella's (199): A clothier.

Envoy of Shem (200): Behind the walls of this Envoy is a separate compound containing a small temple devoted to the gods of the Shemite pantheon. Access to the rest of the Envoy is cut off by a thick, heavily guarded gate, enabling the Envoy to leave the temple open to worshippers without offering potential spies easy access to the main Envoy and its diplomats. The cult of Mitra is offended at the presence of this temple, but there is little they can do about it. Still, on holy days of the Shemite gods, when the largest number of worshippers come here, there is always a Mitran priest proselytising outside the Envoy, attempting to convert the heathens to worship of Mitra.

Envoy of Zingara (201)

Envoy of Aquilonia (202)

Envoy of Nemediia (203)

Envoy of Koth (204)

Envoy of Ophir (205)

Plaza of the People (206): This is the site of the former Stygian Envoy, razed by King Miklus and converted into a plaza for the people of the city. It has a large fountain at each of its four corners and a statue of King Calemos, Miklus' father, at its centre.

The Dome of the Sea (207): The palace of King Milo is as much a tribute to the skills of the Order of Engineers as it is a royal palace. Rarely seen by the folk of Messantia, it is surrounded by a high, crenellated stone wall in the stylised shape of a warship, the sharp prow pointing south toward the harbour. The wall is buttressed on the outside by stone supports that reach up half its height, giving the impression of oars. Even with the aid of these supports, an intruder would be hard-pressed to reach the inside of the compound, as the stones of the walls are sanded smooth and fit together so neatly there are no handholds to be found. Moreover, the elite members of the Royal Guard, who will slay an intruder without question, walk the top of the wall night and day. The only parts of the palace visible from outside (except for those looking down on it from Hilltop) are the zenith of the dome itself, the tips of four towers and the Spire of Argos, a slender tower of stone which rises higher even than the pinnacles of the arena. This same spire, when seen thrusting over the wall, often seems to be a giant mast for the enormous stone ship. Inside the walls, surrounded by peaceful, terraced gardens, lies the Dome of the Sea itself. It is a square building, with towers reaching the height of the outer walls on all four corners. On its northern side stands the Spire of Argos, an awe-inspiring sight designed to intimidate anyone who passes through it into the palace. Raised between the four corner towers, and surpassing them in height, is the Dome. The dome, the four towers and the Spire of Argos are capped in plated gold, giving Messantia its name as the Golden City. The way from the walls to the Spire of Argos is called the Path of Kings, and it lays between two rows of statues, depicting all of Argos' kings back to Arcturus, Cassius' grandfather. Work is underway on Milo's statue, a fact the current king finds morbid and unsettling. There is room for four more statues on the Path of Kings.

The Plazas (208): Flanking the palace walls are two wide plazas, the Plaza of Commerce on the west and the Plaza of Peace on the east. It is tradition in Messantia for important

events to occur outside, weather permitting. In the case of the Merchant Houses, this ritual is almost perverse, considering the secrecy that cloaks all other aspects of their dealings, but they observe it nonetheless. The signings of major new trade agreements or acquisitions of new properties always take place in the Plaza of Commerce. The Plaza of Peace, on the other hand, is the site where King Milo signs documents cementing treaties, alliances and aid agreements with other nations. Incongruously, this is also the site where declarations of war are made. When the feudal lords of Argos are at one another's throats and Milo feels the situation has gone on long enough, he will often summon them to this Plaza to declare an end to their hostilities and intent to restore the peace. Lastly, the Plaza of Peace is the preferred site for weddings for Messantia's wealthy, though it is often joked that, considering the arranged nature of most Merchant House weddings, these should take place in the Plaza of Commerce. As the sun progresses through the sky, it throws the shadow of the Spire of Argos first on the Plaza of Commerce, then on the Plaza of Peace. Messantians consider it especially good luck to conduct their business in the Plazas during this time, and will refer to such business as being 'in the shadow of the king'.

Magistrate Hall and Mariners' Plaza (209): Magistrate Hall is Messantia's courthouse, where all criminals are tried for their crimes and all civil cases are heard. Though Messantia's prison is in Three Corners Keep, there is a block of holding cells beneath Magistrate Hall where a prisoner is kept until his trial. Anyone not of the Patrol must surrender all weapons before entering Magistrate Hall. Mariners' Plaza, mentioned here because of its close connection to Magistrate Hall, is where most public punishments are carried out. These are usually floggings, but mutilations and executions are also exercised here. Aside from this, Mariners' Plaza is a pleasant place of fountains, trees, tiled paths and statues.

Central Tariff Office (210): This building houses Messantia's main tariff office, co-ordinating the offices in Dustbiter and Dockside. It also acts as the central office for co-ordinating ship and caravan traffic and works with the Order of Engineers for all public works.

Palace Patrol Station (211)

Central Licensing Office (212): This building houses the licensing and tax offices for the city. All caravan masters and shipmasters that venture into or out of Messantia must be licensed to do business here. Additionally, this office collects taxes from the people and businesses of Messantia, and all tax rolls and census information are stored here.

Order of Engineers (213)

Clockmakers Guild (214)

Musicians Guild (215)

Blacksmiths Guild (216)

Caravaneers Guild (217)

Shipwrights Guild (218)

Street Sweepers Guild (219)

Clothiers Guild (220)

Hostellers Guild (221)

Porters Guild (222)

Fishermens Guild (223)

Shipmasters Guild (224)

Finesmiths Guild (225)

Butchers Guild (226)

Sewer Workers Guild (227)

Lucius Stage (228): This enormous stage is Messantia's famed amphitheatre.

HILLTOP PREFECT

The smallest of the prefects by far, Hilltop occupies the highlands in the southwest corner of the city, where the land rises up slightly before falling away in a series of short, broken cliffs to the beach below. A set of wide, worn stairs leads up to the peak. Atop the cliffs, nearly at the edge, runs a wide, flagged avenue, banked on the inland side by a row of huge, marble-fronted villas. The people who live in them are not nobles, nor are they the sons of the Merchant Houses. Almost all of them are common Messantians who have grown wealthy from the seas.

There have been homes atop the cliffs for many years, but it is only recently that Hilltop became what it is now. Originally, all the homes belonged to simple sailors and their families. Things remained that way for years, until a baron, in town for the Fortnight of Trials, was taken with the idea of



owning a summer home in Messantia. The Hilltop area seemed ideal, with its view of the sea and warm summer breezes. The baron bought a large plot of land, displacing several fishing families, and began construction on his anticipated summer home. Other nobles, taking notice, felt they should have summer homes as well and before long, the entire clifftop was abuzz with construction.

Things did not work out as these nobles planned, however, for most of these villas were still under construction when Amenkuhn's plague hit the city. Even after it subsided, work on the majority of the unfinished houses was never resumed. There were many reasons for this: continuing concern of the plague, shifting financial fortunes in the economic depression the plague brought and, of course, there was the matter of the renovations King Miklus ordered for the arena, which many wrongly feared would curtail the games. Ultimately, the nobles abandoned most of the houses, and there they sat, in various stages of completion, as the years passed and they were all but forgotten.

Hilltop's fortunes changed suddenly due to the actions of Nicias Fendio, a merchant captain who had no connections to any of the Merchant Houses, yet had still become fabulously wealthy from a

life of sea-trading combined with intelligence, ruthlessness, guile and betrayal. Nicias bought one of the old villas, and rebuilt and expanded it into an estate to rival those of the Merchant Houses themselves. Nicias had not intended to do anything more by building his villa than thumb his nose at the Merchant Houses who had so often tried to cheat him, but instead, he started a trend. Today, nearly two dozen white villas look down on the harbour from Hilltop, each owned by someone who was not born to wealth, but was able to wrest it from trade. Most of these are merchants, but a few are particularly canny or ruthless sea captains. The wide avenue besides which the villas all stand has been named Fortune's Way by the inhabitants, but most of

Messantia's citizens, knowing all too well the ways most Hilltop residents came by their wealth, usually call it Cheat Street. Still, it is the rare merchant who does not dream of one day moving into his own marbled Hilltop villa.

POINTS OF INTEREST

Publio's Villa (229): This is the home of the merchant Publio. Once a simple merchant in Dockside, in a ramshackle shop that stank of dead fish and cheap wine, Publio's fortunes have risen dramatically. He was once widely known, among pirates at least, as a resourceful fence in his youth. He was thrifty with his wealth, and now owns at least a dozen shops and booths throughout Messantia, where the ladies of the Merchant Houses buy the finest silks and pearls available in the city.

Fendio Villa (230): This is the home of Simento Fendio, the sole remaining member of the family of Nicias Fendio, who would be disgusted by his indolent wastrel of a descendant. Living off the investments and treasures of his forebears, Simento has lived a life of sloth and drink. The closest thing Simento has to a goal in life is to procure a seraglio with a woman from each nation to fill it. Fastidious and picky, he has thus far only acquired two, a Turanian and a Kushite, but is actively looking to acquire more.

Here dwelt the men who had grown rich from the hard-won fat of the seas - a few old sea-captains who had found treasure afar, many traders and merchants who had never trod the naked decks nor knew the roar of tempest or sea-fight.

Robert E. Howard, *The Hour of the Dragon*

The Granaries (231): Gouged out of the northern side of Hilltop's hills is a network of manmade caves. Deep in these cool, dry caverns are the city's granaries, which store enough grain, pickled fish and other preserved foods to feed Messantia for about four months. The granaries did not exist until the time of King Tirijs, and thus were not available during the Blackblood plague, when the city needed them most. Today, they are intended to stave off starvation in Messantia should another plague strike or if some pestilence disrupts the city's food supply. Thus far, they have never been needed, and some have questioned their worth, but still, they are maintained. Everyone in the city is aware of the existence of the granaries, but they are, obviously, off limits to the public. Locked away behind heavy wooden doors, the caverns are guarded by a half dozen soldiers at all times. It can be assumed that, should the need to use the granaries ever arise, the guard would be increased substantially to fend off the city's starving commoners.

The Shipyards (232): Though not part of the prefect of Hilltop, it is the closest prefect. In the western arm of Messantia's harbour are the city's merchant shipyards. While shipwrights in Dockside build fishing craft and do some minor repair to all ships, it is here, in the shipyards owned directly by the Merchant Houses, that the great merchant craft of Messantia are constructed. Massive cranes, hoists and dry-docks dominate the area, which is guarded against unauthorised entry by the retainers of various Merchant Houses.

THE SEWERS (THE CITY BELOW)

The people of the city do not consider the sewers of Messantia a prefect. In fact, most citizens rarely think of them at all, but they are included here because of their importance to the city.

Messantia has had some manner of sewer system almost since its founding, though in the beginning it was extremely rudimentary and unreliable, making use of the ruins left behind by the vanished Acheronian civilisation. The early Argossean engineers studied these ruins, as they did everything left behind by the Acheronians, and were able to glean the basic principles of how a sewer should work.

As stated, Messantia's original sewer system was a crude mixture of new, if poorly-constructed, tunnels interconnected with the parts of the original sewers that could still be functional. As the city grew, however, the sewers did not grow with it, leaving most citizens with

no option other than, of course, the chamber pot. Part of King Miklus' reasoning for his massive renovation project was to correct that failing, along with a great many others.

Although it was potentially the most massive project in Messantia's history (the other contenders being the creation of Freecove as a shipyard and the redirection and confinement of the Khorotas River), the recreated sewer system has served the city well for generations. It is formed of pipes and tunnels of all sizes, most large enough for at least three or four men to walk abreast. The network runs almost everywhere in the city, though the system is at its sparsest beneath Dockside.

The sewers let out in a pair of large discharge tubes located a half-mile from the city in either direction along the coast. In the rare event of a flood, the system has a series of valves in the manmade banks of the river which can be thrown open to help bleed away some of the excess water. This idea works better in theory than in practice, as the impact on the two floods Messantia has suffered has been negligible.

The layout of the sewer system is a carefully-kept secret of the Sewer Workers' Guild, the only guild in Messantia to remain independent of the Merchant Houses. It is rumoured there is only one complete map of the sewers and that it is kept hidden by the guildmaster. The truth is that there is no complete map.

When the new sewers were built during Miklus' renovation, the old ones were not destroyed or filled in. Under Redboots, for example, these older sewers are still the main system. Those parts of the old sewers that were still viable were used, but there were dozens of tunnels, chambers and shafts that were walled off and few records of these places exist. What is more, the river and the ocean, over the years, have gouged a collection of caves in the soft limestone, and some of these were breached, then walled off again, during Miklus' renovations. The most accurate maps the guild has are of the sewers under the western city, where the tunnels and pipes are newest, but even there, the possibility exists of finding something not on the map.

In addition to its intended and rather obvious use, the sewer system of Messantia plays other roles as well. Smugglers, pirates and fences routinely use it to ferry goods throughout the city, and are responsible for the sewers' other name: the City Below. Fugitives from Messantian justice hide in

the sewers, hoping to find a way out of the city. And in some of its older, unused chambers gather criminals and worshippers of gods like Bel.

The true ruler of the City Below is Sergio Kostokos, the guildmaster of the Sewer Workers Guild, and those who make regular use of the pathways below the city know they must pay for the privilege. Sergio is not picky about who uses the sewers or how so long as they cause no damage and pay his toll.

Rumours persist of things living in the sewers and there are almost as many different stories as storytellers. One story almost everyone in the city knows and which is in fact true, is that there are some places where sewer workers refuse to go. Whatever may live down there, it has not bothered the people above. Yet.

POINTS OF INTEREST

None. Unauthorised access to the sewers is illegal.

CRANETOWN

Cranetown was founded during the dark time of the Blackblood Plague. Fishermen frightened of catching the plague themselves had thought to flee the city entirely, but King Miklus convinced them to stay. With Messantia's herds lying dead and caravans and trading ships avoiding the city, the fishermen were the only source of food left to the people. Though the fishermen agreed to stay, they would not remain in the city, and with their families, sailed out to a long, rock-capped sandbar near the mouth of Messantia's harbour, where they dropped anchor to wait out the plague.

As the plague dragged on, the fishermen found themselves with less work to do: Messantia was no longer exporting fish, and there was the grisly reality of far fewer mouths to feed in the city itself. Some began to doubt they could ever return to the city, as they had seen the purging fires burning where once homes had stood. At the urging of Parsion Duchis, who had become the unofficial leader of the fishermen, they began to construct a crudely-fashioned village on the rocky sandbar.

Gathering wood and rocks from the shore, they started building rickety platforms and quays on the sandbar.

It was a slow and difficult process that, in the beginning, resulted in more failure than success, and they would have likely given up and simply continued living in their boats were it not for the charisma and prodding of Parsion. His



urging was enough for the fishermen to continue, even if they told themselves they were working only to alleviate their boredom. Soon, however, they began to learn the techniques of building in this strange environment and Cranetown quickly grew.

By the time everyone was convinced the plague had subsided, the fishermen had grown accustomed to life in Cranetown, and had learned the advantages this new way of life offered them. No longer did they have to endure the dangers of life in seamy Dockside. No longer did they have to fight the currents, the tides and the wallowing merchant ships to get out of Messantia's wharves and go to work. Some returned to the mainland when the plague ended, but most chose to remain in their new village on the waves.

Life in Cranetown did not remain as peaceful or idyllic as Parsion and his followers imagined it would be, however. There were many problems they had not foreseen, such as the lack of any fresh water or new building materials. Cisterns and salvage helped with both of these problems, but could not overcome them. The first hurdle for the people of Cranetown, however, was the crown's insistence the new settlement be destroyed, and its people returned to the mainland. Parsion went to intercede with King Miklus, reminding him the fishermen had agreed to stay and feed Messantia during the plague. Miklus relented, and allowed Cranetown to stand.

Permission to remain did not obviate the new settlement's other problems, however. Initially, fishermen had to sail back into Messantia's harbour every day with their catch, and were expected to return with a ship full of fresh water, new wood and all the dozens of other things Cranetown could not supply on its own. During the camaraderie of the first days of the settlement, this worked fairly well, but it could not last. Arguments over ownership and responsibility became commonplace and Cranetown threatened to collapse in on itself.

Even in its infancy, smuggling began to blossom in Cranetown. Ships carrying illicit goods would meet a fishing ship out on the water and offload the goods there. Since fishing ships are exempt from Messantia's tariffs, the fisherman could sail back to harbour and meet the smugglers in Dockside. This simple and easy method of evading taxes and duties on goods had been a long-running practice, but became even more prolific once smuggling ships could also dock at Cranetown and offload much larger amounts of cargo.

This explosion in smuggling as Messantia was recovering from the plague enraged Miklus, and his thoughts turned once again to simply ordering the destruction of Cranetown. That might have been the end of Cranetown, but the Drusus Merchant House saw an opportunity for new business and new profit in the situation. Aloysius Drusus began sending barges out to Cranetown, loaded with wood, water, bread, cheese, nails, rope and everything else the fishermen needed. These items were traded with the people of Cranetown for a small amount more than they cost in port. For the return trip, the barges offered to buy the day's catch from the fishermen, for slightly less than would be paid in port. Most agreed, preferring slightly less money in exchange for the convenience of not having to sail back into Messantia itself. A Patrol officer rode along on every barge, in a clear signal by the Drusus House that they were doing what they could to prevent smuggling, and Miklus, his mind occupied by dozens of projects and problems, was mollified.

Always careful never to gouge too much, soon House Drusus controlled almost all trade between Cranetown and the mainland. Parsion himself was heartbroken by this, as part of his dream of Cranetown was to keep the fishermen of Messantia free of the grasping claws of the Merchant Houses, and he died soon after. But Cranetown thrived, despite the reduction in smuggling.

Today, Cranetown is a busy place, populated mostly by fishermen and opportunists. More than 400-feet in length, but only a dozen or so wide, it is a warren of homes, quays,

taverns, shops, shrines and brothels built haphazardly on top of, under and around each other. Cranetown grew organically, with no plan for its construction, a fact with is immediately obvious to anyone looking at it. Travel through the settlement is accomplished by a dizzying array of bridges, walkways, ropes and catwalks suspended above the water. Its clapboard rooftops are littered with pots full of dirt, growing what fruits and vegetables they can. Adding to the confusion is the constant rebuilding that takes place here, especially after a bad storm season. A native of Cranetown could easily lose even the most dogged pursuer in this confusing labyrinth.

Cranetown has become almost a city unto itself, though still closely tied with Messantia. There was, during the time of Milo's father, a brief attempt to secede entirely, but the crucifixion of Arcadius, the leader of the secession attempt, on the bow of Argos' flagship, the Pride, put a quick end to that. Still, the community mostly governs itself. Aside from Patrol officers riding the Drusus barges out to trade, there are no Patrolmen in Cranetown. The population, at a little more than 1,000 people, relies on self-policing.

Cranetown has grown extremely clannish over the course of its existence, with five major families rising to control the settlement. The most powerful of these is the Duchis family, relatives and descendants of Parsion. Though lesser in power than the Duchis family, the other four, the Biscios, Cortesius, Guadentus and Tictius families, remain very influential in Cranetown. All five clans have close ties to House Drusus, the only Merchant House with major interests in Cranetown, a near-monopoly the House has vigorously defended. The heads of the five families meet in a regular council to decide business and hear grievances. They also try criminals, as the people of Cranetown do not concern themselves with the laws of the mainland more than they must. Punishments are universally simple – either fines or flogging. For the worst crimes, the criminal might be sentenced to 'bleeding'. This unusual punishment involves taking the prisoner 200-feet from Cranetown, cutting his arm, and dumping him in the water. If he makes it back without becoming a meal for the sharks or barracuda, he is free. Since most people, even in Cranetown, cannot swim, this is generally a death sentence even without the carnivorous fish to contend with.

The monarchs of Messantia have rarely bothered themselves with Cranetown's justice. Indeed, word of crimes and punishments in the settlement rarely reach the mainland. So long as the

people of Cranetown hand over any fugitives who have fled from the city, Messantia's rulers are inclined to let them settle their differences themselves.

Disputes in Cranetown are settled as often with knives as with laws, however. Though there is usually peace among the five clans, disputes can sometimes break into violence. The clans are easy to tell apart, even to an outsider, as every clansman is tattooed extensively. This is solely for identification, both in life and in death, as a dead man in the water is not likely to remain intact very long, and the tattoos can tell his identity even when every other trace is gone.

Life in Cranetown is hard, but its people find it rewarding. They are fiercely independent, and generally suspicious of outsiders. Those who come from the outside and stay with them can usually earn their trust so long as they also earn their keep. Three of the five tavern keepers, for example, as well as most of the employees of the single brothel, came from the mainland. Women in Cranetown enjoy the same rights as the men, as do the few members of foreign races that live here. What matters in Cranetown is work. Those who do it are respected, those who do not are not welcome.

POINTS OF INTEREST

Parsion's Statue (233): This statue, carved from a single piece of wood, stands with Messantia to the left and the open sea to the right. It depicts Parsion holding his left hand out, palm up, in a warding gesture toward the city, while his head is turned right, looking out at the waves. It is placed toward the western end of Cranetown, in the largest open area in the settlement, a wooden platform that reaches 30 feet on a side.

Bargehold (234): House Drusus barges dock here when they come to Cranetown.

The Cisterns (235): Cranetown's fresh water supply, which has sufficient capacity to maintain the settlement for about a month. Citizens of Cranetown are allowed two pails of water each day for free, but may take up to five, with a charge of half a silver per additional pail. Past experience has taught that this is perhaps the most precious asset the settlement has and anyone tampering with it would be lucky if he were killed outright.

Seven Stilts (236): A simple tavern.

Conclave (237): Cranetown's cramped 'town hall' where the heads of the five clans meet.

Healing Sea (238): Cranetown's only leech, midwife and herbalist, Pecora Galitia, maintains her shop here. On the roof she maintains a small herb garden.

The Shark's Bite (239): A simple tavern and the only inn in Cranetown. Accommodations here are spartan at best, consisting of a simple cot, a chamber pot and a sponge for bathing. Fish stew is the offered meal almost every night. Still, for those whose business brings them to Cranetown overnight, the Shark's Bite is the only option available and its owner Vagno Orabalos makes a comfortable living.

The Sea Urchin (240): Tavern and gambling hall. Fabbro Avedutius, Cranetown's most prolific fence who is tied as closely to House Drusus as he can manage, works from here.

Ladies of the Waves (241): A rickety brothel.

Fish and Tack (242): This shop run by Ciangheri Amatus and his sons, provides everything from sailcloth to rope to fish hooks for the fishermen of Cranetown.

A Taste of Land (243): Popular, but very expensive, this grocer's market run by Amata Monachos offers fruits, vegetables, meats and bread.

Four Masts Tavern (244): This tavern takes its name from the four salvaged masts of a pair of Zingaran buccaneer ships that are used as its four main roof supports. The ships were sunk a little more than two centuries ago in one of the largest buccaneer assaults on Freecove, commonly known as the Battle of Corpsetide due to the large numbers of dead bodies washed up on shoreline in the aftermath of the fighting. Commanding the *Celeres*, the ship that sank the two buccaneers, was one of Cranetown's favourite sons, Captain Tedaldo Perusinos. Captain Perusinos was the first of only two Cranetown men to rise to that rank in the Argossean navy, the other being Mauritus Venio, captain of the *Red Lady* and buccaneer to the crown (see page 79). Before the sea swallowed the enemy ships, Captain Perusinos had his men cut the masts free and towed them back to Cranetown. Upon his return he gifted the severed masts to his cousin, Tribaldo Florulos, ancestor of Scolaio Albagios and the current owner of Four Masts Tavern. Tribaldo, like all his forebears, is only too happy to regale his patrons with the tale of the masts.

The Laughing Swordfish (245): Tavern and gambling hall.

Beyond the Walls

Outside Messantia

MOST OF THE kingdom of Argos is ruled by a wide array of barons, counts and dukes, who are the *de facto* kings and queens of their own lands. All of them owe allegiance to King Milo, but are largely left to their own devices in governance of their realms. Messantia's influence does not end at the edges of the city's prefects, however. Obviously, as capital of Argos and the seat of King Milo's power, it exercises some measure of control throughout every corner of the feudal kingdom, the city also holds an impressive amount of land under its direct domination.

The lands outside Messantia, for a distance of between 20 and 30 miles, depending on the direction, are under the immediate control of King Milo. Long ago, before Argos coalesced into a nation and Messantia was just another city-state, it held sway over a larger area. With the advent of the feudal system and the rise of the Merchant Houses, the land directly controlled by Messantia shrank as it was ceded to various minor nobles with strong family connections. Eventually, it was possible to stand on the outskirts of Messantia and see, just before the horizon, where the city's influence ended and the lands of the nobles began.

That trend has begun to reverse itself in recent years. King Milo's great-grandfather, King Arrigo, began annexing the lands of troublesome or, in his view, useless nobles whose realms bordered on Messantia's own territory. Fortunately for him, there were no powerful nobles such as dukes or counts so close by, but still, this practice infuriated nobles throughout the country. For five terrifying months Argos trembled on the edge of civil war before King Arrigo was able to buy off the counts and dukes who were assembling against him with bribes, blackmail and secret favours, and the land settled again into a cautious peace. King Arrigo's son, King Lucius, was too nervous about inciting the nobles to rebel once more to expand Messantia's domain, but his son, King Constans and the current King Milo, have each unseated several nearby nobles. Indeed, they have nearly raised the practice to an art form.

Nearby nobles who govern effectively and are loyal to the crown, have nothing to fear from King Milo, as they had

nothing to fear from his father. Those who govern poorly or who are less than sincere in their allegiance are another matter. The two most recent kings, Milo in particular, have been cagey monarchs. Instead of simply seizing land, King Milo will endeavour to discover any debts or vices that a targeted noble possesses and seek to exploit or exacerbate it. When the debt has grown too crushing or the vice too consuming, King Milo offers to purchase the noble's lands. The noble retains his title and place in court, but his lands now fall under the direct control of the king. Of the three nobles who have lost their lands under Milo, two are grateful to him and believe he has done them a great favour.

Obviously, this practice is tremendously unpopular with the nobles, and King Milo will only do it when he feels the gain will outweigh the risks. Some nobles suspect King Milo wants to one day do away with the feudal system entirely, and establish himself as absolute ruler in fact as well as name. In fact, Milo would like that very much, but is far too realistic to think it would ever be possible. Indeed, there may be no more seizures of noble lands, as all the nobles with realms bordering Messantia's are now anxious to prove their worth and loyalty to the king.

No city is an island unto itself, and that certainly holds true with Messantia. The Golden City relies on the lands around it for its survival as much as it relies on international trade for its wealth. The lands under Messantia's control are, like much of Argos, completely pacified. Dangerous beasts of any kind are a true rarity here. Below are some of the major and more interesting areas under Messantia's control, including a list of points of interest.

FREECOVE

Freecove was given its name by the smugglers and pirates who made extensive use of it in the early days of Messantia to smuggle goods into the city. Since King Cassius ordered the naval shipyards moved here from Messantia's harbour, Freecove has echoed constantly with the sounds of hammers, saws and the oaths of

the sweating men who build and maintain the mightiest navy on the sea.

Freecove is home to some 500 shipwrights, craftsmen and slaves, guarded by an equal number of soldiers and a brace of warships waiting at anchor in Freecove's mouth. The shipwrights who labour here know the deepest secrets of the mighty Argossean warships, a fact that is widely known and the importance of which is lost on no one. There have been several attempts by Zingaran pirates to take Freecove, but the shipyard's defences have proven too difficult for them to breach, and the pirates end up fleeing the area, pursued by a dozen of Argos' greatest warships oaring west to send them to the bottom of the sea.

Freecove is a place of hard work, with mills turning out masts and planks, smithies forging deadly rams and labourers swarming over the skeletal frames of ships under construction. Aside from the master shipwrights, who merit private dwellings, everyone here lives in simple, utilitarian dormitories. The slaves are locked up every night in squat, sturdy buildings that house large cells. Almost everything here is dedicated to a single purpose: maintaining Argossean naval superiority. The sole exception is a tavern called the Mainsail, where the men can come to enjoy a jack of ale after a hard day of work. Several times a month, the crown will send minstrel or two, under guard, to Freecove to perform for the men. The shipwrights themselves seldom leave Freecove, and are always guarded when they do. The free men labouring there receive 10 days of leave every three months, which they usually spend in the brothels and bordellos of Dockside.

Freecove and everything in it are owned by the state and every man there is either working or is a slave to it. This place is the key to Argos' maritime might and is absolutely forbidden to anyone not employed here or on the business of the crown. Anyone else entering or even approaching risks a quick death.

POINTS OF INTEREST

Note: Unauthorised entry into Freecove is punishable by instant death under Messantian law. Player Characters who wish to enter Freecove will have to accomplish the all-but-impossible task of obtaining written, signed and sealed permission from the crown or the Consul, and must be accompanied on arrival at Freecove by an agent of the crown. Further, unless the Player Characters have a royal order to the contrary, they can expect their person and possessions to be subject to a thorough search

upon entering and leaving Freecove. The Player Character who tries unsuccessfully to forge any of these documents will suffer a terrible fate.

The Towers: There is only one route through the jagged cliffs surrounding Freecove, guarded by two pairs of towers. The route into the shipyards winds its way through narrow caverns with sheer cliffs on either side, the towers are built into these cliffs. Stretched between each pair of towers is a massive gate of thick oak faced with bronze, so heavy it must be opened and shut by 10 men straining on a cranking wheel. Each tower can accommodate 50 fighting men, and is stocked with enough weapons for 500. Along the cliffs themselves, in the killing zone between the two pairs of towers, avalanches are held in reserve to be dropped on any attacking force. Between the narrow approach and the strength of these fastnesses, the soldiers in Freecove can easily hold off an enemy force many times their size.

The Sea-Keeps: The entrance to Freecove's harbour is narrow, and built on either arm at the entrance are the Sea-Keeps. These thick-walled forts have wide, flat roofs on which are mounted catapults, arbalests and other siege engines, ready to rain flaming pitch down on any attacking ship. Stretched between the Sea-Keeps, lying on the bottom of the harbour is a mighty chain, which can be pulled taut to bar enemy vessels from entering Freecove.



Just inside the harbour from the Sea-Keeps, two of Argos' mightiest warships wait constantly at anchor.

The Mainsail: Open only at night, after the day's work is done, this tavern is the only place of its kind in Freecove, where the men can come to enjoy an ale, a few games of cards and perhaps even a little entertainment on nights when a musician is performing. The men here are very friendly and always overjoyed to see outsiders, especially those bearing news of the happenings in Messantia. A visitor to Freecove who is even marginally cordial to the men of the shipyards will find they are all too willing to buy his drinks all night long, provided the stories of the outside keep coming.

Master Shipwright: This is the home of Milvio Odiernus, the Master Shipwright of Freecove and guardian of the deepest secrets of Argossean shipbuilding. The Odiernus family has a five-generation history of working in Freecove, and three of Milvio's ancestors held the position of Master Shipwright before him. He very rarely leaves Freecove, and then only under heavy guard, which he welcomes for his own protection. Even within Freecove, his home is under constant watch, as are his wife, two sons and one daughter.

Home of Noffo Gianni: While not the Master Shipwright of Freecove, at 80 years of age Noffo Gianni is certainly the oldest. He is a harsh, often cruel taskmaster during the day, working his men to the edge of exhaustion and only grudgingly settling for perfection. At night, he likes to gather scraps of wood and sailcloth left over from the day's work and fashion simple model ships. Once every three or four months, he leaves Freecove with a cart full of these ships, which he sells as toys to children in the Bazaar. For a long time, no one who knew him as a toymaker was aware of his position as a Freecove shipwright. When that fact became known, it set off a race to learn the secrets of Freecove. A tale the Zingarans angrily, sometimes violently, deny is that they sent a Zingaran agent from the Envoy in Messantia to acquire one of Noffo's toys and ship it back to the shipwrights of Kordava, who set to work studying it to learn what hints it held of Noffo's knowledge. Of course, Noffo had built it as a toy, not as a warship and it contained no Freecove secrets whatsoever. Still, it caused the Zingaran shipwrights to waste almost two years of their time in their attempts to replicate the toy.

Statue of King Cassius: In the centre of the shipyards stands a 20-foot marble statue of King Cassius, the monarch who ordered the creation of Freecove as it is today.

THE SWILLS

As Messantia grew from a fishing village into a trading city, the amount of garbage produced by its residents grew accordingly. For many years, refuse was buried in shallow pits north of the city, or it was cast into the river or the ocean. Obviously, that was a poor solution and Messantia's fishermen complained about the toll a bay full of rotting garbage was taking on their livelihood.

King Gellius' daughter Isabella held the throne in those days and was sympathetic to the fishermen's plight. In addition, her advisers had expressed concern of the possibility of sickness arising from the polluted waters. She proposed setting aside a space north of Messantia to burn the city's refuse, but again her advisers raised their concerns of disease brought by the smoke, as well as the chances for the fire to escape control and menace the city.

Isabella was reminded then of worries brought to her by the captains of her navy, of an inlet scarcely more than a league east of the city. The inlet was known as the Swells, for the long, even waves that broke apart at its mouth. They feared an enemy fleet, slipping through Messantia's patrols, might use the Swells to put ashore an army, which could then march unhindered into the city itself. The Swells featured a wide beach and was ringed with low cliffs like Freecove, but these cliffs were broken with two natural passes, through which an army might travel.

It seemed to Isabella that concerns of invasion and concerns of garbage could be solved together, and bringing to mind the actions of her forbear King Cassius, she decreed that the city's refuse would from then on be collected and carried, by ox-cart and barge, to the Swells. Her captains were confused by how this would repel an attacker, but that soon became clear. As the Golden City's garbage began to pile up higher and higher on the beach of the Swells, which quickly became known in the city as The Swills, rats and other disease-carrying scavengers began to infest the place.

In addition, rumours spread quickly of things much older and fouler than mere rats making their homes among the growing piles of trash. These rumours were, in fact, started at the order of Isabella herself, but the stories of things that lurked in the stinking piles of The Swills are now accepted wisdom throughout the city.

Additionally, Isabella had a pair of towers built between the two passes through the hills to further guard against any threat to the city. Both towers are



manned by a score of archers, and at the top of each a signal fire waits to be lit in case of invasion.

The soldiers refer to tower duty at The Swills as Ratwatch, and it is the most repulsive posting available to the fighting men of Messantia. Initially, a posting there was considered a voluntary hardship post, entitling the soldier to draw an extra 10% on his salary. But the reek of the garbage and the stink carried downwind from Redboots combined to create such an abominable, cloying stench that only a handful of the greediest soldiers would volunteer. Thus, the Ratwatch became a posting given to soldiers as a manner of punishment. These men do not draw additional pay, though the duty is still open to any who wish to take it for the money.

The Street Sweepers Guild is responsible for collecting the city's garbage and removing it to The Swills, a duty for which the House Corvara receives a hefty annual stipend from the crown. The guildsmen are firm believers in the stories of things living in the refuse heaps of The Swills, and they will not enter into the 'interior' of the dump. Instead, they pile the new garbage around the edges of the old and hurry away. Even if they have never seen clearly any of the unnatural things they believe are haunting the area, they have seen the foam-mouthed rats

grown to the size of small dogs peering at them from the mounds of trash.

Every three months, the guildsmen toss jugs of oil and lit torches into the refuse, setting it ablaze both in hope of killing the beasts within and out of necessity – for otherwise there would be no room left in The Swills for the city's garbage. Still, the fires have never consumed the oldest parts of the dump. The fears voiced to Queen Isabella about the dangers of burning the refuse do not apply here, as the fire could never pass the stony hills to reach Messantia, and the wind bears the smoke away to the east, toward Shem. But the quarterly burning does serve to make the Ratwatch that much more horrid for the men in the towers.

POINTS OF INTEREST

None, while entry to The Swills is legal, no one willingly chooses to venture here.

THE FARMLANDS

The lands around Messantia, while under the governance of the king, are all but completely in the possession of the Merchant Houses. The area north of the city, on the southernmost plains of Argos, is a patchwork of farms, orchards, vineyards, ranches and dairies, crossed here and there by roads and caravan trails. This is the second of Messantia's larders, the first being the sea. Though the area contains far more than just farms, it is most commonly referred to in the city simply as the 'Farmlands'.

The Merchant House holdings extend outward from the city roughly 15 to 20 miles east and west, and northeast along the Khorotas River even farther, as the river valley holds the richest farmland and most accessible water. There are no towns or villages within the House's domains. All the inhabitants of the area are either slaves or employees of the Houses working on one of their House's holdings. Generally, the slaves live in large dormitories on the farm or ranch, while their paid overseers live nearby in only slightly better accommodations.

The roads and caravan trails, winding their way between fences of stone and wood that mark the boundaries of the Houses' various holdings, are the only areas in the Farmlands that are open to the general public. The Merchant Houses Brenicis, Loreca and Pompilius each maintain a couple of rudimentary inns and watering facilities along the caravan trails and roads at approximately 10 miles out from the city, the only accommodations available to those travelling to the city through the Merchant House lands. The inns have two sets of prices, one for caravaners and one for

travellers. Simple travellers are grossly overcharged, for that reason many will often try to push through to Messantia without stopping.

Outside the Merchant House holdings are a number of towns and villages, which subsist on farming, ranching and providing lodgings to travellers and caravans. The people in these villages are a far cry from the cosmopolitan Messantians. Though they are usually friendly and cordial toward travellers, they are a prosaic and conservative bunch, with none of the great patience for unusual clothing, languages and customs found in Messantia. They are simple people living a simple life and do not welcome complication. They do, however, welcome the silver that travellers bring. Most inns in these villages are relatively simple and rustic, but they do offer clean lodging, stables and good food at a fair price. For the traveller who wants to get an early start on the last, long leg of his journey to Messantia and thus bypass the expensive Merchant House accommodations, these outlying inns offer a breakfast of bread and cheese, wrapped in a cloth so that it may be easily carried and eaten on the road.

Argos was at peace: laden ox-wains rumbled along the road, and men with bare, brown, brawny arms toiled in orchards and fields that smiled away under the branches of the roadside trees. Old men on settles before inns under spreading oak branches called greetings to the wayfarer.

Robert E. Howard, *The Hour of the Dragon*

The crops grown in the Farmlands are predominantly food crops. Argos has a large industry of cotton and hemp farming, but most of those crops are found elsewhere in the nation. Farms near Messantia are split almost evenly between grains and vegetables, with a slight advantage going to the grains. Argosesean farmers implement a limited two-tier crop rotation cycle, which, combined with the ready supply of manure from nearby ranches, prevents the soil from loosing its fertility.

Orchards are primarily devoted to olives and to citrus fruits like lemons and oranges. Olives are a major staple of the Argosesean diet, the oil from the fruit is used for a variety of applications, from food to cosmetics to oiling the mighty mills and machines of River Prefect. As it smells significantly better than fish oil, it is also the preferred fuel for the lamps that light the streets and homes in western Messantia. It is also considered to have exceptional medicinal properties and is used in a number of unguents and poultices prepared by Messantia's leeches.

Farther north in Argos, the plains begin to give way to forests. Likewise, the primary industry of the area goes from farming to logging. The southernmost timber regions are along the banks of the Khorotas, which is where the logging interests of the Merchant Houses are located, as are the logging areas owned directly by the crown. Unlike the labourers on the farms and ranches, Argosesean loggers are free men, not slaves. It would certainly be cheaper to use slave labour, but no one has yet been willing to risk arming a large number of powerful, resentful slaves with axes and then giving them a forest in which to hide. More, the demand for quality Argosesean timber is such that even with the higher cost of employing free men as loggers, the Houses, particularly House Drusus and House Dulcia, which have the largest logging interests of all the Merchant Houses, turn a tidy profit on their lumber holdings.

The Merchant Houses mill their timber on site, in a series of sawmills scattered along the banks of the Khorotas and manned by free men from nearby towns. The milled lumber is then sent downriver to Messantia on wide river barges, eventually making its way to wherever it might be needed. The lumber taken by the crown, however, is not milled on site. All this timber is bound eventually for Freecove,



such is the secrecy of that place that even the dimensions of the planks and beams used in Argossean naval vessels is concealed. Instead, the trees are stripped of their bark, branded the property of the crown and sent downriver. They are collected in Messantia and conveyed overland to Freecove, and only then are they heated, seasoned and milled to the exact specifications of Messantian shipwrights.

MINES AND QUARRIES

The coastal cliffs and hills of Argos are where much of the nation's mineral riches are found and the hills near Messantia are no exception. Once thought to be a rich source of iron ore, all but one of the iron mines near the city have played out. Messantia now imports almost all its iron ore from northern Argos. There is still silver and copper to be dug from the earth here, however, and gold is still gathered from mines and from the streams that crisscross the hills and brought into the city to be shaped and formed by the skilled men and women of the Finesmiths Guild.

The hills near Messantia are also home to several quarries, from which the limestone and marble used in the city's famous monuments and buildings is taken. Argossean limestone and marble are highly prized, but demand for them is sporadic. Coupled with difficulties in transporting something with the mass and bulk of stone, the uncertain demand for these stones as exports keeps them from becoming a more important commodity. Of all the Merchant Houses, only House Gilroy has any quarrying interests whatsoever. With that House's impressive fleet of large, ocean-going vessels and ready access to an enormous pool of slave labour, House Gilroy is able to realise an income on trading in stone.

THE CEMETERY

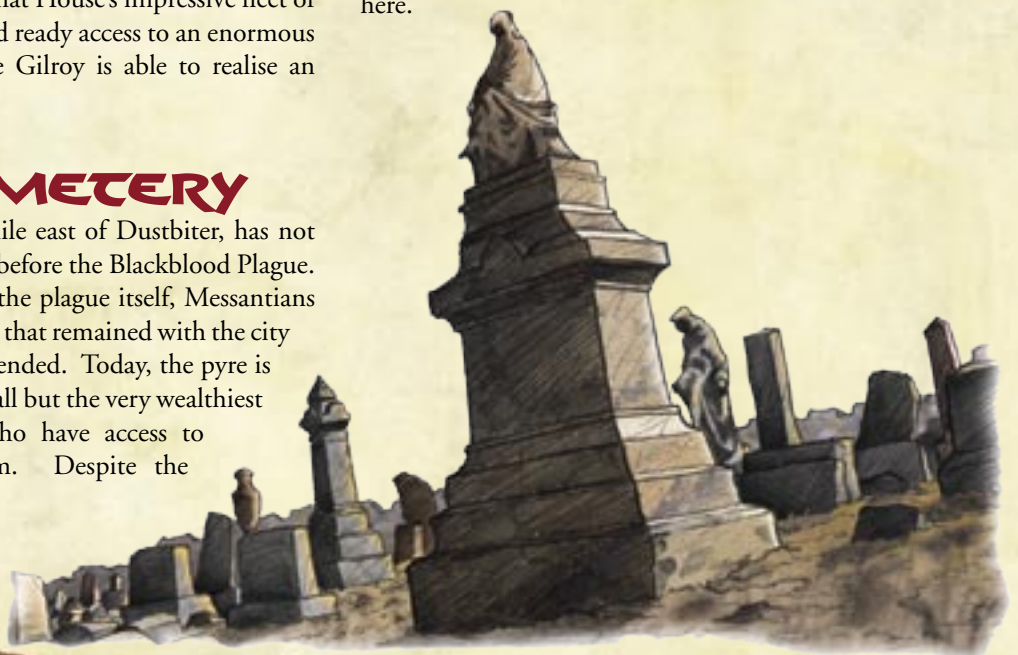
This ancient graveyard, a mile east of Dustbiter, has not had a single new grave since before the Blackblood Plague. During the terrible time of the plague itself, Messantians burned their dead, a practice that remained with the city even after the plague was ended. Today, the pyre is the final destination for all but the very wealthiest Messantians, those who have access to a family mausoleum. Despite the

lapse in its use, however, the cemetery is still maintained by the crown.

The cemetery is surrounded by a 15-foot fence of crumbled stone and rusted iron, the western wall of which holds the only gate, locked with a chain and guarded by 10 Patrolmen who have drawn this unfortunate duty for the month.

Within the walls are thousands of graves and exactly how many people are interred in the cemetery is unknown. The very poor were buried in mass graves in the northeastern area of the cemetery, and many of those who could afford individual interment were buried with a simple wooden marker, rather than stone. The long years that have passed since the last wooden marker was placed have obliterated all traces of such markers. Even the majority of the stone markers are illegible now, their letters washed away by centuries of wind and rain. On the western side of the cemetery, nearest the gates and the city, are the most intact and recognisable graves – a series of ancient mausoleums. These hoary structures have withstood the tide of the years, their thick stone walls and roofs still intact, though the sturdy metal doors of most have long since rusted shut.

Before the plague, not even the Merchant Houses maintained private mausoleums on the grounds of their villas, and many of the old mausoleums in the cemetery were once devoted to holding the remains of different Houses. Most of these are empty now, the corpses removed after the plague to be interred again on the House's estate in the city. Several Houses, such as House Pephredo and House Tarchon, did not bother removing their dead from the cemetery and the bones of their ancestors still rest here.



An awful groan reverberated through the vaults. Conan's hair stood on end and he felt clammy sweat bead his hide. For the body of Shukeli stirred and moved, with infantile gropings of the fat hands. The laughter of Pelias was merciless as a flint hatchet, as the form of the eunuch reeled upright, clutching at the bars of the grille. Conan, glaring at him, felt his blood turn to ice, and the marrow of his bones to water: for Shukeli's wide-open eyes were glassy and empty, and from the great gash in his belly his entrails hung limply to the floor. The eunuch's feet stumbled among his entrails as he worked the bolt, moving like a brainless automaton. When he had first stirred, Conan had thought that by some incredible chance the eunuch was alive, but the man was dead - had been dead for hours.

Robert E. Howard, *The Scarlet Citadel*

Some of these old graves and mausoleums have been plundered of what treasures they held over the long years since the plague. Others, however, have thus far managed to escape the grasp of thieves, whether through ancient traps and secret rooms hidden within and beneath the mausoleums, or simply through the fortunate intervention of the Patrol. Fending off grave robbing is, indeed, why Messantians believe the crown has always kept a force of the Patrol on guard at the gates here.

Scattered here and there among the weeds of the cemetery, and some of the land around it, are small, crumbled chunks of a greenish-black stone unlike anything found in the region. These bits of debris are clues to the cemetery's past, which is darker than anyone in Messantia understands. At the height of the Acheronian civilisation, long before the Hyborian invasion, this was the site of a temple to their foul and forgotten gods. It was a place of darkest sorcery and horrible sacrifices in which thousands lost their lives. The Hyborians destroyed the temple utterly, scattering the broken remains, but some remnant of that old evil still sleeps here. In time, the people of the fledgling nation of Argos forgot what had once been here, and through unfortunate chance chose this place, with its weird, rotted stones, as their graveyard.

From time to time, though very rarely, the evil memory of this place stirs in its rest, and the shreds of its ancient power bring a mockery of life to one or a handful of the corpses interred here. They claw their way up from their old graves, or squeeze their dusty bones out of a mausoleum, into the open air. Sometimes, the risen dead merely mill about in confusion, other times they set off with a grim

purpose toward the north, or toward Messantia. This is the true purpose for stationing the Patrol here, to deal with the undead before they escape to terrify and menace the populace. No one knows why the dead rise; even the royal seers have been unable to learn the truth, as something blocks all their attempts. If it happened more often, some past king would have surely done more to understand and prevent it, but as the dead rise only once every score or so of years, and in such small numbers, no monarch has concerned himself with it overmuch.

Rumours in the city of dead rising in the cemetery surface from time to time, but many do not believe it, if only to maintain their peace of mind. Most of the city believes the Patrol is there to keep grave robbers at bay, and indeed, the Patrol spends a great deal more time keeping the living out than they do the dead in. Within the past year, however, a disturbing trend has begun. Every few months, the Patrolmen find an emptied grave, with no sign of the occupant or of whom or what dug it up.

POINTS OF INTEREST

Patrol House: This small billet outside the gates of the cemetery is the home of the nine Patrolmen and one officer stationed here every month. At any given time, there will be two Patrolmen guarding the gates and two walking the perimeter on the outside of the fence. The remaining five Patrolmen will be found inside the billets with their officer, who wears the only key to the thick lock on the gate on a chain around his neck.

House Accertius Crypt: House Accertius was once one of the most powerful of the Merchant Houses, before the Stygian sorcerer Amenkuhn stole the form of Karnes Accertius (see page 87). In the short time Amenkuhn ruled it in the guise of Karnes, the House only grew more powerful, but it also earned the enmity of the other Houses. During and after the Blackblood Plague, after Amenkuhn was unmasked and House Accertius reeled in confusion and disarray, the other Houses struck at House Accertius, leaving the once-great House dishonoured and destitute. Within a year, the House was no more. But its great crypt still stands here in the cemetery, all but untouched by the passing of time. It has never been robbed or looted, and it is common knowledge in Messantia that every thief who has managed to enter the crypt has never come out again. House Accertius was a large and old family, and its mausoleum is said to hold hundreds of bodies and wealth beyond imagining, though the extent of that wealth increases with every telling of the tale. Still, it is known that even as large as the mausoleum is, it could not hold

everyone interred there, and in its prime, House Accertius dug a network of catacombs beneath the crypt. As if the riches, weaponry and jewellery buried with the dead were not enough temptation for an avaricious thief, there is a long-standing rumour in the city that as House Accertius was falling before the combined might of the other Houses. It is said that the last surviving members hid what wealth they could deep in these catacombs before fleeing the city.

Final Building: This is the crypt of the Order of Engineers. Only a few years before the Blackblood Plague effectively closed the cemetery, the Order made a startling discovery while expanding the catacombs beneath their mausoleum. They broke through into an ancient stairway that descended into the depths of the ancient Acheronian temple. Ferrino Elemosius, the Builder at the time, had the opening sealed up, all slaves who knew of it killed and swore every Engineer to silence. He even had all records of the ruined temple expunged from the Order's archives, ensuring that future generations would never learn of it. He was successful, as no one in the city, not even the current Builder Balsimino Damoctavius, knows of anything of what lies beneath the abandoned crypt. After the plague, Ferrino used his subtle influence in the city to promote the rising trend of burning the dead and arranged with the wealthy for the Order to construct private mausoleums on their estates. Whatever could have frightened Ferrino so much about the temple is unknown, along with the temple's very existence, but whatever it was is surely still there, waiting. The Last Building has never been robbed or ransacked, as thieves rightly fear the traps the Order might have devised, and they know there is nothing of value within anyway, as all members of the Order are buried without wealth or equipment.

House Ricchus Crypt: House Ricchus died out a century or so before the Blackblood Plague. Never among the greatest of the Houses, House Ricchus was cursed with a string of incompetent leaders who squandered the House's fortunes on various useless endeavours. Still, the House might have survived were it not for its last lord, Salito Ricchus. One drugged and drunken night, despairing over what he saw as the inevitable collapse of House Ricchus, he summoned his guards, took up his sword and slaughtered every member of the House before drinking himself to death atop a pile of their bodies. The few members of the House who were lucky enough to be away from the House Ricchus villa that night had their relatives interred in the mausoleum and left Messantia for good. House Ricchus had controlled the now-defunct Bellcasters Guild, and

the mausoleum once boasted a proud bell tower with an enormous bell, hung in such a way that a strong enough wind could cause it to chime. The tower is still there, but the bell has long since fallen from its hanger, and lies cracked and broken in one of the tower's windows. When the wind blows just right, the air passing through the crack in the bell sounds unsettlingly like a scream. More than a few Patrolmen have spoken of hearing screams from this crypt even when there was no wind, and when the Patrol must enter the cemetery, they stay as far from the House Ricchus crypt as they can.

The Shrine: This shrine to Mitra in the centre of the cemetery was once the site of daily prayers, but that was when the graveyard was still used. Now, it is tended once a month by a priest dispatched from the temple to perform a few prayers.

The Stone: This is the largest single known piece of the strange green-black stone. Measuring about five feet by three feet, it appears to have some kind of writing or design on one crumbling edge. Several scholars have come to study it, but the writing, if that is indeed what it is, is too weathered, worn and broken to make any sense.

House Tarchon Crypt: This crypt has been looted so many times there is not so much as a scrap of copper left within it. The traps and security in the tomb were simple, rudimentary and ineffectual, so much so that thieves used to use it to practice their most basic skills, earning the mausoleum the undignified nickname of 'The Playground' in Messantia's underworld. All the traps are now hopelessly broken, the locks worn to uselessness, and now no one comes here, least of all the men of House Tarchon.

House Pephredo Crypt: The dark walls of House Pephredo's mausoleum have been breached several times by ambitious groups of thieves, one of which actually made it out again, bearing riches of gold, gems and silver. Much of that wealth was spent fleeing the city before the vengeful hand of House Pephredo fell upon them, and their success has never been repeated. Recently, Lord Severyn of House Pephredo and several other members of his House have begun visiting the ancient crypt every few months. Whatever they are doing in there remains a mystery.

THE ISLANDS

The seas off the Argossean coast are dotted with islets and atolls, most too small to be of any worth to anyone. Often little more than wave-washed piles of stone or coral, they

are nothing more than a hazard to sailors, though they can be avoided easily enough by an alert mariner. A string of these islets, known as the 'Girdle', lies several miles off the coast south of Messantia and offers the city some measure of protection against the annual storms.

Not all Argossean islands are so small and inconsequential, however. East of Messantia, several miles offshore of the Argossean/Shemite border, lie a pair of islands known to Argosseans as Orabono and Orinolo, or simply 'The Brothers'.

The two mighty islands of Orabono and Orinolo are named for a pair of Hyborian brothers, twins in fact. In Argos' earliest days, they won a number of important victories against the Sons of Shem, securing Argossean independence. Ironically, the islands named after them have ever been a source of conflict between Argos and Shem, as both nations lay claim to the islands.

Ownership of the Brothers has shifted back and forth throughout the years, with the waxing and waning of each nation's strength. In recent years, however, Argos has been in the ascendancy. Shem's claims to ownership of the islands were once backed up by her naval vessels based in Becharadur. Once that city was destroyed by the demon known as Imhotep the Ravager, and the Shemites chose not to rebuild, they lost the closest harbour to the islands. The Argossean kings were not about to let this opportunity slip by and have been busily fortifying their claim on the western island of Orabono. Though Shem still claims the islands as its property, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that it is Argos that owns them.

The narrow track of sea that runs between the two islands is a deadly place of reefs, rocks and riptides known as the Demon Path. Scattered throughout it are several wave-chewed pillars of rock, thrusting skyward from the sea to a height of anywhere between 20 and 200 feet and known as Hell's Fingers. Sailing the Demon Path is incredibly dangerous, though some of the young men from Trabatis do attempt it from time to time. Anyone who fell into the water here would certainly not survive the experience, for even if he did not fall victim to the sea or the rocks, he would still have to escape the hungry jaws of the sharks that infest these waters.

The narrowness of the Demon Path and the existence of Hell's Fingers have led many scholars to believe Orabono and Orinolo were once a single mass. The cause of their sundering is easy to guess, as both islands are home to slumbering volcanoes.

ORINOLO

While the islands may be named for twins, they themselves are nothing alike. Orinolo's brother Orabono may be a green and pleasant place, but the eastern island of Orinolo is another matter.

The island is very nearly inaccessible. It is ringed on the south, west and north by great crumbling cliffs, which offer no sanctuary or harbour to a ship. A ship attempting to drop anchor near one of these shores would likely be pulled toward the island and dashed against the rocks by the treacherous tides that swirl among the cliffs. Should someone manage to reach the cliffs, without falling prey to any of the perils at their base, he will find the climb all but impossible. The very stone seems rotten with the sea's erosion and firm handholds are difficult to find. For the purposes of a Climb check, these cliffs count as a slippery surface (due to their propensity for crumbling) and impose a -5 penalty on all checks. The cliffs ascend from the water to a height of anywhere between 50 and 80 feet.

Orinolo once had a viable harbour, but it was all but walled off from any routes inland by the same crumbling cliffs that surround most of the island. There were several attempts by both Argos and Shem to establish a colony here, but those attempts always ended in failure. On each occasion, before a full year passed, a returning warship or supply ship would find the colony had been razed, its people slaughtered or simply missing. Each nation blamed the other for the murder of their people, but the more often this happened, the more credence people gave the persistent rumours that the butchery done to the colonists was not the work of men. What exactly caused the loss of Orinolo's harbour is likewise unknown. One day nearly two centuries ago, a distant rumble, deeper and longer than any thunder startled men on the shores of both Argos and Shem. Those close enough to see Orinolo from the shore watched as a cloud of dust rose over it, and then fled the shores before the sudden, onrushing waves of water. Ships were dispatched from both nations, and they discovered the island had shed a layer of its cliffs, like a snake shedding its skin. The harbour of Orinolo was gone.

On the eastern side of the island the sea slowly gives way to land in a thick, fetid swamp haunted by saltwater crocodiles, poisonous snakes, spiders the size of a man's head and worse. Ships certainly cannot reach the island by traversing the swamp. Even a small boat will run aground or become lodged on the submerged trunk of a rotten tree. Anyone attempting

to reach the interior of the island by passing through the swamp will need to use both a boat and their feet to make it, as some areas are impassable to a man on foot, while others cannot accommodate a boat of any kind.

Once the land finally becomes solid, it marches uphill through treacherous terrain, in a series of broken, rocky steps and cliffs to a wide plateau. No one in recorded history has ever made that ascent, though atop the plateau, a place untouched by human feet for three millennia, the ruins of an ancient Acheronian settlement await. Its existence is known only to a few, those who do know of it think of it as a treasure to be taken or a danger to be avoided, or both. This unnamed settlement, unlike all others of its kind, was never conquered or razed by the rampaging Hyborians. It was simply vacated by the failing Acheronian civilisation. Despite 3,000 years of decay and neglect, it surely still holds fantastic treasures and perils.

Though the Acheronians may have abandoned the settlement, it is clearly not deserted. The Order of Engineers has dispatched no fewer than five expeditions to Orinolo to study the ruins, but none have ever returned. Sailors passing the island have reported all manner of odd stories, from fruit disappearing from all the trees on the island to strange lights and sounds emanating from the plateau late at night. Some dismiss these stories as mere fancy, ascribing the sounds and lights, for example, to the fitful rumblings of the volcano that marks one end of the plateau. A traveller looking at the island from a distance as he sails past sees what looks at first like a sun-dappled paradise. However, as he continues to watch, he might feel the skin on his spine begin to crawl, sensing that he has attracted the attention of something old and cold staring back at him from beneath the tropical shadows. Whatever might be there is a mystery, and seems likely to remain so.

ORABONO

The western island of Orabono is its Brother's opposite in nearly every way. Certainly the prize of the two, Orabono boasts a wide harbour on its northern shore, plentiful fruit trees and grasslands.

Certainly the most important feature of Orabono is the Argossean naval base and settlement at Trabatis, the only area of the island inhabited by humans and a clear sign of the upper hand Argos has gained in its dispute with Shem over ownership of the Brothers.

Civilisation is beginning to creep outward from Trabatis.

Logging camps and farmlands are growing more prevalent outside the city, as the Merchant Houses begin to exploit this virgin territory. What crops and timber are not needed in Trabatis itself are exported elsewhere, generally back to Messantia. House Gilroy has begun excavations at a new obsidian mine about nine miles from Trabatis, which is farther from the settlement than any other Merchant House operations.

On the northwest corner of the island lies another treasure recently discovered by House Gilroy. On the shallow waters off the beach lies an enormous oyster bed, which the House wasted no time in beginning to mine for pearls. The waters here are as shark-infested as all others around the island, however, making the work extremely dangerous. House Gilroy brought in slaves to dive for the pearls, but even the slaves started refusing to dive after several were eaten in a single day by an enormous shark patrolling the area. The House tried flogging slaves into the water, but the blood from the fresh wounds only made the situation with the sharks worse. Eventually, House Gilroy hit upon an elegant solution, and promised freedom to any slave who worked the pearl beds for four months. Unfortunately for the slaves, any who survive three months of diving among the sharks are transferred to another of House Gilroy's holdings, and never have the chance to dive for the fourth month and their freedom.

The land immediately around Trabatis has been mostly pacified, though there are still occasional problems with crocodiles or poisonous snakes. Outside the settlement, the land is still very wild. The forests of Orabono are home to enormous bears, boars, leopards and sabre-toothed cats as well as several colonies of giant spiders on the southern coast.

It is extremely rare to see people anywhere outside the borders of Trabatis. Argossean sailors are sometimes brought inland to train for combat on different kinds of terrain, and the officers consider the dangerous wildlife of the island to be just another opportunity for the men to hone their skills, should they come in contact with one of the beasts.

The only other people one could expect to find in the wilds of Orabono are there because of the beasts. In the last few years, it has become fashionable among the young men of the Merchant Houses to mount hunting expeditions to Orabono to hunt and kill one of the enormous carnivores that roam the island. Usually these hunting parties are large and extremely well armed, with a number of guards along to protect the House's princeling from any real danger. There are a few scions of the Merchant Houses,

however, particularly those of the Actaeus, Florens, Pluvius and Tarchon Houses who hunt the island's dangerous prey either alone or in small bands.

Before the Merchant House hunts began, Orabono was a prime source of deadly animals for an enterprising man to capture and bring back to Messantia's Arena, but that practice has been ended now by the order of the Houses. The wealthy hunters have no desire to see their new favourite hunting ground stripped of game for the amusement of the masses. The sudden interest in the Merchant House hunts came as a surprise to the tanners and taxidermists of Messantia, who had no experience preparing the kinds of corpses and skins brought back from the hunts. They have learned quickly, however, and are expanding their knowledge of how to properly present even the oddest of trophies, such as the two giant spiders recently brought back to the city by Uglioni Pephredo.

TRABATIS

The settlement of Trabatis on Orabono is the clearest sign of Argossean supremacy on these two islands. 20 years ago, the island was almost as uninhabited as its brother, home only to a scattering of fishermen and a great deal of wildlife. Once King Milo became convinced the Shemites would not rebuild the flattened city of Becharadur, however, he moved quickly to strengthen the Argossean grip on the islands, hoping to install such a sufficiently powerful presence there that the Shemites would be forced to concede possession of the Brothers to Argos.

Trabatis was the first and most important step. King Milo ordered the construction of the settlement and its shipyards as a base for his mighty navy, from which his ships could easily patrol Argos' eastern waters and protect the Argossean claim on the Brothers.

Trabatis has grown quickly in the 20 years since its founding, and is now home to some 3,000 sailors, slaves and civilians. Fifteen of Argos' great warships call this their home, as do almost two score of smaller support ships. It is now the primary training site for sailors in the Argossean navy, who drill endlessly in the harbour, on the beach and in the island's interior, learning the skills that make them some of the most-feared sailors in the world.

The settlement is officially divided into two sections, one for the military and one for the civilians. The two halves have no official names, but are commonly known among the residents of Trabatis as 'The Deck' for the military and 'Landward' for the civilians. The division is physical as well as official; a long wooden fence runs between the two halves, pierced by two lightly guarded gates. Unlike the

various prefects of Messantia, this division has a real legal and useful purpose. Civilians, even the families of the rare married sailor, are not allowed 'on Deck' as it is called, and the sailors are not allowed to remain in Landward after midnight (though an exception to this rule is made for a married sailor).

The entire settlement of Trabatis, and by extension the entire island of Orabono, is governed locally by Captain Meus Fenthenes, appointed to the task three years ago by King Milo. However, there are limits on his power, as Trabatis is officially the property of the crown and is considered part of Messantia. Though Captain Fenthenes has full authority over all the military men in Trabatis, he must abide to some degree by Messantian law in regards to the civilian population. Aiding him in this are a single judge and two wardens, dispatched from Messantia for a six-month term of service on the island. Unlike Messantia itself, Trabatis has no Patrolmen and sailors are detailed to police duty while their ship is in port enforce all laws. Most sailors are tremendously displeased with this task and are apt to vent their frustration on anyone they catch in commission of a crime. The legal code in Trabatis is identical to that of Messantia.

The Merchant Houses themselves are strongly represented in Trabatis. When King Milo first decided to found Trabatis, he rightly expected resistance from the Merchant Houses, who saw it as another example of Milo gathering more power to himself. By declaring the settlement to be legally part of Messantia, however, he gained the eager co-operation of the Houses. Just as in Messantia, the Merchant Houses enforce guild membership on all businesses in Landward, and they have quickly snatched up every opportunity for import or export on the island.

The settlement of Trabatis begins even before the water's edge in a series of wharves and quays berthing the island's warships and fishing craft. Like the rest of the settlement, these wharves are kept strictly separate. The military side boasts docking space for four score naval vessels. The civilian side is less impressive, but still has sufficient space for the island's fishermen and the ships of the Merchant Houses that dock here regularly. The harbour itself is deep and relatively still. There is no beach as such, the land drops away underwater in a submerged cliff, leaving just a few feet of rock above the tides.

The eastern side of the harbour is the Deck, devoted to maintaining, training and housing the officers, sailors and slaves of the Argossean warships docked here. It is a place of utilitarian billets, slave

kennels and storehouses. The shipwright facilities here are rudimentary, sufficient only to ensure a damaged ship is seaworthy enough to make the voyage to Freecove for full repairs.

Landward occupies the western side of the harbour. Consisting mostly of a chaotic jumble of poorly constructed buildings, it was perhaps best described by Captain Fenthenes upon his arrival in Trabatis as 'a stationary army of camp followers'. The first residents of Landward were indeed camp followers, a collection of con men, gamblers, prostitutes and merchants who came to Trabatis to take advantage of the opportunities presented by hundreds of bored sailors.

The population of Landward is becoming slightly more diverse, with the arrival of fishermen, farm crews and loggers brought to Trabatis by the Merchant Houses to open up new interests and increase their profits. Regardless, the purpose of Trabatis' civilian population remains unchanged – to serve and/or cheat the military population. The majority of Landward's businesses are taverns, brothels and gambling halls, packed with a constantly-rotating clientele of off-duty sailors, traders and even Barachan Pirates, who are tolerated here as well as in Messantia.

The most dominant feature of Trabatis, without a doubt, is the massive, hulking fortress perched on a granite cliff some 100 feet above the settlement itself. Assembled in 13 years of feverish effort by the Order of Engineers and an untold number of slaves, this towering fastness is known simply as the Crag. From here, Captain Fenthenes rules Trabatis, and it is in the Crag that all trials are held and all prisoners incarcerated. The storerooms underneath the granite fortress hold literally tonnes of food and fresh water is drawn up from a well in the Crag's centre. The size and provisions in the fortress would allow it to shelter the entire population of Trabatis for as long as three months.

It is generally assumed King Milo had this imposing fortress constructed to add a final exclamation point to Argos' claim of ownership of the Brothers, and that is indeed its primary purpose. But there is a second purpose, one known only to King Milo, his sons Prince Cassio and Prince Ariostro and a handful of trusted advisers.

King Milo has always believed in planning for every possibility, and his secondary purpose in building the Crag is part of his plans for the worst possibility of all – the fall of

Argos. Since the completion of the fortress, King Milo has been ferrying small amounts of gold from his treasury in Messantia to the hidden storerooms beneath the Crag, which now contains nearly half of his wealth.

Should an invading army ever conquer Argos, King Milo or one of his sons can flee to Orabono and take shelter in the Crag. With the naval might available, and the strength of the Crag itself, the town of Trabatis is well suited as the site of Argos' government in exile. Further, the staggering amount of gold concealed in the Crag by King Milo should be more than enough to hire an army of mercenaries to retake Argos for its rightful rulers.

POINTS OF INTEREST

The Crag: The impenetrable fastness of Trabatis, and the seat of its governor.

Armouries: Thick-walled and heavily guarded, this is where all military weapons not kept in the Crag or aboard ship are stored. Employing eight smiths, damaged weapons and armour can be quickly repaired.

Billets: The dormitories housing the Argossean sailors.

Slave Kennels: The cramped housing given to those slaves lucky enough not to spend their nights chained to the oars in the belly of a warship.

The Military Docks and Shipyards

The Civilian Docks

The Fence: This wooden wall runs from the water's edge all the way to the base of the cliff atop which the Crag stands. It has two openings in it which are lightly guarded, and serves to divide the military and civilian populations of Trabatis.

Bloody Sails: A waterfront tavern frequented by both sailors and pirates and owned by an old, retired pirate named Cantino Tedescus, who always has a story to tell if he can be heard over the din. Brawls are common in this place, and indeed, the chance to watch or take part in a good fight is the reason most patrons come here. There are no barmaids here, and no metal or wooden drinking vessels of any kind. Bloody Sails serves cheap beer and cheaper wine in clay mugs and flimsy leather jacks, which are both easily replaced and all but useless as a weapon.

Aiolfo's Hide: The only leatherworker in Trabatis, Aiolfo Naldinus is kept constantly busy with orders from the

military. Fortunately, he has his wife Simona and two daughters Dinora and Tommasa to help him. He came to Trabatis four years ago from Messantia, a move that has worked well financially, but he is beginning to be concerned over what kind of future his daughters will have in this place.

Spar and Canvas: A large outfitting shop and shipwright owned by Gilio Cosius and employing nine workers. It is the sole source for ship maintenance and major repair available to the civilian population of Trabatis.

The Cradled Oar: A tavern and gambling hall only slightly less rowdy than Bloody Sails. Fulino Lagias, who supplements his sizeable income from the tavern by controlling most of the smuggling in and out of Trabatis, owns it.

Chello's Guides: Chello Mercherus has lived in Trabatis for nearly 20 years and knows the island of Orabono better than anyone. He and his three sons Chirico, Cinello and Ciulo hire out their services as guides to the wealthy gentlemen who come to the island for the hunting.

The Last Veil: Dancing hall and brothel, the largest of several in Trabatis.

Fishermen's Hall: This building is both a tavern and a secondary branch of the Fishermens Guild of Messantia, and is very popular with the fishermen of Trabatis. The old men sit inside with their ale, while the younger men congregate on the steps of the building. Idle boasting among the men on the steps, combined with enough ale, has escalated into more than one ill-advised race through the Demon Path.

The Fish and Bowl: One of two inns in Trabatis, its clientele is primarily traders and sailors.

The Full Tankard: A tavern owned by Rinieri Biondus, who brews his own beers in a large shack behind the tavern using local grain. His most popular brand is a spicy draught brewed with wild peppers, called Demon Pitch.

Romolo's Wheel: Romolo Pieran is the most prolific potter in Trabatis, turning out a steady supply of mugs for Bloody Sails.

The Golden Wave: The second of Trabatis' two inns, the Golden Wave caters to a wealthier crowd. Its owner, Zelone Mandinus, is concerned for the future of his business, however, as the Merchant Houses have begun

construct of permanent homes in the area the townsfolk have taken to calling the Villas. Without their patronage, Zelone will have to compete with the Fish and Bowl for less affluent customers.

Pitch and Roll: The newest brothel in Trabatis, its owner Venzi Dovisius is having a difficult time finding and retaining enough female employees. The recent increase in reports of strange things afoot on Orinolo, related to the employees by the customers, is frightening many of his employees into returning to the mainland.

The Drunken Dice: A tavern and gambling hall.

To The Point: Pandolfo Andreus and his son Nuccino run this shop, making and repairing bows and fashioning arrows for clients ranging from simple sailors to the sons of the Merchant Houses preparing for a hunt in the island's interior.

Many Needs: A combination second-hand shop and general store, Many Needs stocks everything from clothing and shoes to pots and harness. Ghelere Agnolettus, an old, extremely talkative widower, owns it.

The Villas: This area on the southern outskirts of Trabatis has only recently gained its name. There are no villas here yet, but several are in the process of construction for use by the Merchant Houses. The Houses have only recently been convinced the settlement at Trabatis would be successful, and have refrained from building permanent residences here until now. Far less grand than the Houses' villas in Messantia, the villas here are intended to house whichever cousins and lesser House members are tasked with running the House's operations on Orabono, as well as any visiting House members on the island to hunt or set up new holdings.

The Temple of Mitra: Currently the only building in Trabatis built of marble, the temple of Mitra here is only a pale reflection of the massive edifice in Messantia. Two priests attend it; the brothers Grazino and Nastagio Lotierus.

The Roasting Boar: A tavern near the outskirts of Trabatis, owned by Duccino Ulivius. The Roasting Boar will offer to cook any game brought back to town by hunters. If it is enough to feed the tavern's customers for the night, the hunter who brought the game in drinks for free that night.

Messantia, Day-to-Day Life in the Golden City

MESSANTIA IS A cosmopolitan, tolerant city with a steady population of approximately 35,000; most of which are Argossean. People of every conceivable social standing make their home in Messantia, from the lord of a Merchant House scheming in his villa in King's Prefect to the homeless beggar dreaming of a hot meal in Dockside.

CULTURE AND VALUES

Argosseans are a Hyborian people, but they have interbred extensively with the neighbouring populations of Zingara and Shem. They tend to be stockier than other Hyborian peoples, of medium height, with brown or tawny hair most common among these people. They are a brave race, and are excellent traders, sailors and pirates, when the situation calls for it.

There are few universal traits in a city as cosmopolitan as Messantia, where people and cultures from around the world mingle and mix freely, be they traders, mercenaries, refugees or fugitives. Most Argossean traditions and customs have remained, but they have been mixed with a stew of disparate cultures to create some traits that are purely Messantian.

Messantia owes its wealth, power, even its very existence to trade and that fact has served to shape and form the culture of the city. Messantians have a very mercantile mindset, a tendency to see everything in profit, loss and percentage. Messantians, even the wealthiest of them, have a reputation as misers, which is generally deserved as to them avarice is not a failing. The long tradition of trade and commerce has produced a city of shrewd businessmen who are always alert for an opportunity. Naturally, any city will have its

sluggards and wastrels, but they are certainly the minority here.

Messantians value hard work, a keen business sense and an ability to work the angles of a situation more than anything else, except possibly wealth. They value honesty in business dealings, but they value it more in their business partners than in themselves. Still, it is a fine line. Embellishment, innuendo and omission in business deals are well and good, to a point, but outright lying and cheating can poison any chance for future deals and are therefore considered taboo. Even the Merchant Houses are not completely excluded from this, despite the vast amounts of wealth and influence they control.

Directly tied to Messantians' social mores regarding a reasonable amount on honesty in business dealings is the culture's occupation with appearances. Though far more prevalent at the upper levels of society than the lower, this focus on appearances is present throughout the city. A merchant with a dozen illegal enterprises who is somehow able to maintain the appearance of propriety will likely find his fortunes waxing. But if a merchant, even one who has no illegal dealings, somehow becomes the subject of rumours about lying and cheating in business, his business will suffer badly, and he may soon be out of business. An old Messantian saying states 'a thimble of appearance can bring more gold than a keg of truth'.

The Merchant Houses of Messantia, those who control the majority of the wealth in the city, are exemplars of Messantia's value of wealth, and, though it might not seem so at first to an outside observer, of appearance as well. Though notoriously cut-throat in their business dealings, they always maintain the appearance of propriety. Spying, sabotage, theft and even outright piracy on the sea between rival Houses certainly goes on, and all the city is aware of it, but the Houses themselves keep all

The Argosseans were strong, sturdy, fearless like all their race, trained in the brutal school of the sea.

Robert E. Howard, *The Hour of the Dragon*

this at arm's length. Even if most of the city knows the truth, they also know that no House's culpability in such things could ever be proven.

Grudging respect might be the best way to describe the feelings ordinary Messantians have for the scheming lords of the Merchant Houses. They resent the control the Houses exert over every aspect of the city's commerce, particularly when it costs them money and business, but they envy the wealth and power of the Houses. Those who have gained enough wealth to make their homes on Hilltop might be the best examples of that envy.

The value placed on being able to work the angles of a situation is what has made gambling so prominent in Messantian culture. All Messantians like to think they can work those angles, whether they can or not, leading many to believe they have an edge in gambling. It is a rare Messantian who only occasionally gambles, most either gamble enthusiastically, or never gamble at all.

Messantians share most of the basic values that make civilisation possible, such as loyalty to lord and nation and condemnation of 'universal crimes' like murder, rape and treason. Obviously, life can be cheap in the Hyborean Age, and violent crime happens often in a metropolis like Messantia. Messantians disapprove, and if the criminal is caught, they will be glad to watch him dance at the end of a rope or bleed out his life on the sands of the arena. Messantians are, however, otherwise unlikely to take any real notice of the crime unless it involves them personally. This is especially true in Dockside, where it is as common as not for the sun to rise on a fresh corpse in some filthy alley. Such things are common, as the people who make their homes in this prefect know, and unless it becomes epidemic, they do not concern themselves with it.

Messantians all have very high regard for property laws, however. Doubtless a result of their mercantile mindset and their dogmatic adherence to fair pay for fair work, they consider theft of another man's property a terrible sin. This does not extend to canny trading which amounts to theft, nor does it extend to smuggling, which has a long and storied history in Messantia, but rather is limited to the traditional definitions of theft: burglary, pickpocketing and the like.

Messantians have a strong sense of community and a large share of civic pride. They believe Messantia is, by virtue of its trade and cosmopolitan nature, among the finest cities in the world and destined to grow ever mightier with power and wealth. They take tremendous pride in their city, in its infrastructure, wealth, art and architecture, and

most will gladly answer questions or provide directions to foreign visitors. Their civic pride ends at their coin purses, however. There are no charities in Messantia, no orphanages and beggars receive most of their alms from people from other lands. Even when it comes to their tithes to the cult of Mitra, Messantians are tight-fisted.

SORCERY AND SUPERSTITION

Although the people of Messantia are far removed from the conservative, prosaic Argosseans of the country's interior, there are still some old superstitions that play a role in the city's culture. The city's maritime role in the world, bringing large groups of notoriously superstitious sailors into Messantia, has added to this aspect of the culture. Many of these have crossed over from superstition to pure ritual, but they remain prevalent. Conducting, or, as is more often the case, concluding business deals outside in the sunlight is one such ritual. Fastidious cleanliness is another, though that can be easily traced back to Amenkuhn's plague. Other rituals and superstitions include: never cross a bridge at midnight, always keep one mug or glass clean and ready and three rooster feathers tied together with a cotton thread brings good luck. There are, of course, dozens of other good luck charms, and some merchants do a booming business selling such tokens. Many Messantians are likely to have one such charm on them at any given time.

Good luck is one thing to the mind of a Messantian, but sorcery is another. Sorcery is something the average Messantian will probably never see, but that does not mitigate the revulsion they have for the practice of magic. Between the stories every man, woman and child has heard regarding the degenerate rituals of sorcerers, the lingering memory of Amenkuhn's plague and the horror with which the Mitran cult regards sorcery, the Messantians' antipathy toward it is not surprising. There are sorcerers in the city, of course. Some make their homes there, others are merely passing through but only the most foolish make their avocation known.

CLOTHING AND FASHION

The types of clothing worn in Messantia are as varied as its people. Most dress in linen, cotton or light wool in deference to the warm climate, and they tend to prefer white or muted colours. Boots and shoes

are the most common footwear and most leave their heads uncovered. Dock workers are easy to spot, as they are deeply tanned and usually wear only breeches and sandals, and a reed hat to ward off the hot sun. The very wealthy of the city are equally easy to spot, as they tend to dress far more splendidly. They adorn themselves in velvet, brocade and silk at all times of the year, staving off the summer heat with ice imported from the north and an army of servants vigorously wielding fans. Though the clothing of common Messantians is generally simple, and cycles through a small number of minor style changes, the clothing of the wealthy is another story. Fashions can change dramatically almost overnight, particularly among the ladies of the Merchant Houses. This is the bread and butter of the city's clothiers, and they actively prey on this habit. It only takes the right clothier or the House lady, to see a Vendhyan woman in a brightly-patterned sari or a Khitan woman in tightly fitted silk dress before every woman of every Merchant House begins wearing something similar.

FOOD AND COOKING

For the rich and the poor, fish is a staple of food in Messantia. The proximity of the Farmlands ensures a steady supply of grains, vegetables and various meats, most of which are affordable to all but the city's poorest citizens.

Most of those living in the eastern city, particularly the tenement dwellers of Dockside, have no cooking facilities in their homes, and so must buy cooked food every day from any one of dozens of small shops and roving carts. These carts are taxed the same as the stalls and booths of Bazaar Prefect. Messantians living in the west of the city often have extensive kitchens in their homes with two or more ovens. Wood and charcoal are the most common fuels for Messantian ovens.

In Cranetown, where fire is always a terrible danger, no one has cooking facilities in their homes. Most of the settlement's cooked food is brought in by barge from the mainland, and what few ovens exist in Cranetown are small enough not to pose too great a danger of fire.

The most common food in Messantia, available almost anywhere, is called a 'tile'. It consists of a piece of fried fish in a pocket of flatbread, and usually costs a quarter to a half silver piece. Adding a relish of olives and peppers to the tile will cost another quarter silver.

LIGHTING

Sunset plunges most of the eastern city into darkness, as the Honoured Brotherhood of Street Lighters and Street Sweepers only keeps lamps burning after dark in Bazaar Prefect. The western city is another matter, as the guild keeps all of its major streets and avenues lit throughout the night with oil-burning lamps. Open flame, such as from a torch, is rarely used as a source of lighting anywhere in the city, as it is far more dangerous and far less efficient than a simple lamp. Only the poorest of the poor in Messantia cannot afford some manner of lighting for their homes after dark, even if it is just a simple clay lamp burning a supply of smelly fish oil.

In Cranetown, all fires of any kind, whether it be a lamp, a torch or a candle, are kept suspended over a pail of sea water, in hopes that if there is some kind of accident, the flames will be quenched by falling into the water.

WEAPONRY

Those Messantians who can afford to are customarily armed. Generally this is limited to a poniard or stiletto, but if someone wants to swagger down the street lugging a greatsword, a Patrolman might raise an eyebrow but will otherwise do nothing. There are limits, of course. Walking down the street with an arrow nocked to a strung bow will elicit more than a raised eyebrow from the Patrol.

ARCHITECTURE

The sea and the city of Messantia are inextricably linked – it is the sea that has brought the city the wealth and power it enjoys. Most Messantians love the sea, even those who have never sailed it. The ship races and the debuts of new warships, come in second only to the arena games in popular entertainment. The Messantians' love for the sea is reflected in the city's architecture and art. Images of waves or dolphins are common throughout the city, whether on the gates of the arena or the walls around the Merchant House villas. Argossean coinage features a profile of King Milo on one side and Messantia's emblem of a coin between two waves on the other.

Messantians are also aware of how much the Khorotas River has contributed to the growth of the city, so too has influenced their architecture, but in a much more functional way than the sea has. While the river brings great wealth downstream, it also, from time to time, brings flood. The flat lands north of Messantia help mitigate this problem, as do, to some extent, the valves built into the sewer system to bleed away floodwaters. Regardless of these facts, the city is still, on rare occasions, flooded,



though the water never rises very high. For this reason, the buildings of Messantia are elevated on stone foundations to a height of two or three feet above street level, which puts them beyond the range of any recorded flood. The clapboard shacks and shanties of southern Docksider are a notable exception to this, but most buildings in that area are torn down and rebuilt frequently anyway.

The flood-elevated construction and ocean-themed decoration of Messantian architecture are only two of the things that make the construction of the city so fascinating. The Order of Engineers learned much from the ruins left behind by the Acheronians and they have improved on that knowledge. Though much of the eastern city is brick and clapboard, or, in the case of the mills, smithies and warehouses, strictly functional cut stone, the western city is another story altogether. With the wealth of the crown, guilds and Merchant Houses at its disposal, the Order has created a showplace of spires, domes, arches, scalloped walls and wide plazas that visitors to the city never fail to find awe-inspiring. Forsaking the grim, grey, hunched look of architecture in the northern countries, Messantia's western buildings are of pale stone, open and airy to allow the breezes from the sea through.

POPULATION

Messantia has a population of about 35,000 people, citizens who make their homes in the city year-round. During the height of trading season, the population explodes, as traders, sailors, caravan workers and boatmen all find themselves in the city.

At the height of the summer trading season, when the annual Fortnight of Trials begins in the arena, the population of Messantia can climb as high as 50,000 people. This strains the hostels, inns and boarding houses of the city to capacity, and provides the innkeepers with the opportunity to raise their prices; an opportunity few can afford to pass up. During this time, many travellers sleep in their ships or on a blanket thrown down outside Dustbiter. Those determined to get a room inside the city can expect to pay double, perhaps triple, the normal rate, assuming a room is even available.

Most of Messantia's permanent population is Argosian. In the midst of trading season, however, people of a dozen different races make the city their temporary home. Most common are people from Shem, Aquilonia and Zingara, but seeing a Hyrkanian stumble down the street, eyes bugging at the sights all around him, would not be more than mildly unusual. This constant influx of people of other lands have made Messantia a very liberal and cosmopolitan city, the kind of place where one could reasonably expect to see a Stygian and a Nordheimer sharing a skin of wine and talking about the events in the arena the night before.

ECONOMY

Clearly, Messantia's economy thrives on trade. But what, exactly, is traded in the city? The short answer is everything. Everything is needed, and everything is available.

Messantia's citizens say they live in the trading capital of the world, and they are not boasting idly. Messantia lies at three crossroads of trade. It is an anchor at one end of the Road of Kings. It lies at the mouth of the Khorotas River. Throughout trading season, its quays host a constant stream of ships, both of Argos and other nations, importing and exporting goods at a dizzying pace.

Most of Messantia's sea trade is with Shem and Kush, as well as Argos' old rivals Zingara and Stygia. Messantia itself is rightly famed for its clockmakers and finemiths, who craft some of the most intricate and delicate jewellery available in the

Hyborian Age from the gold mined in Argos' hills. With Shem, Messantia trades mirrors, silk clothing, armour, weapons and shields. With Kush, the trade consists of beads, silk, sugar and weapons in exchange for ivory, copra, copper ore, slaves and pearls.

In addition to the items listed above, Messantia offers ships in trade. Acknowledged throughout the sailing world, except by the Zingarans, as the best ships to ride the waves, Argossean vessels are always in demand. Though many nations might wish otherwise, the only Argossean vessels for sale are simple merchant craft of varying descriptions. The making of Argos' warships is a more carefully-guarded secret than most any in the world.

Up and down the Khorotas River and along the Road of Kings flows Argos' trade with Aquilonia and the lands beyond. Goods of most every description, from vats of pickled fish to velvet-wrapped jewels, travel north to hungry mouths and eager hands.

A city with the size and wealth of Messantia has tremendous demands, however, and importing goods is the only way to satisfy them. Indeed, the only staple the city has in abundance is fish. The farms and ranches in outlying areas produce, at most, the minimum required to feed the city's hunger, so the arrival of herds of cattle or long wagon trains laden with grain is not an uncommon sight in Dustbiter. From the northern forests of Argos comes a steady stream of timber, bound for Freecove to repair damaged ships and build new ones.

Like any other government, the city makes its money through taxes and tariffs. Goods entering or leaving Messantia, whether by sea, river or land, are subject to tariffs based on the type of good and its value. Landowners are taxed yearly, the tax depending on the size of the land, its location and its use. The owners and captains of merchant ships are licensed by the city for trade in its harbour. The specific rules and rates for these taxes, fees and tariffs are incredibly complicated.

Messantia's position as a trading hub means that nearly anything is available for purchase somewhere within the city. Most of the items listed in *Conan the Roleplaying Game* for example, are easily purchased in shops throughout Messantia, though some of the more esoteric weapons and armour may require some tenacious searching.

The prices given in *Conan the Roleplaying Game* also form a useful baseline price, though

a Games Master may consider varying the prices by as much as 20% depending on the time of year. During trading season prices fall as supplies flood the market, only to rise again during the winter, as stocks become scarcer. Another detail to consider is that the prices given in *Conan the Roleplaying Game* are generally for the cheapest or most basic incarnation of any given item. In a city like Messantia, the wealthy will not be satisfied with such lowly accoutrements, and a number of shops and merchants cater specifically to such tastes with customised items of great worth. For example, an arming sword inlaid with gold filigree and capped on the pommel with a huge pearl will certainly cost more than 100 silver pieces, just as a specially-tailored silken dress from Linia's Clothiers will cost dramatically more than two silver pieces.

GOVERNMENT

The government of Messantia is nominally in the hands of King Milo, but in actuality he has little to do with the day-to-day governance of the city. The Consul, a noble appointed to the post by the king for a period of two years, oversees the general affairs of the city. The full roster of the Consul's duties is too complex to be detailed here, but in summary he oversees collection of taxes and tariffs, maintenance of the city's streets, sewers, buildings and wharves and the supervision of the Patrol. He meets with the king every 10 days to brief him on what has happened in the city and submits to him any problems which fall outside his authority. This leaves the king free to focus his attention on Argos, and the world outside its borders.

In reality, of course, it rarely works so smoothly. Consul is a position of some power, and from its inception some nobles who have held the rank have sought to use it to further their own ends or settle scores with old rivals. Queen Penellia, when she created the position, foresaw that and instituted a simple remedy. Any Consul who behaved in such a fashion would be replaced with a noble of a rival House. Thus far, this provision has worked fairly well at stopping the more blatant transgressions.

Below the Consul position, city government is divided into Law (Patrol and judges), Treasury (fees, taxes and tariffs, as well as disbursement of monies) and Engineering (maintenance of all property owned by the state).

In a departure from tradition, King Milo instituted a new practice upon assuming the throne. Concerned his advisers might not tell him everything he needed to hear, and concerned as well for the welfare of his subjects, Milo offered the citizens of Argos the opportunity to speak to him directly. On the second day of every new year,

commoners from throughout Argos have the chance to speak directly to the king, in an event known as the King's Ear.

Those who would speak their praise or grievances gather early outside the Dome of the Sea, and are chosen by lot. Inside, Milo waits for them, alone except for his guards, who have their ears plugged with wax so that only the commoner and the king know what is said. After one assassination attempt, his advisers pleaded with him to quit the practice, but Milo refused and the tradition continues. It is a simple thing, but it has endeared the king greatly to his subjects.

King Milo is a strong monarch who enjoys the approval of the people, something which has been of tremendous help to him in his daily struggles with the Merchant Houses. Rulership of Argos and Messantia is decided in large part by whoever controls its purse strings, thus the Merchant Houses have a tremendous amount of power within Argosesean politics. Weaker monarchs have had to content themselves with merely acting as puppets for the Houses, but the last few kings have had the strength to resist them. Milo has been charting his own course as much as possible and is determined to continue doing so, much to the Merchant Houses' chagrin. The Houses still possess enormous power and it remains to be seen how well Milo's sons will resist them.

JUSTICE

It has been said before that money is power in Messantia and the city's justice system is no exception. Over the years, the Merchant Houses have had laws written and rewritten to serve their interests, and have inculcated a culture of deference to privilege in the justice system. As envisioned, Messantia's justice system is based on a set of laws, enforced by the Patrol and administered by magistrates, that is, at least in theory, how it works. The reality is much more complex. While it is possible to receive a fair trial in Messantia, this is only true so long as the Merchant Houses are not involved.

In its simplified form Patrolmen on the street will arrest anyone they see in commission of a crime or whom they suspect has committed a specific crime. The suspect is taken under guard to the Magistrate Hall in the King's Prefect. Once there, a warden questions him. The warden is responsible for bringing all available evidence to the upcoming trial, including any evidence the suspect feels will help prove his innocence, including witnesses, who cannot refuse to testify before the court if charged to do so. A judge will convene the trial as soon as the warden is

satisfied that all evidence which can be found is present, a process which can take hours or days.

There are no lawyers in Messantian justice, nor are there juries. The judge will weigh the evidence, the words of the Patrol, the suspect and any witnesses and render his verdict. There are no appeals, save by direct order of the king. After one unfortunate incident with a barbarian, it is now forbidden for any person save Patrolmen to enter the courtroom armed.

Civil cases, such as a dispute over trade agreements or the rights to property or a cargo of goods, are handled similarly to criminal cases. A warden takes statements and solicits evidence from each aggrieved party and a judge decides the case. In disputes between two ordinary Messantians, the decision is likely to be fair, but ordinary Messantians have long since learned the folly of challenging the wishes of a Merchant House in court, where, barring truly overwhelming evidence, the decision always favours the House. Disputes between two Merchant Houses, on the other hand, never come to court. They are either decided between the Houses or added to the long list of grudges and vendettas nursed by all the Houses.

Messantian judges have tremendous latitude in assigning blame and ascribing punishment in the cases brought before them. The city's law code lists a large number of crimes, categorised from First Order to Fifth Order, and the recommended sentencing of the offender, but the judges are free to increase or decrease the punishment as they see fit. As a general rule, the wealthier and more influential the criminal, the lighter the punishment. See pg. 55 for more information on crimes and punishment.

Though the Magistrate Hall has a number of underground cells, they are not used to house a criminal who is sentenced to a period of imprisonment. Instead, the prisoner is taken under heavy guard to Three Corners Keep, the headquarters of the Patrol, and locked away in a dank cell beneath that ancient fortress. Actual imprisonment is an uncommon sentence, however, as housing, feeding and guarding a prisoner is expensive. Execution, arena combat, mutilation, hard labour, flogging, exile and fines are much more common and are indicative of Messantia's 'an eye for an eye' system of justice. Rarer even than imprisonment are the sentences of enslavement and destitution.

Argosesean law is regarded in some other nations as venal and corrupt, and that is true of Messantia as well. However, despite the corruption endemic in

‘But I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. So then, seeing they were all mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge’s skull: then I cut my way out of the court, and seeing the high constable’s stallion tied near by, I rode for the wharves, where I thought to find a ship bound for foreign parts.’

Robert E. Howard, *Queen of the Black Coast*

the system, Messantia does have a code of laws and process of judgement that elevates it somewhat above other areas of the nation. The common man on trial in Messantia is, barring the involvement of any of the Merchant Houses, almost certainly better off than the common man in rural Argos. Deeper into Argos, such individuals are hauled trembling before a baron with more interest in how his eggs were cooked that morning than in the life of the trembling peasant before him.

SMUGGLING AND THE LAW

Under Messantian law, smuggling is a crime that carries stiff penalties, usually including heavy fines, hard labour and/or flogging, in practice, however, these laws are not commonly applied. Coin is the engine that drives Messantia, and in turn Argos and smuggling brings in that coin. The steps taken by Argossean kings at Freecove and Cranetown to limit smuggling have worked well, and merchant ships bearing smuggled goods to Messantia now have little choice but to dock openly in the city’s harbour. As it would be a foolish man indeed who sailed into the heart of King Milo’s realm in a laden merchant ship and declared no cargo, smugglers tend to mask their illicit goods by bringing them to port as a small percentage of an otherwise legal cargo. This practice has the twin benefits of keeping smuggling at an acceptable level and generating still more trade in the city.

Though the city turns a blind eye to most smuggling, from time to time an exception is made. Generally, this is a foreign merchant who has become too greedy and brazen in

his illegal trafficking. Seeing a fellow smuggler stripped of his ship, goods and even the clothes on his back is usually enough of a deterrent for most novice smugglers. However, being flogged in full view of his fellows and either exiled from the city or sent to the arena serves as a poignant reminder to even the hardest smuggler not to grow too confident.

SORCERY AND THE LAW

Sorcery is illegal in Messantia and practising it carries penalties ranging from instant death to fines. Likewise, creating, dealing in or possession of magical items is forbidden. It is noteworthy that Messantian law does not make it illegal to *be* a sorcerer, only to practice the craft within the city. There are several sorcerers who discreetly make their homes here and a number of others frequently pass through on business of their own.

Messantian law provides few clear rules for adjudicating the severity of a sorcerous crime. In some cases, such as very minor prestidigitation, the crime might go unnoticed even in a crowd. In a case where no evidence exists of any harm done or other crime committed, the punishment may be limited to fines or possibly exile. If magic is used in the commission of a crime, the punishment for that crime is raised to the next Order. For example, a sorcerer who used his magic to change the odds in an arena match



to make the combatant he bet on more likely to win would have used magic to commit theft. In this case, the sorcerer would be charged with a Second Order crime. In the most severe cases, such as sorcery that is openly endangering the city, the punishment is instant death. The Patrol would kill without question any sorcerer foolish enough to openly attempt to summon a demon or raise the dead.

Trials for sorcery are handled differently than for other crimes. Messantian law considers sorcerers to be armed at all times, as a sorcerer's weapon is his mind. He will not be allowed into court for the trial and both the verdict and sentence are decided by a tribunal of three judges, for fear that the sorcerer may attempt to control one judge's mind.

As stated, magical items and components such as lotus extracts are illegal in Messantia, but there are some fences brave and avaricious enough to buy and sell such items. There is always a market in a city of this size for potions, poultices and lotus extracts. Dealing in such things is a dangerous path to walk, but it can be extremely profitable as well for a character with enough wealth, and who knows the right people. This is Messantia after all and almost anything can be found for a price.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE LAW

Messantians enjoy very few civil rights enshrined in the law, the foremost of these being the right to own and inherit property. Others include the right to own weapons, the right to use the city's water supply and the right to worship whatever god the citizen pleases. Everything else exists outside the scope of the law, while there are few laws limiting freedom of speech, for example, there are no laws protecting it.

Women in Messantia are of nearly equal social standing as are men. They too can own and inherit property, make their own living and carry a weapon if they so choose. They are, however, barred from service in the military or in the Patrol and from appointed positions in the government, such as serving as a judge. A notable exception to the last rule is the position of Consul, which has been held by six women since its inception.

Despite the general lack of guaranteed rights, Messantians enjoy many freedoms, and most know they are governed lightly. Messantia's reason for being, the thing that drives the city, is trade, which can be hampered by harsh or autocratic rule. Though they may chafe beneath the ever-growing yoke of the Merchant Houses, the people of the

city understand that compared to many other countries, indeed, compared to many other cities in Argos itself, they have it easy.

THE ORDERS AND CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

The table below lists a sampling of crimes of various Orders and their ascribed punishments. This list is by no means complete, but should provide the Games Master with a good baseline to judge other crimes.

Messantia law dictates punishments must be carried out publicly. Executions are usually by hanging, with crucifixion reserved for extreme offenders outside Three Corners Keep. Floggings and mutilations are carried out in Mariners Plaza or on the wharves. Mutilation involves loss of the extremity used in commission of the crime. Fines are payable to the city, restitution is payable to the injured party. Repeat offenders may find their crimes elevated to the next Order, as can crimes committed against a noble, such as trespassing in a Merchant House villa, for example. Crimes of the Fifth Order are rarely cause for arrest, unless the Patrol is intent on harassing someone.

POLICING

The Patrol is Messantia's police force. From a score of stations throughout the city, the Patrol walks the streets of Messantia, keeping the peace and enforcing the law. While on duty, they move in groups of two to four, depending on the area of the city and the time of day.

The Patrol numbers about 250 soldiers of 1st and 2nd level, as well as a score or so of officers, soldiers of 3rd and 4th level. The commander of the Patrol, appointed by the King and who reports directly to the Consul, is known as the High Constable. The current High Constable is Patrius Hannor (see page 84).

The uniform of the Patrol is brown boots and breeches and a sleeved cote. Until a year ago the cote was simple and black, but the current Consul, Demetrio Navici, a cousin of House Eurus, changed the black cote for a new one, pale blue in colour, with flowing sleeves. The Patrolmen are not pleased with this change, particularly now that the citizens have begun referring to them as 'Sleeves', but there is little they can do about it. Over the contentious cote is worn a leather jerkin on which is emblazoned the wave and coin emblem of Messantia, above a number of stripes, from one to

Order	Crime	Punishment	
First	Treason (includes assault on a member of the royal family)	Death, instant	
	Attack on the City (poisoning a city well, an act of obviously dangerous sorcery)	Death, instant	
	Unlawful entry into Freecove	Death, instant	
Second	Murder	Death, on conviction or arena combat	
	Assault on a noble	Death, on conviction or arena combat (victim's choice)	
	Assault on a Royal Guard	Death, on conviction	
	Kidnapping a noble	Destitution and death, on conviction or arena combat	
	Rape	Mutilation, fines, restitution	
	Dealing with Black Corsairs	Death, on conviction	
	Smuggling	Destitution, flogging, exile or arena combat	
	Theft from a noble	Mutilation, restitution	
	Arson	Hard labour (term varies)	
	Impersonating a noble	Flogging, hard labour	
	Forgery or counterfeiting	Mutilation, destitution	
	Major act of sorcery	Mutilation, exile	
	Third	Assault on a Patrolman	Imprisonment or hard labour, fines
Theft		Flogging, restitution or arena combat for multiple convictions	
Theft or damage of another's slave		Flogging, restitution, hard labour (could be enslavement with multiple convictions)	
Kidnapping a commoner		Restitution, flogging, hard labour	
Minor act of sorcery		Fines or exile	
Destruction of property		Flogging, restitution, hard labour	
Disobedience of an order given by the Patrol		Flogging, imprisonment	
Impersonating a guild member or doing business without appropriate guild membership		Flogging, fines (up to 500 sp), restitution to guild (up to 500 sp)	
Fourth		Assault on a commoner	Restitution, imprisonment (15 days)
		Slander against a noble	Restitution, imprisonment (1 to 10 days)
		Slander against another nation's envoy	Fines, imprisonment (1 to 10 days)
	Interfering with business (blocking a shop door, for example)	Fines, restitution	
	Unlawful entry to the sewers	Fines and flogging or imprisonment (20 days)	
Fifth	Trespassing	Fines (1 to 50 sp)	
	Brawling	Fines (1 to 20 sp), restitution	
	Vagrancy	Fine (1 sp)	
Fifth	Public Drunkenness	Fine (1 sp)	
	Brandishing a weapon without cause	Fine (1 to 5 sp)	
	Noise interfering with sleep or business	Fine (1 to 3 sp)	

four which indicate the Patrolman's rank. A leather cap completes the uniform. On duty, the officers of the Patrol are armed with broadsword, poniard and manacles. They all carry copper whistles as well, which make a distinctive trilling noise when blown and are used to summon reinforcements.

King Milo is well aware that there may be circumstances in which his Patrol is outclassed. Therefore, he has gathered a group of men

together who are fiercely loyal to him and more than capable of dealing with any who prove to be too much for the Patrol. This group, which calls itself the King's Hand, is comprised of barbarians, borderers, pirates, scholars and soldiers. Given the feelings of Messantians toward sorcery, the inclusion of two sorcerers in this group is a closely kept secret, and they are only dispatched when the disturbance is obviously magical.

The Patrol loses some of its best men to the higher pay and greater privilege of the Royal Guards. These men are

no longer charged with enforcing the law, but rather with protecting the life of the King. They wear breastplates and scale hauberks, steel caps and most of them are 4th to 6th level soldiers.

MILITARY

While the Argossean military is most famed for its indomitable navy, King Milo can also field an army that all but the mightiest of nations would fear. Argos is a feudal land, and Milo must call upon his nobles to provide troops in time of war, swelling the standing army's ranks to tens of thousands.

Argos maintains a relatively small standing army known as the Argossean Guardians through levees from the feudal barons to help patrol its borders, while guardianship of its cities and resources, such as Freecove usually falls to regular soldiers. In Messantia, some of these soldiers are billeted in Three Corners Keep, which also functions as the city's dungeon, armoury and the base for the Patrol. The soldiers and Patrolmen have an uneasy relationship born of rivalry, but it is expressed in taunting and mockery rather than violence. Soldiers are also billeted in Freecove and at The Swills. All told, there are some 700 to 800 active soldiers in and around Messantia at any given time.

All Argossean men are required to receive some level of military training and, provided he has no dependants and is not a business owner, to spend two years as a soldier or sailor. The man's rank, and where he serves, depends upon his social standing. The sons of the wealthy serve as knights and cavalry or aboard the great Argossean warships. The sons of the middle classes become infantrymen or serve aboard transport vessels. The sons of the poor become archers and auxiliaries or serve on a support ship or riverboat. Argossean men are liable to be summoned for military service from the age of 17 to the age of 60. With as little warning as one day, King Milo could field an army of 5,000 to 10,000 men, though most of the troops would be militia.

Argos also makes extensive use of mercenaries in time of war, particularly those of Shem. Its bulging coffers enable it to hire large number of mercenaries to supplement its armed forces or simply to fight the battle without the involvement of any Argossean military. Many of the skirmishes and limited border struggles with Zingara have been fought in this manner.

While the standing army of Argos is small, the country maintains a huge navy, which is constantly in operation. Ships ply the Argossean seas up and down the coast, endlessly patrolling the water to guard against hostile

pirates and nations, and provide assistance to any trading ship that needs it.

The Argossean navy is made up of more than 500 ships. Many of these are support and transport craft, but the nation still boasts more than 200 deadly warships, based out of every city along the coast. Most of these are out on patrol at any given time, but a few remain in port to defend the cities should any enemy force slip past the navy's screen. In Messantia and Freecove combined, there are often as many as a score of warships ready to defend the capital and its vital shipyards.

Though the Argossean army can be a formidable foe, it is the nation's sailors that truly terrify an enemy. Unlike the army, mostly composed of conscripts and militia, many of these men have made the navy their career. Adept at fighting on the deck of a ship or the sand of a beach, they are rigorously, even mercilessly, trained in ship-boarding and small-unit combat. Any enemy ship that comes to grips with an Argossean warship is all but certain to lose the encounter, its decks swarming with stocky, sure-footed Argossean sailors cutting through her crew with a terrible, bloodthirsty efficiency born of long practice.

BIRTH, HEALTH AND DEATH

Disease can cut short a life as effectively as a sword, and in a large trading city like Messantia, the possibility of illness is ever-present. Between the sewers and The Swills, the city has done away with two of the most common sources of disease, but neither of these measures can fend off a jungle-spawned fever stowing away aboard a trading ship from Kush.

The memory of Amenkuhn's plague has never really faded, and as a result Messantians are almost obsessively clean people. Those with access to a public bath use it regularly, those who do not make do as best they can.

Ever since the plague, the city has had more than its share of leeches, herbalists and midwives. There is no true hospital in the city, but Messantians with the gold to afford it have access to a small army of physicians to tend them. A number of the city's herbalists have small shops in which they sell various cures and poultices of varying quality and efficacy. Most herbalists do not sell the actual herbs, as they can make far more money selling the compounds in which the herbs are used. Some herbalists and leeches in the city offer a small

number of beds for rent to patients who require more long-term care.

Birth is a dangerous thing in the Hyborian Age, no matter where one lives. As in sickness, the wealthy of Messantia have access to some of the best care available in the Hyborian Kingdoms. Even for those women without great wealth, there is still help. Many women in the poorer areas of the city are skilled midwives, who will often offer their services in barter for those who cannot pay. While death in childbirth is not rare in Messantia, it is at least uncommon.

Rich or poor, king or peasant, death comes for all. But as with so many other things in Messantia, what happens after death depends on one's social standing in life. The wealthy and powerful, who paid their obligations to Mitra, can expect a funeral at the temple, followed by a sombre interment in the family mausoleum on their estate. For everyone else, the pyre awaits.

In earlier days of Messantia, the dead were buried in a cemetery on the northeast side of the city, but the plague changed that, as the dead piled up too quickly to be buried and were simply piled into the buildings that were to be burned. The occasion now is more solemn, the dead are taken out of the city to a spot on the riverbank where a shallow, stone-lined pit has been created, and are cremated there. The family of the dead is free to remove the ashes from the Bowl, as it is called, should they wish to do so.

In Cranetown, the rituals of death differ slightly. Rather than bearing their dead back to land for immolation in the Bowl, the people of Cranetown build a simple funeral raft. The body is laid on this raft, which is then towed out to sea. Once it is safely away from Cranetown, the raft is set alight and cut free to drift until consumed.

As for the old cemetery, it is still there, a mile east of Dustbiter. It is no longer used, but fearful of what might come of dishonouring so many dead, the kings and queens of Argos have kept it maintained, though the headstones are all cracked and worn. The

cemetery is also under constant guard by a small force of the Patrol stationed there not to keep the living out, but to keep the dead in.

SLAVERY

Slavery is still quite alive in Messantia, though it is not so prevalent as it once was. The majority of slaves attached to Messantia rarely see the city; they spend their days chained to the oaring benches of a ship, either in Argos' mighty navy or aboard one of her larger trading vessels.

Most Messantian slaves are taken from the lands of Kush and the Black Kingdoms, and are used for menial, dangerous labour. Those not chained to an oar are likely working the croplands, vineyards and orchards that surround the city or are assigned as labour to the Order of Engineers, to spend their days hauling stone and timber for the Order's current project. Their labour is ensured with the chain and lash and the occasional threat to sell them upriver to Athos.

The average Messantian owns no slaves, primarily because he has little need of them and most find the practice of slavery distasteful. In a city as purely mercantile as the capital of Argos, the philosophy of 'a day's wage for a day's work' is nearly religious dogma, and slavery stands in stark contrast to that.

The average Messantian of a Merchant House or noble family, on the other hand, has never done a day's work,



RELIGION

As a Hyborian kingdom, the dominant religion in Messantia is Mitra. The temple of Mitra, a huge, square building of polished marble, is the only public temple in the city.

Messantia differs from most other cities where the worship of Mitra is predominant, however. As citizens of the greatest trading city on the Western Ocean, a crossroads walked by people of a dozen nations, Messantians have learned to be tolerant of the culture and beliefs of other peoples. The persecution meted out by the Mitran cult against all other faiths, so prevalent in Aquilonia and Nemedra, is greatly muted in the Golden City. The tolerance of the Mitran cult goes only so far, though, and they have been successful in preventing any other faith from building a public temple in the city.

Almost any faith in the western world has adherents in Messantia, though generally not enough to justify a temple, the Mitrans' opposition notwithstanding. The gods of Shem are an obvious exception, given the proximity of Shem and the number of Shemites who live in or visit Messantia. There are many practitioners of the Shemite faith in the city, who attend services at a small shrine behind the walls of the Shemite envoy. The god Bel is not worshipped there, but there are rumours of a temple to Bel in an old, unused sewer chamber beneath Dockside. Considering the god's popularity with thieves, pirates and smugglers, this does not seem at all unlikely.

Traditionally, Mitran priests conduct weddings in Messantia, but the government does recognise marriages performed under other religions.

Tolerance aside, the power wielded by the cult of Mitra is considerable. The temple's high priest, Valerus Barucci, is one of King Milo's advisers and the cult's holy days are considered holidays in the city.

EDUCATION

There are, at present, no formal schools or academies in Messantia. Children are educated according to their parents' means.

For the scion of nobility or wealthy merchants, this means hired tutors or educated slaves to teach him his lessons in history, etiquette, mathematics, literature and philosophy. For families of lesser means, tutors and knowledgeable slaves may not be an

Conan looked down into the open waist, whence wafted that sickening abominable odor. He knew it of old. It was the body-scent of the oarsmen, chained to their benches. They were all negroes, forty men to each side, each confined by a chain locked about his waist, with the other end welded to a heavy ring set deep in the solid runway beam that ran between the benches from stem to stern. The life of a slave aboard an Argossean galley was a hell unfathomable.

Robert E. Howard, *The Hour of the Dragon*

and feels no compunctions regarding ownership of other human beings. More than that, however, they consider it a necessity. No free man would work the oars of their trading ships like a slave can be made to, and no free man would work their farms and orchards from before dawn until after dusk for a wage low enough to maintain profits. As much as for the practical reasons, though many nobles own slaves simply because they enjoy doing so. Maintaining a small seraglio or a staff of footmen gives them yet another of the trappings of power so many of them crave.

Yet even among the nobles, the practice of slavery is diminishing slightly. For years, it was tradition to purchase a learned slave for the purposes of educating one's children. Recently, however, many nobles have decided to abandon that in favour of hiring one of Messantia's distinguished tutors. The practice of keeping a household staff of slaves is falling by the wayside as well. One or two unfortunate incidents have taught the nobles it is better to maintain a staff of paid servants who are grateful for the employment than to surround oneself at all times with slaves dreaming of freedom.

The cult of Mitra bears some of the responsibility for the ebbing of slavery, however slight, as the religion opposes it, and the priests have become more vocal with this opposition in recent years.

Most slaves in Messantia today can be divided into three categories: labour, pleasure and sport. A slave who fails the first two can expect to find himself in the third, gripping a short knife and facing a hungry lion while the roar of the arena crowd pounds in his ears.

option. A merchant who owns his own shop will generally rear his children to run the business, assuming he does not have too many.

Shop-owners with too many children, or those who have no business of their own, such as the dock workers or slaughtermen of Redboots, have fewer options for their offspring. If the parents are very lucky and very pious, they might arrange to have their child educated by the priests of Mitra. Otherwise, their best option is to petition a guild to accept the child as an apprentice. In time, if accepted, the child may advance to a position of power within the guild, which is one of the only means of social climbing available to those not born to nobility. Being accepted as an apprentice is not common, but it happens frequently enough that many parents hope for it, dreaming that when the time comes, their child will be able to provide his children with the education his own parents could not.

Aside from a career in the military, the other option available to the sons of Messantia is the sea. It is a difficult life, but one which can lead eventually to riches or to a painful death on an unnamed beach.

ENTERTAINMENT

Work is very nearly a religion for the people of Messantia, but even the most ardent and enthusiastic of them will, from time to time, need some manner of relaxation and distraction. The wiser monarchs throughout Messantia's history have recognised this, and have provided their subjects with a variety of diversions.

The foremost of these is the arena, which hosts a variety of games and athletic contests, the most famous of which take place in trading season during the Fortnight of Trials.

Messantians love the sea, and running a close second in popular entertainment to the arena is boat racing. This happens frequently and unofficially on a small scale, but there is one annual two-day event called Seabreaker the people of the city are absolutely obsessive about. It is the primary topic of conversation in the city the month before and for at least a month after it happens. Usually held in late spring, when a stiff wind is virtually assured, these races encompass all classes of ships from almost all of the seagoing western nations. There is competition in sailing, oaring and combination. The number of masts and number of oars determine a ship's class.

Trading season or not, work on the docks, and in much of the city itself, is at a bare minimum during the two days of Seabreaker. To accommodate the fans who want the best possible view, the Merchant Houses convert all their surplus cargo barges into floating spectator stands, allowing excellent views for a cost of three silver pieces per person per day. The barges are outfitted with two curtained privies, the use of which is free, and food and drink vendors, which charge their captive audience about four times more than their shorebound counterparts. The barges are chained together and towed out of the harbour to a spot near the race lanes just east of Cranetown, where they are anchored in place against the tides.

Huge amounts of money are won and lost in gambling on Seabreaker. Many Merchant Houses build and maintain private ships for the sole purpose of winning one of the events and gamble large sums in hopes of recouping the cost of the ship in a single day. The fortunes of Seabreaker can break alliances or create rivalries among the Houses as well as any trading contract.

The only people of Messantia who despise Seabreaker are not citizens at all, but slaves. The slaves manning the oars know they will feel the lash during the races, and it is a rare year that goes by without a slave being whipped to death during Seabreaker.

Also a popular pastime more common, but by no means as well loved as Seabreaker, is the unveiling of a new Argossean warship. Word is sent from Freecove and spread through the city whenever a new warship is about to embark on her maiden voyage. She sails east from Freecove into Messantia's harbour, where she is put through her paces before a crowd of citizens. People gather on the wharves to watch, cheering and applauding with pride this latest symbol of Argossean maritime supremacy.

Sea racing is not the only kind of racing available in Messantia. The caravaners of Dustbiter host informal horse races about once a month, on average. Unlike many other countries and cities, though, the sport has never truly earned a dedicated following in Messantia, and most crowds at the Dustbiter races are mediocre and the betting light.

Those who desire more civilised or sedate entertainment than arena games or races have several options available in Messantia. On the western edge of the city, carved into a hill, stands Lucius Stage, a huge amphitheatre with seating for 1,000 people. Construction began under King Lucius, King Milo's grandfather, who had a passion for theatre. Each month, a new play opens on the stage, playing every

CLIMATE

Messantia enjoys a balmy, temperate climate almost year-round. Although the trading season, which runs from spring through summer, can be warm, the constant breeze from the sea keeps the city cool. In the winter, the weather rarely turns very cold, and even the oldest of the city's residents can count on their fingers the number of times they have seen snow fall.

The end of trading season coincides with the worst weather the city has to endure. In late summer and early autumn, the changing winds and temperatures can lead to devastating typhoons from the sea. These storms pose a particular danger to Cranetown, which was all but washed away in one such tempest.

During the summer the temperature in Messantia grows warm and rain is scarce. This hot, dry climate, combined with the increased population of trading season and the fact that after sunset all light is provided by flame, make fire a real danger in the city. The Patrol doubles in duty as a fire brigade, as well as a police force.

In the event of fire, any Patrol officer has the authority to commandeer as many healthy, adult males as he thinks will be necessary to put out the blaze. These men will be required to drop whatever they are doing and assist the Patrol in combating the fire. Whenever possible, the Patrol will take slaves to aid in firefighting, but are not shy about putting merchants, caravan drivers or anyone else to work. If a man runs away instead of helping fight the fire, the Patrol officer will likely not pursue, continuing to focus his attention on putting out the fire. The runaway, however, can be certain the Patrol will come looking for him the moment the danger of the fire is past.

In addition to the standard bucket brigade, which is immediately formed, the Patrol has another tool in their arsenal. To assist in fighting fire, each Patrol station has a three-man pump that can be brought to the scene of the blaze. One long hose will be dropped down the nearest well, into the closest fountain or into the river. The water is drawn up by two men working a set of bellows and forced out another hose on the opposite end, wielded by one man against the fire.



other day until the next one opens. On nights when no play is being performed, there are usually musical or oratorical performances. Entertainers from other Argossean cities, and even from other lands, come to Messantia harbouring hopes of performing at this famous amphitheatre.

Although the amphitheatre is the most famous and prestigious of Messantia's venues, there are other stages. Miklus' Garden and Mariners' Plaza both have small stages available to performers trying to make a name for themselves. Here citizens who do not wish to pay the admission price at the amphitheatre may watch for free. In addition to plays, these stages often host tumblers, jugglers, fools and musicians. In the Bazaar prefect and some of the wider plazas of King's Prefect it is not uncommon to spot jugglers and tumblers performing for the passing crowd, and the bazaar itself has a small stage. On days when the arena hosts games, the gardens are filled with performers entertaining the waiting audience.

Such entertainment is not to the taste of some, however, who find their diversions in other pleasures. In the taverns and dancing halls of the eastern city, minstrels lead the drunken crowd in lusty chants and dancers ply their erotic trade for thrown coppers.

Power & Politics

Guilds & Merchant Houses

SINCE MESSANTIA'S EARLIEST days of trading, when the Hyborians of Argos were just beginning to rise from barbarism to civilisation, the Merchant Houses have been a part of the city. As the city rose to prominence, was named capital of the newly formed nation of Argos and grew fat and wealthy on trade, the Merchant Houses have played a part, and their presence can be glimpsed throughout the city's history. They were not always as they are now, though.

The Merchant Houses have their beginnings as barbarians, as do all Argosseans. In Messantia's youth, they were the brave souls and lusty adventurers who charted the trading lanes, pirated Stygian vessels to steal their cargo and learn their shipwrights' secrets, who brought caravans through dangerous lands and fought and died on land and sea. That, however, was a short chapter in the history of the Houses. The perilous lives of the fathers and grandfathers bought their sons a life of wealth and ease.

The forebears of the various Merchant Houses laid claim to the trading routes, the seaports and the caravan trails Messantia still uses today. It was a claim that could not be defended except through power and secrecy. The early trading vessels of the Houses were more like warships than trading galleys, armed to the teeth and ready to turn on and destroy any who followed them to find the trading lanes. Their caravans moved across the countryside like small armies. This secrecy and jealous protection of the trading ways could not last long, too many others were charting their own routes and carving their own caravan paths.

Those years of sole ownership of the trade routes ways brought the fledgling Merchant Houses tremendous wealth.

They did not sit idly on this, but rather used it to expand their influence ever farther. They bought land and businesses and ships, they signed trading agreements with distant kingdoms and insinuated themselves into Argossean nobility. They grew civilised and patient, protecting and acquiring wealth no longer with just the sword, but now with intrigue and scheming as their favoured weapons.

The meteoric rise of the Merchant Houses, with their fabulous wealth, political influence and ever-growing control of Messantia's trade and business began to cause widespread concern among the other Messantians, particularly independent merchants and craftsmen. These men banded together to form the first guilds of Messantia, for the sole purpose of protecting themselves and holding the power of the Merchant Houses at bay. For a time, they were successful.

The Merchant Houses had learned the lessons of patience well, however, and rather than declare war against the newly founded guilds, they set about taking control of them. With bribes, blackmail and the occasional murder carried out by surrogates, the Houses insinuated their own agents into the guilds. One after another, all but one of the guilds fell beneath the influence of one of the Merchant Houses. Today, the guilds still exist, but they are little more than impotent fronts for the Houses that control them.

MERCHANT HOUSES

In the long years of Messantia's existence, some Merchant Houses have died out, been subsumed by marriage into another or been destroyed by rivals, its members left dead or destitute. House Accertius is a good example of this; after King Calemus died and Amenkuhn was unmasked the House lost its influence on the throne and the remaining Houses crushed House Accertius. There is some dispute over how many Merchant Houses have existed throughout Messantia's history, but less than 21 still stand today.

Members of Merchant Houses are considered to be of noble blood, as all of them claim barons, counts and sometimes dukes throughout the nation of Argos among their number. In Argos' feudal society, the lands these men control give them as much influence on the throne as the family's great wealth.

When two Merchant Houses come into direct conflict, the city holds its breath. Open war between two Houses

is exceedingly rare, however, for the simple reason that such a war is expensive and wasteful. Rather than fielding armies, such a war takes the form of trade embargoes, price gouging, arson, slander and assassinations. More commonly, disputes between two Houses are settled through negotiation, compromise or duelling. Duels may be to the death or to submission, and when they are concluded, it is assumed the conflict itself is resolved. Note that as members of the Merchant Houses are nobles, they will not debase themselves to fight a duel against a commoner who dares challenge them, and the commoner will find the full weight of Messantian law falling on his head for such an affront.

Most of Messantia's industry is owned and controlled by the Merchant Houses, as are many of her businesses. There are independent merchants and craftsmen in the city, but they are not free of the Houses. Guild membership is compulsory for all Messantian businesses, and as the Houses control the guilds, the dues, which are burdensome but not unbearable, go straight into the coffers of the Houses. A merchant who somehow became troublesome to a Merchant House could expect, at the very least, that his guild dues would become so high as to force him out of business. He would be very lucky indeed to get off so lightly.

Businesses with no appropriate representative guild, such as brothels and gambling halls, for example are not free of the influence of the Merchant Houses. In such cases, the owner of the business may well find himself paying an annual stipend to two or more Houses with interests in such businesses.

Though the wealth of the Merchant Houses is such that they could easily forego engaging in trade and commerce, and live degenerate, indolent lives of luxury, they do not. They are the very embodiment of, and perhaps the very cause of, Argos' culture of avarice. They do not believe there is such a thing as 'enough gold'. While not indolent, they are most certainly degenerate, however. Behind the concealing walls of their luxurious villas, the lords of the Houses indulge in whatever bizarre pleasures and activities draw their depraved interest. Though the numbers of each Merchant House vary, it is not uncommon to have two or three dozen members of the extended family living in the House's villa.

The lives of the members of Merchant Houses are taken up conniving and plotting to increase the House's wealth and power. Some are purely evil and corrupt, others merely avaricious, but all are deceitful and insidious people, who rarely give more care to those not of their House.

It is widely said in Messantia that the face of a House lord betrays less of his thoughts than does the face of a snake. Nowhere is this truer than in their dealings with other Houses. While the life of members of a Merchant House may seem to be divided between court, business, the baths, the arena and amphitheatre and the endless galas hosted by one House or another, there is one common thread through all of these. Each is attempting to gain an advantage over the other Houses through innuendo, outright lies, misplaced truths and observation of the same in others. Over time, this has come to be known as The Thousand Faces, and the Merchant Houses play it well and constantly. Each word from the lips of a Merchant House lord may have a dozen different meanings, and it may be that none of them are the truth.

Listed below are descriptions of the Merchant Houses of Messantia, including information on their major business interests, current lords and principal rivals and allies. It is important to note that any given Merchant House is likely to have literally dozens of revenue streams from many different ventures, and the few interests listed with each House are only the most prominent of its businesses. It is also important to remember that though the Merchant Houses are based in Messantia, they have holdings and interests throughout Argos and even, in some cases, beyond its borders. For example, House Eurys has extensive textile holdings, but there are no textile mills in Messantia. Nor, in the case of House Gilroy, are there any gem mines in or near Messantia, aside from the very recently established obsidian mines and pearl beds of Orabono.

HOUSE ABASANTIS

House Lord: Cecrops Abasantis

Principal Interests: Iron-mining, river trade, fishing, warehousing

Major Allies: Drusus

Major Rivals: None

Guild Controlled: None

Description: Its ancient patriarch Lord Cecrops rules House Abasantis with a heavy iron fist. He has little patience for anything other than the business of the House, and views The Thousand Faces as foolishness. He is unsparing and brazen in his disdain for everyone not of House Abasantis, and his punishments to those who fail him are terrible. Even the members of his House avoid him if possible, and he spends his days with ledgers of account and served by slaves. The House has control of none of the guilds, but does enjoy a significant share of the river trade.

Cecrops' son Mercutio, his only direct heir in a House cluttered with cousins, has become increasingly like him in a vain attempt to earn his autocratic father's respect. He has begun scheming to increase the House's interest in smithing, in a plan to wrest control of the Blacksmiths Guild from House Tartan, unaware that House Gabrio has similar plans.

HOUSE ACTAEUS

House Lord: Garai Actaeus

Principal Interests: Mercenary companies, shipping, retailing, weapons

Major Allies: Gabrio

Major Rivals: Drusus, Tartan

Guild Controlled: None

Description: Although House Actaeus makes a healthy income from milling weapons for the military of Argos, they have been eclipsed recently by House Tartan and are expanding into the custom weapon market. They own or control many of the weaponsmith shops in Messantia and elsewhere in Argos. If this new avenue of business continues to expand, the longstanding rivalry with Tartan may ebb away, which Garai would welcome, as it would leave him more time to focus on the House's mercenary and shipping ventures.

House Actaeus is currently most well known for the handsome if somewhat dim-witted Cirilo Actaeus, Garai's youngest son. He has served with many of the House's mercenary companies and loudly proclaims himself the finest warrior in Messantia. He has been forbidden by his father from duelling, in an attempt to maintain the peace while

House Actaeus repositions its businesses, but, desiring to prove himself, has made up for it by fighting in the arena. He uses his family's influence to ensure that he is paired against whichever gladiator he chooses to fight. If he hears of a new arrival

in the city he believes would be an interesting challenge, he will send that warrior an invitation to appear in the arena with him. Though Cirilo has

not lost yet, neither has he chosen to face Sigurd (see pg. 80).



HOUSE ANCHISES

House Lord: Lino Anchises

Principal Interests: Finesmithing, jewellery, river trade, shipping, shop-owning

Major Allies: Gilroy

Major Rivals: Mazentius

Guild Controlled: Finesmiths Guild

Description: House Anchises controls the Finesmiths Guild, and its coffers bulge with the proceeds of the gold and jewellery crafted by the guild. The obscene wealth of this Merchant House has made Lord Lino Anchises greedy to see what other heights he might aspire to setting his sights on nothing less than the rule of Argos itself. He is well aware a coup would be impossible, but he prefers to move in more subtle ways and is an expert at The Thousand Faces.

House Abasantis

Lord Lino has not set his sights on the throne, but on the power of the throne. He has begun cultivating a relationship between Prince Cassio and his granddaughter Donnesa, an auburn-haired beauty with a heart like black glass. He intends them to wed, and to rule as the power behind the throne. Donnesa has gone along gladly with this plan, but has no intention of sharing power with her doddering grandfather. Such is Lino's skill at The Thousand Faces that as yet, neither King Milo nor any other Merchant House have taken notice of his scheming.



House Actaeus

HOUSE BRENCIS

House Lord: Munro Brencis

Principal Interests: Brothels, caravan trade, horse-breeding, ranching

Major Allies: Pluvius

Major Rivals: Loreca

Guild Controlled: Caravaneers Guild

Description: Aside from its brothel interests and control of several areas of Dustbiter, House Brencis has few holdings in Messantia itself. The House enjoys a near-monopoly on the shoreline caravan route running from Napolitos to Messantia, and it is in the area of Napolitos that the House maintains its major holdings of ranchland



House Anchises

and breeding farms. Brencis horses are said to be the best available in Argos.

House Brencis' extensive ranch holdings in the area of Napolitos have enabled to take control of the Butchers Guild in that city. Working hand in glove, House Brencis and House Pluvius have conspired to set and maintain the price of cattle, sheep, swine and fowl throughout Argos.



House Brencis

over the wall and apologise was the garbage removed. House Onoria and House Corvara have been rivals since that day, but the lesson was lost on no one.

HOUSE DRUSUS

House Lord: Priam Drusus

Principal Interests: Fishing, logging, shipping, slaving, trade

Major Allies: Abasantis, Dulcia

Major Rivals: Actaeus, Idaeus

Guild Controlled: Fishermens Guild

Description: House Drusus is thought to be one of the two oldest Merchant Houses in Messantia, for those who keep an accounting of such things. Their ships ply the seaways from Korvela to Khorala, and their merchant fleet is among the largest in Argos. In addition to their extensive slaving interests, bringing a steady supply of fresh labour back to the city, they deal largely in valuable items of small bulk, and in transportation of other peoples' cargo. House Drusus also enjoys a near-monopoly on trade with Cranetown, which it has vigorously and sometimes violently defended against other Houses.

HOUSE CORVARA

House Lord: Patrio Corvara

Principal Interests: Butchering, ranching, city maintenance

Major Allies: Pluvius

Major Rivals: Onoria

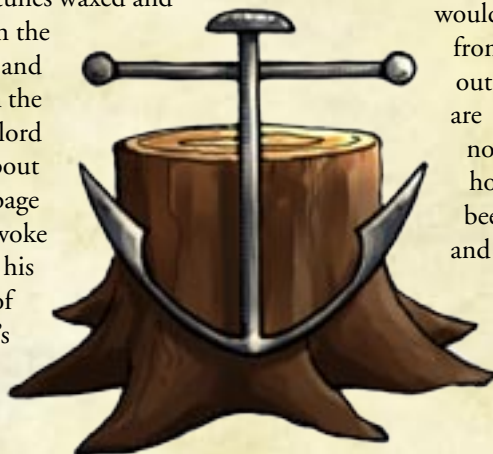
Guild Controlled: Street Sweepers Guild

Description: When Queen Isabella ordered the creation of The Swills, doubling House Corvara's wealth was probably not her intention, but it was a direct result. Without the wide trade connections enjoyed by many other Houses, House Corvara was one of the lesser Houses of Messantia. It had achieved prominence in the Street Sweepers Guild primarily because of lack of competition, and from the guild it drew only a modest income to supplement its more traditional businesses of ranching and butchering, providing a great deal of the city's meat. With the creation of The Swills, however, House Corvara's fortunes waxed and it now collects a healthy stipend from the city for the guild's work in gathering and removing the detritus that collects on the city's streets every day. When the lord of House Onoria made a joke about the indignity of being in the garbage business some 50 years ago, he awoke two days later to find the gates to his villa blocked by a small mountain of waste, left there at House Corvara's order. Not until he swallowed his pride and sent his son to climb



House Corvara

In the last three years, House Drusus has lost more than a dozen ships in what Lord Priam is convinced are pirate attacks by the Black Corsairs. He has become obsessed with the Corsairs, and is intent on forcing King Milo to send an expedition to find their base and crush them. While King Milo would be glad to see the Corsairs vanish from the waves, he has wisely pointed out that there is no evidence the Corsairs are actually based anywhere. Priam is not motivated simply out of vengeance, however. He knows the Corsairs have been taking merchant ships for years, and dreams of the mountain of wealth they must surely have acquired by now.



House Drusus

HOUSE DULCIA

House Lord: Acias Dulcia

Principal Interests: Brewing, logging, milling, shipping, shipbuilding

Major Allies: Drusus, Onoria

Major Rivals: Florens, Mycaelis, Pompilius

Guild Controlled: Shipwrights Guild

Description: Had the Bakers Guild not been destroyed in fighting between Merchant Houses long ago, House Dulcia would surely control it now, in addition to its tight-fisted grip on the Shipwrights Guild. House Dulcia has few holdings outside Messantia, but has a firm grip on several major industries inside the city. They are long-time allies with House Onoria, despite competing brewing interests, the two Houses are now plotting the destruction of House Pompilius, which they believe will give them enough control over brewing interests to wrest control of the Hostellers Guild away from House Mycaelis.



House Dulcia

Description: The people of House Florens are, by and large, a drunken and violent lot, more apt to duelling than any other of the Houses. House Mycaelis' recent assumption of control of the Hostellers Guild has had only a slight impact on House Florens' brewing business, as most of their product was being exported to other cities and towns in Argos. Any loss of business is enough to put Lord Damon into a rage, and he has made his new enmity for House Mycaelis well known.

House Florens' major interests have always been the House's two great passions: gladiators and gambling. Not satisfied with the amount of games held in the arena, House Florens has converted a large cellar beneath their villa into a sort of private arena, where they can host their own death matches and place bets among themselves and any guests as to the outcome. They do not waste the resource of skilled gladiators in these fights, but rather they prefer to use slaves, freshly procured from the Black Kingdoms. As terrible a fate as this is for the slaves, there is one ray of hope for them. A slave with enough victories in House Florens' villa may be introduced to the arena itself, to eventually win his freedom.



House Eurus

HOUSE EURUS

House Lord: Zether Eurus

Principal Interests: Clothiers, textiles, wine, shop owning

Major Allies: Mycaelis

Major Rivals: Tullus

Guild Controlled: Clothiers Guild

Description: House Eurus is currently in control of the Clothiers Guild, but it has been 10 years since it seized the guild from House Tullus, and it is said among the Houses with no stake in the fight that control of the guild changes nearly as often as women's fashions. No House has ever had total control of the guild, as the market changes quickly and often. House Eurus has always enjoyed an advantage, however, due to its extensive textile concerns in northern Argos, and its wide networks of foreign merchants who bring silk and fine linen to its many clothiers.

HOUSE FLORENS

House Lord: Damon Florens

Principal Interests: Brewing, gambling, gladiators, shipping

Major Allies: Tartan

Major Rivals: Dulcia, Mycaelis

Guild Controlled: None



House Florens

HOUSE GABRIO

House Lord: Livia Gabrio

Principal Interests: Gladiators, land-owning, smithing

Major Allies: Actaeus

Major Rivals: Tartan

Guild Controlled: None

Description: House Gabrio is the only Merchant House currently led by a woman, Lady Livia, who seized control of it upon the very moment of her husband Tuchian's death. Originally from a province near the city of Venezia, Livia is the daughter of a local baron, and was married into House Gabrio to secure an alliance. As she is not of Gabrio blood, she has had a difficult time maintaining control of the House, and Tuchian's brothers are intent on taking it away from her. Her moves to increase the House's land ownership in the regions north of Venezia, where she has family and allies, while simultaneously decreasing the House's interest in its traditional business of gladiator management has

caused even more concern. She is also preparing to mount a challenge to House Tartan for control of the Blacksmiths Guild, but has kept that fact secret from the rest of the House.

Lady Livia finds House Tarchon's attitude toward women personally insulting, a fact she has not kept secret, and House Tartan returns her hatred. This redoubled enmity with a powerful House is yet another cause for concern in House Gabrio.



House Gabrio

Major Allies: Loreca

Major Rivals: Drusus, Gilroy, Brencis

Guild Controlled: Shipmasters Guild

Description: House Idaeus is second only to House Gilroy in fostering and maintaining Argos' slave trade. One of the oldest Merchant Houses, as old as Drusus, it is responsible for charting and drafting many of the maps in use by captains throughout the Western Ocean.

Its ships have travelled farther than those of any other House, and have even journeyed as far as Khitai. For the most part, however, its ships ply the lanes from Shem to Zingara, and House Idaeus has longstanding relations with the Barachan Pirates, with which the House does a tidy business in fencing.

Recently, several of the House's ships have gone missing in Zingaran waters, and word has reached Lord Calchas' ears that Zingaran buccaneers are behind it. Never a patient or forgiving man, Calchas has vowed privately to his House that he will punish those behind this, and has begun funding his own personal war against the Zingaran buccaneers. King Milo is growing concerned, wary of the possibility of this personal grudge dragging Argos and Zingara into open war, but Calchas seems almost delighted at the prospect. House Brencis is also concerned, as its holdings near Napolitos would quickly be overrun by a Zingaran invasion. Calchas has found an ally in House Loreca, however.

HOUSE GILROY

House Lord: Bonifacio Gilroy

Principal Interests: Gem-mining, quarrying, shipping, slaving

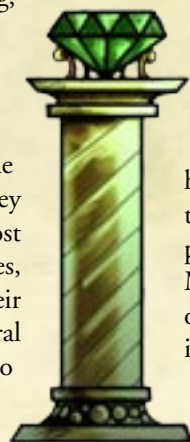
Major Allies: Anchises

Major Rivals: Idaeus

Guild Controlled: None

Description: House Gilroy's nearly unfathomable wealth is built on the backs of men in chains. They are unquestionably Messantia's largest and most prolific importers, exporters and owners of slaves, dealing almost exclusively in slave labour. Their far-flung gem-mining interests reach into several nations, bringing the wealth back to Messantia to be cut and placed in the rings and necklaces created by the Finesmiths Guild. Considering the small bulk and great value of the cargo they carry, House Gilroy's merchant ships seem more like warships than anything else. The House's larger and slower ocean-going vessels are primarily used for shipping limestone and marble cut from the House's quarries, and House Gilroy is the only House that engages in trading this commodity.

Bonifacio Gilroy became lord of this House upon his father Calandro's death four years ago. Lord Calandro had sponsored two attempts on the life of Giovanni Eres; concerned that the Slavertaker's business might impact House Gilroy's slaving enterprises, though the two were at opposite ends of the business. Since assuming control, Bonifacio has come to an understanding with Giovanni, and has even used his services on occasion.



House Gilroy

HOUSE LORECA

House Lord: Justus Loreca

Principal Interests: Caravan trade, caravan outfitting, money lending, river trade, warehousing

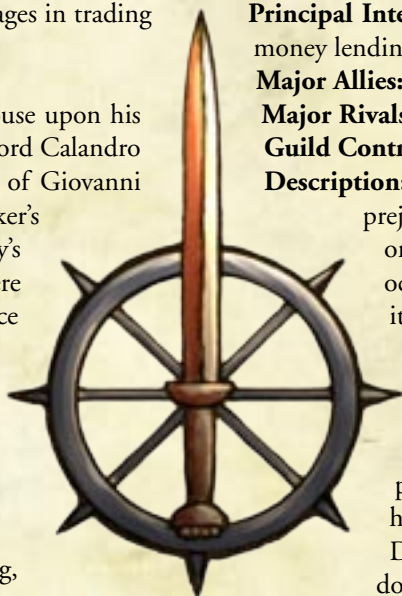
Major Allies: Idaeus

Major Rivals: Brencis, Pluvius

Guild Controlled: Porters Guild

Description: House Loreca has a long, ingrained prejudice against any non-Argossean. The only Merchant House without a single ocean-going vessel, House Loreca restricts its businesses to enterprises within Argossean borders. The House finds Hyborians of other nations barely tolerable, has disdain for all non-Hyborians and is possessed of a near-fanatical hatred of Zingarans.

Despite its refusal to do business outside Argos, the House's



House Idaeus

HOUSE IDAEUS

House Lord: Calchas Idaeus

Principal Interests: Exploration, fencing, navigation, shipping, slaving, trading

caravan and river trade, as well as its large warehousing facilities, have made it very wealthy. Currently, its greatest income is from its money lending enterprises, and the House is now the largest moneylender in the nation. Interest on loans ranges from 10 to 30%, and the number of foreclosures is beginning to put House Loreca into the land owning business.

There are rumours that the real reason House Loreca has no ocean-going ships is because the members of the House are afraid of the sea, a suspicion given partial credence by the lack of any maritime symbols on the House's villa or heraldry.

HOUSE MAZENTIUS

House Lord: Elegius Mazentius

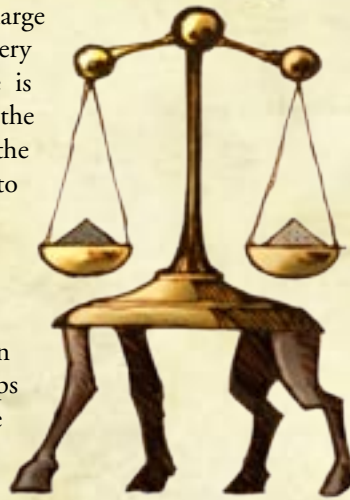
Principal Interests: Clockmaking, finesmithing, gold mining, shop owning

Major Allies: Tullus

Major Rivals: Anchises

Guild Controlled: Clockmakers Guild

Description: Until some 100 years ago, House Mazentius held control over both the Finesmiths Guild and the Clockmakers Guild, it was the House's move to combine the two which gave House Anchises the opening it needed to wrest away control of the Finesmiths Guild. This embarrassment instilled a sense of modesty and caution in House Mazentius. For the last few generations, the House has been quiet, zealously defending its remaining holdings, but rarely acquiring new ones. In fact, the House's collaboration on the Bridge of Chimes is one of the few noteworthy accomplishments of the last half-century. Lord Elegius is aware that, in *The Thousand Faces*, such caution can be construed as weakness, and is desperately trying to change the House's reputation of carefulness, lest other Houses align against Mazentius.



House Loreca



House Mazentius



House Mycaelis

HOUSE MYCAELIS

House Lord: Danaus Mycaelis

Principal Interests: Brewing, inns and taverns, shipping, trade, wine

Major Allies: Eurus

Major Rivals: Dulcia, Florens, Onoria, Pompilius

Guild Controlled: Hostellers Guild

Description: Now firmly in control of the Hostellers Guild after a long battle with the fading House Pompilius, House Mycaelis is seeking to expand its interests. Through its primacy at the guild, the House has begun to push other Houses with brewing and winemaking interests out of the independent inns and taverns, and Mycaelis is now seeking new markets to expand its exports of beer and wine. The House's recent and aggressive growth has earned it several bitter rivals, but for now Lord Danaus and his House are still flush with their victory. House Mycaelis is widely known for its frequent and lavish galas, which have only grown more frequent of late.

HOUSE ONORIA

House Lord: Rufeo Onoria

Principal Interests: Brewing, farming, performers, ranching, taverns

Major Allies: Dulcia

Major Rivals: Corvara, Florens, Pompilius, Mycaelis

Guild Controlled: Musicians Guild

Description: House Onoria maintains a firm stranglehold on the Musicians Guild, claiming a healthy income from all performers and instrument makers in the city. This is slightly ironic, as Lord Rufeo is completely tone-deaf, a fact no one dares point out to the humourless, autocratic tyrant of House Onoria.

House Onoria is currently scheming with House Dulcia to destroy House Pompilius, which will give them sufficient influence to seize control of the Hostellers Guild from House Mycaelis. Which of the two Houses will actually control the guild, should they succeed, has not been discussed, but Lord Rufeo is intent that it be Onoria.

HOUSE PEPHREDO

House Lord: Severyn Pephredo

Principal Interests: Fencing, mercenaries, shipping, slaving, sorcerous items and components

Major Allies: Gabrio

Major Rivals: Actaeus, Idaeus

Guild Controlled: None

Description: The House's interests in mercenaries, shipping and slaving are well known, but its interests in fencing and trafficking in sorcerous items is not. Whilst many Houses engage in these activities on a limited scale, Severyn has actively sought to increase Pephredo's interests in such things since his father's sudden death 10 years ago. Severyn and his inner circle are among the most depraved of any House in Messantia. Unknown to any outside this circle, they are worshippers of Set, who are being tutored in sorcery by Nefri Toth, a Stygian priest. Members of the House not in Severyn's inner circle are growing concerned over his increasingly degenerate behaviour, but have not yet settled upon what action to take, if any.



House Onoria

Alone among the Merchant Houses, House Pluvius did not build the villa they now call home. Instead, they purchased the villa that had belonged to House Ricchus, once that House was destroyed and disbanded. The recent discovery of several hidden rooms and passageways in the villa has Lord Anteros concerned as to what else might be hidden within his own home. His attempts to extract such information from the Order of Engineers have so far been rebuffed, as House Ricchus never officially passed ownership of the villa to House Pluvius. This lack of co-operation has redoubled Lord Anteros' concern, and security is now extremely tight at the villa.

HOUSE POMPILIUS

House Lord: Constans Pompilius

Principal Interests: Fishing, inns and taverns, shipping, shipbuilding

Major Allies: None

Major Rivals: Mycaelis

Guild Controlled: None

Description: Of all the Merchant Houses, the Pompilius family may be the least secure. One of the last to rise to prominence, their fortunes seem already to be fading. Recently, they lost all control of the Hostellers' Guild to House Mycaelis, and the House's fishing interests, though impressive, are overshadowed by those of House Abasantis and House Drusus. Constans Pompilius, the elderly lord, has insisted he has a plan, but others in the House are beginning to doubt him, and the other Houses, sensing weakness, are beginning to align against House Pompilius. Asceline Pompilius, his niece, has plans to save the House through its shipbuilding interests. She has found a former Freecove worker with some knowledge of Argossean shipwright arts and has already sent envoys to the Zingarans to propose exclusive trade deals in return for ships far better than those commonly available. This skates dangerously close to treason, even for a lady of a Merchant House, but if successful, could catapult her into rulership of a rejuvenated House Pompilius.



House Pephredo

HOUSE PLUVIUS

House Lord: Anteros Pluvius

Principal Interests: Butchering, ranching, shipping, tanning, warehousing

Major Allies: Brencis

Major Rivals: Loreca

Guild Controlled: Butchers Guild

Description: As old as House Pluvius is, it is still the youngest of the Merchant Houses, and some of the older Houses still give it short shrift. It is also one of the largest Houses, both in the size of the family and wide range of its holdings. Many members of House Pluvius spend most of their time outside the city, supervising the family's large ranching interests. Its ranching, butchering and tanning businesses are widely credited with making Redboots what it is today, as dubious an honour as that may be.

House Pluvius also has a great deal of Shemite blood in it, which has created some difficulties for it in standing equal to the other Houses. The people of House Pluvius continue to worship the Shemite pantheon, though they go to the Mitran temple to keep up appearances.



House Pluvius

HOUSE TARTAN

House Lord: Cowin Tartan

Principal Interests: Brothels, iron-mining, shipping, smelting, weapons and armour

Major Allies: Florens

Major Rivals: Actaeus, Gabrio

Guild Controlled: Blacksmiths Guild

Description: House Tartan even outstrips House Actaeus in milling the constant stream of weapons and armour needed for the military, the Patrol and for export, though the two are engaged in a constant struggle. The men of this House pride themselves on their martial prowess, riding to war at every opportunity. They even maintain a semblance of military discipline within the House, referring to Lord Cowin as 'General', and assigning military rank to each member of the House as befits his station.

Misogyny is an ingrained trait in House Tartan, which is the only House that, throughout its long history, has never had a woman in control. Indeed, the House has very few women among its members. Children of the House's men are born to slaves in its large seraglio, and any girls that come from these unions are traded off in marriage at a young age. Although the House's seraglio includes women of several different nations, the House is keenly aware of the importance of maintaining its Argossean and Hyborian heritage. Any children, male or female, born to a slave who is not of Hyborian descent is discarded. No one, not even the lords of House Tartan, know how many of the House's bastards survive in the outside world, or if any of them are aware of their true heritage.

HOUSE TULLUS

House Lord: Fausto Tullus

Principal Interests: Fashions, money lending, shipping, shop-owning

Major Allies: Mazentius

Major Rivals: Eurus, Mycaelis

Guild Controlled: None

Description: House Tullus still stings from the loss of the Clothiers Guild to House Eurus a decade ago, and is using much of its income from its money lending and shipping enterprises to increase its fashion



House Pompilius

and shop-owning interests in an attempt to retake the guild. Despite the loss of guild control, Lady Beldina, Lord Fausto's wife, is still considered among the leaders in women's fashions in Messantia.

What House Tullus is best known for, however, are its many galas. Fausto Tullus is a huge, jolly man, who enjoys a good festival more than a bitter rivalry. Ironically, the House's penchant for parties had created a fierce rivalry with House Mycaelis, also known for its galas. Those who would dismiss Lord Fausto as a drunken sot are fools, however. As much as he enjoys a good, friendly time, he is an implacable enemy when roused.

THE GUILDS

The guilds of Messantia were formed in response to the growing power of the Merchant Houses. They protected both merchants and consumers by regulating occupations, ensuring quality of goods and services and maintaining prices.

The Merchant Houses felt the guilds were a threat to their growing power, and through a patient campaign of bribes, blackmail, intimidation and usury were slowly able to take control of all but one. They still serve the same purposes for which they were founded, but now do so under the thumb of the Houses. The Merchant House that controls the guild appoints its Guildmasters, and prices are usually set according to the House's wishes.

Guild membership is easier to obtain now than it was prior to the Houses' coup of the guilds. A craftsman must still show a degree of proficiency with his chosen profession, but more importance is placed now on the fee for admission and ability to pay dues. Guilds still offer care for their sick members and for the widows and orphans of deceased members, the closest thing to charity in Messantia, but this practice soon ends unless the guild member was either long standing or of high rank.

There were once more guilds in the city than there are now. Over the course of the years, Merchant Houses in control of two similar guilds (blacksmiths and weaponsmiths, for example)



House Tartan



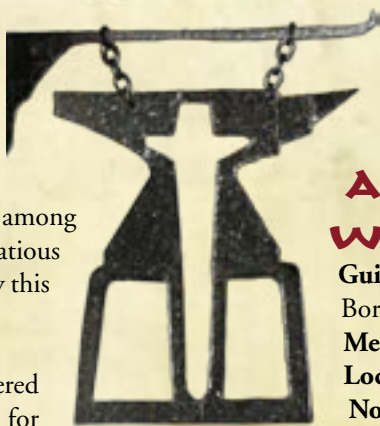
House Tullus

have combined them into a single guild for the sake of simplicity. Other guilds have been destroyed in the Merchant Houses' battles for control, such as the Bakers Guild. There are now 14 guilds operating in Messantia or 15 for those who falsely count the Order of Engineers among them. Though most guilds have ostentatious official names, they are rarely referred to by this full name.

Initially, Messantia's guilds were scattered through the city. It was not uncommon for all the practitioners of a specific craft to live in close proximity to one another, often all on the same street, and the guilds were headquartered in the same area in which the members lived. With the advent of Merchant House control, the guilds began moving their headquarters to the western city, to create what is now the Street of Guilds. Many streets in the eastern city still bear names like Smith Street, Sword Street, Lighters' Way and sundry other names which denote the initial location of the guild and its members.

Guild membership is compulsory for all independent businesses in Messantia. Businesses owned by a Merchant House that is not currently in control of the appropriate guild are not required to be members of said guild. Guild members are given a small token (usually worn around the neck) to denote their membership. Doing business without appropriate guild membership is a crime of the Third Order in Messantia. Itinerant traders are not immune to this, but are offered short-term memberships at a discount.

Below is a list of the guilds of Messantia as they exist today, including information on the current guildmaster, the Merchant House in control and additional notes on the guild where it is appropriate.



THE BROTHERHOOD OF BLACKSMITHS AND WEAPONSMITHS

Guildmaster: Chaucor Nequan (Owner of Born of Steel, #125)

Merchant House: Tartan

Location: #221

Notes: The Blacksmiths Guild and the Weaponsmiths Guild were only joined together some 80 years ago, and antagonism between the two sides remains a concern. The former guildhall of the Weaponsmiths Guild has been converted into a villa owned by the House Tartan and rented out to exceedingly wealthy visitors to the city.



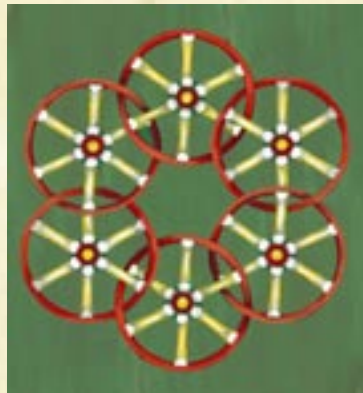
THE NOBLE ASSOCIATION OF BUTCHERS AND SLAUGHTERMEN

Guildmaster: Varian Illius (Owner of Varian's Meats, #102)

Merchant House: Pluvius

Location: #231

Notes: Only the Caravaneers Guild has a larger membership than the Butchers Guild in Messantia. Still, this remains one of the poorest guilds, as the vast majority of its members are Redboots slaughtermen, a group of men who exist on notoriously low wages.



THE ORDER OF CARAVANEERS

Guildmaster: Priore Brencis

Merchant House: Brencis

Location: #222

Notes: This is the largest guild in Messantia, counting hundreds of caravan drivers, guards, cooks and others among its members.



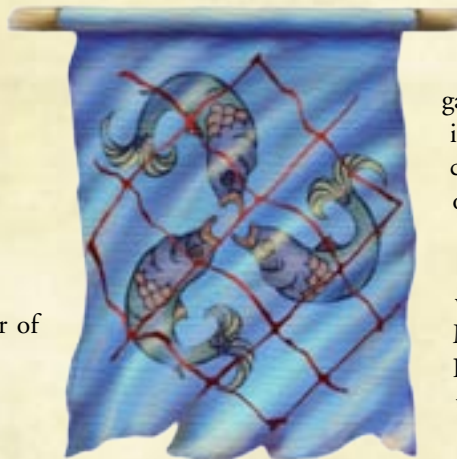
THE EXACTING BROTHERHOOD OF CLOCKMAKERS

Guildmaster: Bongiani Orbalis (Owner of Tide of Times, #109)

Merchant House: Mazentius

Location: #219

Notes: This is the smallest guild in Messantia, but still among the wealthiest. The waterclocks created by Messantia artisans are famous throughout the western world, though most people cannot afford them, settling instead for one of the guild's less-opulent sundials. Guildmaster Bongiani Orbalis and some of his most skilled fellow craftsmen are working to create a new kind of clock entirely, one which does not require water, but rather functions through the spinning of gears and wheels. They have recruited Ciardo Isottus, the locksmith who owns Impassable Fastenings, to help them in this effort.



THE ESTEEMED ASSOCIATION OF CLOTHIERS AND COBBLERS

Guildmaster: Aldiana Forese (Owner of Aldiana's Grace, #115)

Merchant House: Eurus

Location: #225

THE HALL OF FINESMITHS AND JEWELLERS

Guildmaster: Felice Consolius (Owner of The Finest Art, #164)

Merchant House: Anchises

Location: #230

Notes: The second-smallest guild in Messantia, the Finesmiths Guild is in constant



competition with the Hostellers Guild as the richest guild in the city.

THE GUILD OF FISHERMEN

Guildmaster: Bettino Drusus

Merchant House: Drusus

Location: #228

THE HOSPITABLE ORDER OF HOSTELLERS

Guildmaster: Mesinos Diotrepes (owner of The Silver Dolphin, #78)

Merchant House: Mycaelis

Location: #226

Notes: Though the Hostellers Guild may not seem of much consequence at first glance, it is one of the strongest and wealthiest guilds in the city. As guild membership is compulsory to all businesses in Messantia not directly owned by one of the Merchant Houses, and the Hostellers Guild includes brothels, dancing halls, gambling houses, inns and taverns under its sphere of control. This places it in control of more businesses than any other guild in the city, though it has fewer members than the Caravaners Guild or the Fishermens Guild. This is why the loss of guild control to House Mycaelis was so devastating to House Pompilius, a House which had invested the majority of its interests in the guild over the course of the three centuries it was in power.

THE PERFECT ORDER OF MUSICIANS AND INSTRUMENT MAKERS

Guildmaster: Miglino Rosanos (owner of Rosanos Instruments, #130)

Merchant House: Onoria

Location: #220

THE STURDY LEAGUE OF PORTERS AND WAGONEERS

Guildmaster: Crespin Demetros (owner of A Clear Hold, #35)

Merchant House: Loreca

Location: #227



know only the small sections of the sewers to which they are assigned.

Although entry into the sewers is illegal for anyone not of the guild, Sergio and his guildsmen will usually not interfere with others using the sewers. Smugglers and thieves make frequent use of the pathways below, and pay the guild for the privilege. Anyone who uses the sewers without paying the guild, or who tries to map them, is dealt with quietly.

THE SEWER WORKERS GUILD

Guildmaster: Sergio Kostokos

Merchant House: None

Location: #232

Notes: This is the only independent guild remaining in Messantia. There have been attempts by Merchant Houses to seize control, but they all failed miserably. Merchant Houses that interfered with the guild found that their deepest secrets were coming to the attention of rival Houses, wealth was vanishing from their villas and some of their members were disappearing entirely.



Membership in the Sewer Workers Guild is exceedingly difficult to obtain, as Sergio is ever cautious of Merchant Houses trying to insert a proxy. Most guild members are the sons of guild members themselves, and so on. After a long process in which the potential member's loyalty is tested over and over, there is a three-day initiation ritual, after which the potential has no recollection of. For this and other reasons, it is widely and correctly rumoured that the guildmasters have access to some manner of sorcerous knowledge.

Many people refer to the sewers of Messantia as 'The City Below.' It is a vast network of built and rebuilt tunnels, chambers and passageways, by which those who know the way can gain access to almost any building in Messantia. The undisputed lord of the City Below is Sergio Kostokos, the guildmaster of the guild. He, like all his predecessors, uses the ways of the sewers to learn Messantia's deepest secrets. It is this knowledge that keeps the guild independent. Not even Sergio knows all the passageways of the sewers, however. Beneath Redboots and in the cramped tunnels under parts of Dockside, there are areas that are a mystery to him. He only knows that something is lurking in there; but as it has not come into the rest of the sewers, he is inclined to leave it alone. Sergio does possess the most complete maps of the sewers in existence, however, which are far superior to those held by the Order of Engineers. Only he has access to all the maps; his subordinates within the guild



The Sewer Workers Guild was originally based in River Prefect, but when the Merchant Houses moved all the guilds together in King's Prefect, the guildmaster at the time moved his headquarters as well.

THE WORTHY ORDER OF SHIPMASTERS

Guildmaster: Fernando Idaeus

Merchant House: Idaeus

Location: #229

Notes: Control of this guild, while impressive, is not the overwhelming advantage it might initially seem to be in a city like Messantia. The lion's share of shipmasters in the city are directly in the employ of other Merchant Houses, which excludes



them from the obligatory membership to this guild.

THE GUILD OF SHIPWRIGHTS

Guildmaster: Franco Vicinius (Owner of The Cutting Prow, #49)

Merchant House: Dulcia

Location: #223

Notes: Once one of the largest guilds in Messantia, the Shipwrights Guild is growing ever smaller as more and more of their work is done by the Merchant House-owned facilities at the Shipyards in Hilltop. There are even rumours that House Dulcia may disband the guild and buy out the remaining independent shipwrights of Messantia.



they call Agnolino the Wise, who studied the ruins left behind by the vanished Acheronians and learned their secrets of building, founded it. In his honour, the head of the Order is called the Builder.

Agnolino gathered a select group of apprentices, and together they continued to study and reconstruct the engineering and architectural principles of the Acheronians. They kept their knowledge a closely guarded secret and as time passed and the Order grew, more and more old wisdom was unearthed and new learning discovered. As Messantia grew larger, the need for the Order's knowledge became apparent and Banchello, Agnolino's heir as Builder, made the Order's services available in the city. In return, the Order was made a part of the government of the fledgling city and nation, yet still was guaranteed its ability to operate independently. This arrangement still stands today, though many Messantians incorrectly think of the Order as an independent guild, like the Sewer Workers Guild.

The Order's knowledge has grown ever greater with the passing of years, but otherwise it has changed little. Its vast knowledge remains a closely guarded secret, insuring the Order's prominence in the city. None of the buildings or monuments that make Messantia famous would be possible without the work of the Order; indeed, the Order's involvement is required by law for any building larger than two storeys. The Order maintains a strict code of secrecy regarding every building it constructs, so the rich sea captain who wants a hidden vault in his new Hilltop villa can rest easy knowing no one outside the Order will ever find out about it.

The Order is responsible for maintenance of all government buildings, and is hired to maintain and repair

THE HONOURED BROTHERHOOD OF STREET LIGHTERS AND STREET SWEEPERS

Guildmaster: Arvalis Trithenes

Merchant House: Corvara

Location: #224

OTHER POWERS OF MESSANTIA

The government and Merchant Houses are the cornerstones of power in Messantia, but between them, they leave dozens of niches for those clever and opportunistic enough to seize them. Some of these splinter off from larger organisations, others achieve a prominence in their own right, and still others are crushed before they grow powerful. Detailed below are three other groups that hold some degree of power or influence in the Golden City.

ORDER OF ENGINEERS

Officially, the Order of Engineers is a branch of the government, but possesses a unique charter that allows it to operate independently. The Order believes itself to be the oldest organisation in Messantia, and, considering the exactitude of its records, is likely correct.

The Order of Engineers has its beginnings when Messantia was just beginning its rise from fishing village to the gleaming metropolis it is today. According to the Order, a man whom



most other buildings in the city. In co-operation with the Sewer Workers Guild, it maintains the major branches of the sewer system. Lastly, it is charged with the upkeep of Messantia's wells, fountains and water pipes.

The Order's prominence and secrecy have led to many theories and suspicions regarding them, and some Messantians believe they are the true power in the city, greater than the Merchant Houses or even the crown. There is a longstanding rumour in Messantia that the Order always inserts a structural flaw into its buildings, which can, with one stroke of a hammer or chisel from a member of the Order, bring the entire building crashing down. This is supposedly done to maintain their power, for any who threaten them or come close to exposing their secrets will find themselves buried beneath a small mountain of crumbled stone.

What is absolutely true is that the Order has built just such a flaw into their own headquarters. This is the ultimate expression of the oath all members of the Order take – to die before revealing the secrets of the Order. Should the worst happen, should Messantia fall to an enemy force, the Builder can destroy the Order entirely. A single hammer stroke on a certain concealed stone will set the headquarters' collapse in motion, simultaneously compromising the foundation and spraying a shower of sparks into the vats of oil that lie waiting in the basement. Less than two minutes after that stroke falls, the Order of Engineers and all their accumulated knowledge will be nothing but a pile of charred stone.

Entrance to the Order of Engineers is all but impossible for those not born to it, and only under extreme circumstances would it be considered. It is far easier for a shepherd to become a noble than it is for even a noble to gain entry to the Order. Currently, the Order has slightly more than 150 members strong. The current Builder Balsimino Damoctavius, is descended from Agnolino himself.

CRIMINALS

Any city like Messantia will have its share of pickpockets, smugglers and burglars, but there is no centralised Thieves Guild in the city, though some might argue that the Merchant Houses comprise 21 thieves' guilds. There are, however, criminal organisations in the city.

Most of these are strictly small-time gangs working a neighbourhood in one of the poor areas of the city, but there are a few who have risen to prominence. A man named Mulciber Maksym runs the largest of these gangs. From the basement of a second-hand shop in Dockside, Mulciber commands a small empire of smuggling,

extortion, protection, thievery and the occasional murder. He has dealings with several of the Merchant Houses, but remains independent of them, a position that is difficult to attain. In the minds of the Houses, he is at once too powerful to dismiss or lightly try to kill, but does not impact their business enough to target him as a rival.

Mulciber is beginning to grow cocky with his power, which is actually more impressive than the Houses suspect. He controls a sizeable amount of the smuggling coming into the city and has frequent dealings with the Black Corsairs.

INFORMATION BROKERS

Money is power in the Golden City, but information is one of the most valuable commodities. Blackmail and extortion are commonplace, especially among the wealthy, and knowing what a rival is planning is the closest thing possible to assuring victory in the war of commerce and The Thousand Faces. The Merchant Houses employ scores of spies just so they can keep a step ahead of rival Houses.

If the spy fails, there is still the information broker. If someone has no spies he can call on, but still has enough silver to afford the service, there is the information broker. There are at least a dozen people plying this trade in Messantia, but most of these are charlatans, who often provide incomplete or invented information. Still, there are two who are always reliable.

The first of these is Sergio Kostokos, guildmaster of the Sewer Workers Guild. He is probably the most knowledgeable of the brokers. For anyone who desires information about something other than one of the Merchant Houses, Sergio is the most available source. Unfortunately for those who are interested in the Houses, Sergio keeps much of that information to himself, to maintain his advantage against them.

The second of the brokers goes only by the name Nicholo. He is much more difficult to locate than the other brokers, though someone looking for him will eventually be directed to one of the taverns or gambling halls where Nicholo keeps an agent. Nicholo too is guarded with his information, but for enough silver will undertake to discover almost any secret. Unknown to anyone but himself (even Sergio Kostokos is unaware of this) Nicholo is actually a vampire sorcerer named Theron Shavan, originally of Ophir (see pg. 85).

Movers & Shakers

Non-Player Characters of Messantia

KING MILO

Male Argossean noble 13

Hit Dice: 10d8+20+6 (81 hp)

Initiative: +4 (+4 Reflex save)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +14 (+4 Level)

Defence (Parry): +18 (+3 Str, +6 Level)

Damage Reduction: –

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +9/+12

Attack: Broadsword +15 melee; heavy lance +15 melee

Full Attack: Broadsword +15/+10 melee; heavy lance

Damage: Broadsword 1d10+2; heavy lance 1d10+2

Special Attacks: –

Special Qualities: Do You Know Who I Am?, Enhanced Leadership, Lead By Example +4, Rank Hath Its Privileges, Social Ability (*ally*), Social Ability (*etiquette*), Special Regional Feature +3, Title, Wealth

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +6, Ref +4, Will +11

Abilities: Str 16, Dex 11, Con 14, Int 15, Wis 17, Cha 17

Skills: Balance +2, Bluff +20, Diplomacy +20, Gather Information +12, Intimidate +16, Knowledge (history) +12, Knowledge (local) +10, Knowledge (nobility) +12, Profession (sailor) +5, Ride +11, Sense Motive +14, Use Rope +2

Feats: Leadership, Mounted Combat, Power Attack, Ride-By Attack, Steely Gaze

Code of Honour: Civilised

Possessions: As King of Argos, Milo can have any possession he pleases. The statistics given here assume he is unarmoured. King Milo and his sons prefer to use weapons and armour of Argossean craftsmanship, despite the availability of Akbitanan equipment.

King Milo seems destined to be regarded as one of the great Kings of Argos. His reign began rockily, taking the throne at a relatively young age after his father Constans died, and facing an invasion by the far more powerful nation of Aquilonia. Even after peace was declared, relations between Argos and its mighty neighbour to the north were chilled.

King Milo eventually got his revenge on Aquilonia, when he allowed Conan the Cimmerian to use Argos as a staging point for an

invasion of Aquilonia, even using his own army to protect Conan's when the barbarian's first foray into Aquilonia met with failure. Once Conan assumed the throne in Tarantia, relations between Argos and Aquilonia became much friendlier, but Milo remains concerned about Argos' traditional enemy to the west, Zingara as well as the doings of some of his feudal lords and the entire ill-favoured city of Athos.

Milo himself is heavy-set and barrel-chested, with a long grey beard and sharp blue eyes. He is opportunistic in his country's affairs, usually ready to take any advantage he sees, but he is also very patient, willing to wait as long as is needed until the right opportunity presents itself. He is even-tempered, rarely displaying much emotion and is a shrewd and stubborn negotiator.

The wealth of the Merchant Houses, as well as the fact that many of Argos' barons are members of those Houses, gives them tremendous power within the country, and more than a few of Milo's predecessors have been reduced to mere figureheads, carrying out the orders of the Houses. Milo, like his father, has been able to resist them, playing them against one another and forming temporary alliances with those he needs at any given time. He has picked his battles with the Houses carefully, and has usually emerged the victor. He has tried to pass these lessons on to his sons Cassio and Ariostro,

'King Milo's broad face flushed with anger, and he sat up sharply. A heavy-set man of middle years, whose luxuriant grey beard overspread his chest. Milo gave the impression of stolid taciturnity, more like some honest peasant than the ruler of a rich and sophisticated realm. Slow to make up his mind, he could be exceedingly stubborn once he reached his decision.'

L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter,
Conan the Liberator

hoping that when one of them takes the throne, he too can rule in fact as well as name.

PRINCE CASSIO

Male Argossean noble 5/soldier 5

Hit Dice: 5d8+5d10+30 (93 hp)

Initiative: +6 (+2 Dex, +4 Ref)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares) ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): 14 (+2 Dex, +2 Level)

Defence (Parry): 16 (+3 Str, +3 Level)

Damage Reduction: -

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +8/+11

Attack: Broadsword +12 melee; heavy lance +12 melee

Full Attack: Broadsword +12/+6 melee; heavy lance +12/+6 melee

Damage: Broadsword 1d10+3; heavy lance 1d10+3

Special Attacks: -

Special Qualities: Lead By Example +2, Rank Hath Its Privileges, Social Ability (*reputation*), Special Regional Feature +1, Title, Wealth

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +9, Ref +4, Will +8

Abilities: Str 16, Dex 15, Con 16, Int 15, Wis 14, Cha 18

Skills: Balance +4, Climb +8, Diplomacy +10, Gather Information +9, Handle Animal +10, Intimidate +12, Knowledge (local) +10, Knowledge (history) +10, Knowledge (nobility) +10, Profession (sailor) +4, Ride +12, Sense Motive +10, Use Rope +5

Feats: Cleave, Leadership, Mounted Combat, Power Attack, Ride-By Attack, Spirited Charge

Code of Honour: Civilised

Possessions: As Prince of Argos, Cassio can have any possession he pleases. The statistics given here assume he is unarmoured.

The elder of Milo's two sons, Prince Cassio is the heir apparent to the throne of Argos. He is an intelligent but impetuous young man in his middle twenties who, having completed his schooling under Messantia's best tutors, has spent the last five years riding the borders with Argos' army.

He is an exceptional warrior, which was a relief to the men he serves with, as they feared the responsibility of safekeeping a royal fool. When Conan's army was driven back out of Aquilonia after their first push, it was Cassio who commanded the Argossean army Milo sent to protect Conan. Showing his impetuosity, he wanted to cross the border after the fleeing Aquilonians, but listened to the counsel of his generals.

Cassio seems as intelligent as his father, but is more quick-tempered and less shrewdly wise. Milo hopes he will learn patience before taking the throne, lest he find himself outmatched and cornered by the crafty Merchant Houses.

PRINCE ARIOSTRO

Medium Humanoid Argossean noble 4/soldier 2

Hit Dice: 4d8+2d10+18 (50 hp)

Initiative: +9 (+4 Dex, +5 Ref)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): 16 (+4 Dex, +1 Level, +1 Dodge)

Defence (Parry): 14 (+2 Str, +2 Level)

Damage Reduction: -

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +5/+7

Attack: Broadsword +11 finesse melee; heavy lance +8 melee

Full Attack: Broadsword +11 finesse melee; heavy lance +8 melee

Damage: Broadsword 1d10+3 finesse melee; heavy lance 1d10+2

Special Attacks: -

Special Qualities: Rank Hath Its Privileges, Social Ability (*savoir-faire*), Special Regional Feature +1, Title, Wealth

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +7, Ref +5, Will +7

Abilities: Str 14, Dex 18, Con 16, Int 18, Wis 16, Cha 16

Skills: Balance +6, Bluff +10, Climb +7, Diplomacy +10, Gather Information +12, Handle Animal +9, Intimidate +10, Knowledge (history) +11, Knowledge (local) +11, Knowledge (nobility) +11, Profession (sailor) +5, Ride +13, Sense Motive +10, Use Rope +6

Feats: Dodge, Mounted Combat, Negotiator, Ride-By Attack, Weapon Focus (broadsword)

Code of Honour: Civilised

Possessions: As Prince of Argos, Ariostro can have any possession he pleases. The statistics given here assume he is unarmoured.

At the other end of the room sat a silent, catlike figure in a shadowy corner, enveloped in a thick, black cloak with the hood drawn close about his face. He leaned forward with strange interest, eyes narrowing to observe the quarrel.

Lin Carter and L. Sprague de Camp,
Conan of the Isles

The younger of Milo's sons, Ariostro is smaller and slighter than his brother. He seems as if he will become a capable warrior and leader of men, but does not show the same promise as Cassio. For this reason, the Merchant Houses are hoping it will somehow be he who takes the throne when Milo is gone.

They do not realise that behind the slender, almost catlike build is a quick, many-layered intellect, faster and deeper than that of his father or brother.

GIOVANNI ERES (THE SLAVETAKER)

Male Zingaran pirate 4/soldier 3/thief 6

Hit Dice: 4d8+3d10+3d8+40+6 (109 hp)

Initiative: +20 (+5 Dex, +15 Ref)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +23 (+5 Dex, +7 Level, +1 Dodge)

Defence (Parry): +20 (+3 Str, +7 Level)

Damage Reduction: –

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +10/+5

Attack: Akbitanan broadsword +17 finesse melee, unarmed strike +15 finesse melee, sling +15 ranged

Full Attack: Akbitanan broadsword +17/+12 finesse melee, unarmed strike +15/+10 finesse melee, sling +15/+10 ranged

Damage: Akbitanan broadsword 1d10+3, unarmed strike 1d3+3, sling 1d8

Special Attacks: Sneak Attack +5d6, Sneak Attack Style (broadsword) +3d8+2d6, Sneak Attack Style (unarmed strike) +3d8+2d6, To Sail a Road of Blood and Slaughter

Special Qualities: Eyes of the Cat, Ferocious Attack, Formation Combat (*skirmisher*), Light-Footed, Pirate Code (*Barachan smoke and rockets*), Seamanship +1, Sneak Subdual, Sorcerous Protection, Trap Disarming, Trap Sense +2, Uncanny Dodge

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +13, Ref +15, Will +6

Abilities: Str 17, Dex 20, Con 18, Int 16, Wis 14, Cha 15

Skills: Balance +6, Bluff +14, Forgery +12, Gather Information +14, Hide +14, Knowledge (arcana) +9, Knowledge (nature) +7, Knowledge (nobility) +10, Listen +11, Move Silently +17, Open Lock +14, Profession (sailor) +3, Search +15, Sense Motive +12, Spot +10, Swim +5, Tumble +15, Use Rope +10

Feats: Dabbler (Counterspells), Dodge, Improved Grapple, Improved Unarmed Strike, Poison Use, Power Attack, Striking Cobra, Stunning Attack, Zingaran Surprise

Code of Honour: None

Possessions: Giovanni almost always has his sword and sling with him, but the remainder of his equipment may vary wildly. He has access to a wide range of disguises, armours and poisons, and will equip himself for each mission accordingly.

Giovanni is a man of average height and build who is on the cusp of middle age. A native of Napolitos and the child of Zingarans, he served for a short time as an Argossean Guardian on the border with Zingara. The constant suspicion of his fellows for his Zingaran heritage led him to abandon that life and seek his fortune as a pirate. He soon grew weary of that as well, and took

the opportunity to jump ship when his captain took to port in Messantia.

After lying low until the pirates gave up their search for him and took to sea once again, Giovanni set himself to finding a new way to make a living. The idea of riding guard for a caravan, or signing on as a deck hand on a trading ship, held little appeal. But when he remembered the ships that sailed from Argos to Kush and the Black Kingdoms in search of new slaves to labour in Argos' mines or row her warships, he eagerly signed on. For several years he sailed with the slaver ships, capturing savages and bringing them home to Messantia.

One day, however, after watching the newest batch of slaves being sold off for four or five silver apiece, he stayed in the auction yard for another skin of ale with some of his shipmates. While there, another slave auction began, and Giovanni watched as a dusky Iranistani beauty and a golden-haired Nordheimer wench were sold for more than 400 silver each. It was then he decided he was in the wrong end of the business.

Unwilling to break his contract, he served on one more slaving run before cashing out to go into business for himself. It was difficult to get started in this new end of the slaving



business – it was much easier to envision himself capturing and selling comely, exotic slaves than it was to actually find such slaves and bring them to market. For several years, he eked out a meagre living as he built his reputation under the name ‘Slavetaker’. It was difficult, but it paid off as he hoped it would.

Eventually, Giovanni carved out for himself a reputation as a ‘custom slaver’. Instead of capturing slaves and bringing them back to market in hopes they will be sold, he acquires slaves to order for wealthy, usually degenerate nobles and Merchant House princes. If a client asked for a beautiful, educated Zingaran slave, Giovanni would procure one. Additionally, if a noble wants a certain individual as a slave, for example, the daughter of a baron who got the better of him on a business deal, he would go to Giovanni. Capturing slaves to order is a dangerous business, particularly if the slave to be captured is well-protected or noble, and Giovanni has no compunctions about refusing a job he considers too risky. Nor will he kidnap and enslave Messantians of noble or wealthy standing, no matter how much silver he is offered.

Giovanni quotes a rate to each client based on the difficulty of his request, how many accomplices will be needed and whether the new slave is to be trained before being handed over. His rates have reached as high as 5,000 silver for the virgin daughter of an Aquilonian count, delivered after training.

Although such custom jobs are what he is most famous for, Giovanni’s bread and butter are the clients who ask only for a certain race, age, gender and vague description, rather than a specific individual. He keeps a list of requests from clients, and has paid informants keeping watch constantly at the quays and around Dustbiter for any potential new arrivals that match the requests, or whom he is certain he can sell.

Though quite wealthy, Giovanni lives an ascetic life in a set of forgotten cellars beneath one of the warehouses in Docksider. He keeps this location a carefully guarded secret, but he can be contacted through Nepsius, the owner of the Purple Pearl tavern. He has been the target of several assassination attempts, but has an uncanny ability to smell a trap and prides himself on a constant feeling of suspicion.

Giovanni retains a group of some 20 soldiers, pirates and thieves he can call on for a job. Though he uses subdual attacks and paralytic poison when taking his victims, he is perfectly capable of dealing swift death to any who come against him.

CAPTAIN MAURITUS VENIO

Male Argossean pirate 7/soldier 5

Hit Dice: 5d8+5d10+20+4 (99 hp)

Initiative: (+3 Dex, +9 Ref)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +20 (+3 Dex, +7 Level)

Defence (Parry): +18 (+2 Str, +6 Level)

Damage Reduction: 6 (+5 mail shirt, +1 steel cap)

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +10/+14

Attack: Akbitanan war sword +16 melee, Shemite bow +9 missile

Full Attack: Akbitanan war sword +16/+11 melee, Shemite bow +9/+4 missile

Damage: Akbitanan war sword (two-handed) 1d12+8 (17-20/x2), Shemite bow 1d10+4

Special Attacks: Sneak Attack +2d6, To Sail a Road of Blood and Slaughter

Special Qualities: Bite Sword, Ferocious Attack, Formation Combat (*skirmisher*), Mobility, Pirate Code (*Barachan smoke and rockets*), Sneak Subdual, Seamanship +2, Uncanny Dodge

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +12, Ref +9, Will +4

Abilities: Str 18, Dex 17, Con 14, Int 16, Wis 12, Cha 18

Skills: Balance +5, Bluff +11, Climb +9, Gather Information +6, Intimidate +12, Knowledge (geography) +15, Profession (sailor) +18, Search +10, Spot +11, Swim +5, Tumble +15, Use Rope +8

Feats: Cleave, Combat Reflexes, Improved Critical (war sword), Leadership, Navigation, Pirate Code Expert, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (war sword), Weapon Specialisation (war sword)

Code of Honour: None

Possessions: Akbitanan war sword, mail shirt and steel cap. He has just acquired a Shemite strength bow +4 he intends to learn to use.

The son of a Cranetown fisherman, Mauritus was fascinated as a child by the mighty warships he saw cutting through the water by sail and oar. As he grew older, he chose not to join his father as a fisherman, but instead took to the ocean with Argos’ great navy.

He proved to be an outstanding sailor and warrior and eventually leader that his skills and luck overcame the stigma of his low birth and he advanced rapidly through the ranks. Eventually, he achieved the rank of captain aboard one of Argos’ galleons, the *Clementus*.

His constant devotion to duty overshadowed everything else in

his life, leading his few friends to joke that he was, indeed, married to his ship. That was fine by Mauritius, as this was the life he had wanted for himself.

His life changed one night in a tavern in Docksider, where he met Lydia, a licensed trader and the captain of her own vessel. She was a wild and free spirit, who loved the open seas and often wore red just to thumb her nose at the social convention of the colour's connotations. Their courtship was brief and passionate, and they were to be married when Lydia returned again to Messantia after a brief journey to Kush. When she did not return, Mauritius took the *Clementus* to search for her.

The people he spoke to who remembered Lydia's ship spoke of it leaving to sail north again, but could offer nothing else. Mauritius was about to give up hope of finding out her fate when the *Clementus* came under a dawn attack by a galleon of the Black Corsairs. The battle was short and brutal, with Mauritius and his men barely emerging the victors, and both ships sinking underneath them even as they realised the last of the Corsairs had fallen. But as Mauritius and his men scrambled aboard the sole remaining launch, he saw, tied about the waist of one of the pirates, the sash he had bought for Lydia, stained with blood.

By the time he returned to Messantia, Mauritius was a changed man, obsessed with exacting revenge on the Black Corsairs. He sought a new command, and asked for permission to seek out and destroy the Corsairs. But the request was denied, and he was told he would be returning to standard military patrol duty. In an act that would have been unthinkable to him a year before, he resigned.

The gold he had saved over his career bought him a new warship, a Zingaran vessel that had been taken by the Barachan Pirates. Though he had few friends, they had many, and began calling in the favours owed them to help Mauritius in his quest, even enlisting the shipwrights of Freecove in their plans. The Zingaran ship was brought to Freecove under heavy guard, where it was rebuilt and refitted as a warship the equal of any on the waves. Mauritius himself was given a letter of marque naming him a privateer of the crown, and was at last ready.

His new ship he named the *Red Lady*, in honour of Lydia. Whenever he is not out at sea, hunting the Black Corsairs and slaying them wherever he finds them, he is in Messantia, refitting the *Red Lady*, selling the plunder from the Corsair ships or seeking new crewmen. Even when he returns from the sea with no plunder, there are dozens of sailors and merchants to whom his quest has made him a hero that will gladly see to it the *Red Lady* is fit to sail again as soon as possible.

Mauritius is a grim, driven man, an expert seaman and cunning warrior. He knows this path of revenge will likely end in his death, but he is intent to send as many Corsairs as he can to the bottom of the sea before that happens.

SIGURD OF MESSANTIA

Male Nordheimer barbarian 12/pirate 4

Hit Dice: 6d10+4d8+60+18 (124 hp)

Initiative: (+Dex, +Ref)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +25 (+3 Dex, +12 level)

Defence (Parry): +22 (+6 Str, +6 Level)

Damage Reduction: 1 (barbarian class ability)

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple:

Attack: Greatsword +22 melee

Full Attack: Greatsword +22/+17/+12 melee

Damage: Greatsword 2d10+10

Special Attacks: Sneak Attack +1d6, To Sail a Road of Blood and Slaughter

Special Qualities: Bite Sword, Damage Reduction 1/-, Fearless, Ferocious Attack, Greater Crimson Mist, Improved Mobility, Improved Uncanny Dodge, Pirate Code (*Barachan smoke and rockets*), Seamanship +1, Sneak Subdual, Trap Sense +4, Uncanny Dodge, Versatility

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +18, Ref +15, Will +5

Abilities: Str 22, Dex 16, Con 22, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 14

Skills: Climb +21, Craft (carpenter) +2, Handle Animal +7, Intimidate +21, Jump +20, Listen +7, Profession (sailor) +2, Spot +11, Survival +2, Swim +10

Feats: Cleave, Diehard, Explosive Power, Great Cleave, Fighting Madness, Power Attack, Tough As Nails, Track, Weapon Focus (greatsword)

Code of Honour: Barbaric

Possessions: Sigurd always has his greatsword handy, but possesses little else, as his arena winnings are usually gambled away or spent within days. He relies on the arena to supply him with armour before every match.

Sigurd, originally from Nordheim, is a gigantic mountain of a man. Nearly seven feet of muscle and skill, he is accounted by many as the best warrior in the history of Messantia's arena. His record certainly bears that out; no other has spilled as much blood on the sands as he.

As a young man, scarcely more than a boy, Sigurd left his frozen homeland, journeying south into the Hyborian kingdoms to seek his fortune. He served as a mercenary for a dozen lords, and eventually made his way to the coast of Zingara, where he fell in with the Barachan Pirates. For the next few years, he sailed the seas as a pirate, learning to love the sea and this bloody way of life.

His ship was docked in Messantia at the end of trading season nearly 10 years ago. The storms that chase trading season away had come early that year, and his captain had chosen to ride them out in harbour. Drawn by the roar of the crowd, Sigurd went to the arena to watch the games. Before the first match ended, he was trying to find a way to take part.

Sigurd had no trouble signing up for a match against a pair of convicts, and no trouble killing them both. An instant sensation, he was overwhelmed by the attention his victories brought him. He also, as so many other gladiators have, found himself deeply in debt to those he thought had befriended him, particularly to Vincenzo Gabrio,

an idle son of House Gabrio with a vested interest in a dozen gladiators.

The storms lifted, and Sigurd planned to depart with his ship, but Vincenzo sent a pair of men to dissuade him. Sigurd killed them, but the battle was seen by the Patrol, who were able to subdue the massive barbarian and bring him to trial. The judge in the case, at Vincenzo's urging, sentenced Sigurd to the arena.

For seven years, Sigurd fought and won every battle, no matter how badly the odds were stacked against him, while Vincenzo continued to make a tidy profit on his matches. Finally, when the bookmakers started to refuse to take bets on Sigurd losing, Vincenzo tried to convince him to take a fall, saying that he could have his freedom with the one loss. Sigurd said nothing in response, but by the end of the fight, only he still stood.

Vincenzo was enraged, and pressured the masters of the games to place Sigurd in a battle he would be unable to win. Again, the barbarian was victorious, and his popularity with the screaming crowd grew, until King Milo took the unprecedented step of declaring Sigurd free. Apoplectic with rage, Vincenzo stormed out of the arena, and was struck dead by a passing cart.

Sigurd had thought to leave Messantia for good should he ever win his freedom, but yet he remains. The roar of the crowd always draws him back again, and he still fights in the arena as a free man.

PUBLIO

Male Argossean commoner 5/noble 4)

Hit Dice: 5d4+4d8 (32 hp)

Initiative: +3 (+1 Dex, +2 Reflex save)

Speed: 30 ft. (robe)

Defence (Dodge): 14 (+3 level, +1 Dex)

Defence (Parry): 13 (+4 level, -1 Str)

Damage Reduction: –

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +4/+4

Attack: Stiletto +5 melee

Full Attack: Stiletto +5 melee

Damage: Stiletto 1d4-1

Special Attacks: –

Special Qualities: Rank Hath Its Privileges, Skill Focus (Profession (merchant)), Social Ability (*refuge*), Special Region Feature +1, Wealth,

Space/Reach: 5 ft.
(1)/5 ft. (1)





Saves: Fort +2, Ref +3, Will +6
Abilities: Str 9, Dex 12, Con 10, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 14
Skills: Appraise +15, Balance +5, Bluff +12, Diplomacy +12, Gather Information +6, Knowledge (local) +5, Profession (merchant) +12, Profession (sailor) +5, Sense Motive +7, Use Rope +5
Feats: Leadership, Negotiator, No Honour, Skill Focus (Appraise)
Code of Honour: None

Possessions: Stiletto

Publio is a widely respected merchant who lives in Hilltop, has ties to several Merchant Houses and owns a number of booths and shops throughout the city. He is well known as an avaricious man, a quality which is applauded in Messantia. But he was once a Dockside merchant who did business from a tiny shack that, as Conan said, 'stank of rotten fish and cheap wine.'

Publio's true avocation in those days was his career as a fence for smuggled and pirated goods. What is unknown to anyone else in the city is that he was unwilling to let patriotism or morality interfere with his chance to earn silver, and took the audacious risk of fencing goods brought to him by Black Corsairs, even by their leader, Amra himself. It is his most closely-guarded secret, for even now he would likely not have the influence to save himself from the gallows if it became known.

Publio sat at a carved teakwood desk writing on rich parchment with a golden quill. He was a short man, with a massive head and quick dark eyes. His blue robe was of the finest watered silk, trimmed with cloth-of-gold, and from his thick white throat hung a heavy gold chain.

Robert E. Howard, *The Hour of the Dragon*

Publio maintains a number of associations among the city's smugglers and criminals. These make him an excellent contact for an adventurer with stolen goods to fence, but also provide him with an easy source of cheap cut-throats to deal with any who learn his secret.

ELENA YARDOTOS

Female Argossean noble 1/thief 3

Hit Dice: 1d8+3d8+4 (27 hp)

Initiative: +9 (+3 Dex, +6 Ref)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +14 (+3 Dex, +1 Level)

Defence (Parry): +10 (-1 Str, +1 Level)

Damage Reduction: -

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +3/+1

Attack: Stiletto +5 melee finesse

Full Attack: Stiletto +5 melee finesse

Damage: Stiletto 1d4-1

Special Attacks: Sneak Attack +2d6/+2d8, Sneak Attack Style (stiletto)

Special Qualities: Eyes of the Cat, Trap Disarming, Trap Sense +1

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +2, Ref +6, Will +4

Abilities: Str 8, Dex 16, Con 12, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 16

Skills: Appraise +9, Balance +5, Bluff +10, Diplomacy +10, Gather Information +10, Hide +9, Knowledge (nobility) +4, Perform +10, Profession (sailor) +3, Sense Motive +8, Sleight of Hand +9, Use Rope +3

Feats: Negotiator, Performer

Code of Honour: None

Possessions: Stiletto, medallion with Yardotos family crest

Elena was scarcely more than a baby when King Vilerus III of Aquilonia invaded northern Argos, a region that included the lands of her father, Baron Yardotos. The only survivor of her family, she was carried to safety by her family's old retainer Beltrame Graeme. He tutored her as best he could as they travelled from place to place, looking for a new home. Unlike most nobles, however, the Yardotos family had no holdings outside the barony, and no one would take them in.

Beltrame died of illness in Zotoz when Elena was 10, and she scrounged a living for herself as best she could. She grew increasingly disgusted with the city, however, and left for Messantia several years later. She fared no better in the Golden City than she had elsewhere, and eventually was forced to turn to prostitution. Though beautiful, her sharp tongue and quick temper got her fired from the city's more expensive brothels, which is how she ended up in The Dove.

When she realised The Dove's owner Provius had addicted the other women in the brothel to his drugs, and was trying the same on her, Elena killed him. Those who knew Provius generally agreed the world was a better place without him in it, and Elena took over ownership of the brothel.

A woman with the mature beauty that comes on the cusp of middle age, Elena is quite content running The Dove, and rarely gives a thought to the barony she was born to. She is no longer even certain who rules there now. The women of The Dove, now healthy and well-paid, are as much family as she has ever had. She finds most men untrustworthy, and has little respect for them, but does not let that keep her from taking their money every day. Elena herself now only runs the brothel, she no longer works with the other women.

Elena, though raised as a noble by Beltrame, has none of the benefits of the class, such as title or wealth.

BASILIO VERONUS

Male Argossean thief 2/scholar 7

Hit Dice: 2d8+7d6+9 (50 hp)

Initiative: +4 (+4 Ref)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +13 (+3 level)

Defence (Parry): +15 (+2 Str, +3 level)

Damage Reduction: –

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +6/+8

Attack: Dagger +8 mele

Full Attack: Dagger +8 mele

Damage: Dagger 1d4+2

Special Attacks: Spells, Sneak Attack +1d8/+1d6, Sneak Attack Style (dagger),

Special Qualities: Eyes of the Cat, Knowledge is Power

Base Power Points: 9 (base 4, +3 Wis, +2 Level)

Maximum Power Points: 27

Magic Attack Bonus: +6 (+3 Cha, +3 Level)

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +3, Ref +4, Will +10

Abilities: Str 14, Dex 10, Con 13, Int 15, Wis 16, Cha 16

Skills: Balance +2, Bluff +8, Concentration +11, Craft (herbalism) +12, Decipher Script +14, Diplomacy +7, Gather Information +17, Intimidate +13, Knowledge (arcana) +12,

Knowledge (local) +14, Knowledge (nobility) +12, Move Silently +5, Profession (sailor) +5, Sense Motive +15, Sleight of Hand +8, Use Rope +2

Feats: Carouser, Debaucher, Persuasive, Poison Use

Code of Honour: None

Spells: *Enslave, entrance, domination, hypnotic suggestion, ranged hypnotism, savage beast*

Basilio Veronus is the son of a Docksider prostitute who blamed her son for the loss in business during and after her pregnancy. His childhood was one of neglect and abuse; his mother frequently beat him and he spent long periods of time locked in a tiny cabinet in her room while she worked. These early days of powerlessness and fear bred in him the hatred and need for control that would dominate his miserable life.

As Basilio grew older, his mother cared for him even less, and he turned to thievery to keep himself fed. Seeing a man of some wealth enter his mother's room one evening, he spied a gilded leather case under the man's arm, and made up his mind to steal it. Basilio slipped silently into the room and made away with the case while his mother and the stranger were occupied. He had barely left the room when the man's shouts told him the case had been missed, and he fled. The stranger killed Basilio's mother in revenge, but was unable to find him.



Closer examination of the leather case revealed great age and extensive weathering, and when Basilio opened it, he found it was filled with a sheaf of brittle paper and a collection of cracked clay pots containing strange, dried-out substances. The writing on the pages was in Stygian, a language he could not understand, but his impressive intellect was piqued, and he began to decipher it. It was a treasure trove of knowledge, a near-complete set of hypnotism spells. He eagerly set himself to learning these mysteries, delighting in the control and power his new knowledge gave him over others.

Today, Basilio Veronus is a fat, unctuous and cowardly sociopath, surely one of the most loathsome men in all of Messantia. His need for control and his disdain for others, particularly women, have only increased with the years and his degeneracy. He has mastered every spell he found in the leather case so long ago, knowledge he has used judiciously to gain power and wealth.

Basilio is the owner of The Palace, a brothel in King's Prefect disguised as a tavern. In the catacombs and cellars beneath, Basilio practices his true pleasure – breaking others to his will. Using drugs, sorcery and time-honoured brainwashing techniques, he trains slaves for the brothel and for those Messantians who want a sincerely obedient slave, not just one who is afraid of the lash. Few others know of this side of Basilio or of his sorcery. Giovanni Eres uses Basilio's services when he takes quarry for which training is required, but he despises the man and has as little contact with him as possible. Still, Basilio is quite skilled at his work, and no one who falls into his grasp in the terrible catacombs he refers to as the 'Academy' has ever managed to escape. Eventually, the captive will leave, but only after they have been completely broken by Basilio, a process which can be frighteningly quick for even the most stubborn and strong-willed captives. Female prisoners, at least those Basilio intends to put to work in the Palace, are in more danger than male, as Basilio has been known to simply use love potions and enslavement spells to get the desired effect quickly.

As despicable and degenerate as Basilio is, the city is fortunate he has never learned any more sorcery than he found in that leather case years ago. He has the wealth and resources to find someone to teach him other secrets, but would never submit to a master's lessons. He has tried to find more written knowledge from which to learn on his own, but has failed.

HIGH CONSTABLE PATRIUS HANNOR

Male Argossean thief 2/soldier 9

Hit Dice: 2d8+8d10+30+3 (95 hp)

Initiative: +8 (+1 Dex, +7 Reflex save)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +6 (+1 Dex, +5 level)

Defence (Parry): +12 (+5 Str, +7 level)

Damage Reduction: 5 Armour

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +10/+15

Attack: Broadsword +16 melee

Full Attack: Broadsword +16/+11 melee

Damage: Broadsword 1d10+7

Special Attacks: Sneak Attack +1d6/+1d8, Sneak Attack Style (broadsword)

Special Qualities: Eyes of the Cat, Formation Combat (*heavy infantry*), Formation Combat (*skirmisher*), Trap Disarming

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +9, Ref +7, Will +5

Abilities: Str 20, Dex 12, Con 16, Int 13, Wis 14, Cha 16

Skills: Balance +3, Bluff +8, Gather Information +12, Intimidate +16, Knowledge (local) +14, Listen +7, Profession (sailor) +3, Search +16, Sense Motive +10, Spot +8, Use Rope +3

Feats: Combat Expertise, Improved Disarm, Improved Grapple, Improved Trip, Improved Unarmed Attack, Investigator, Leadership, Weapon Focus (broadsword), Weapon Specialisation (broadsword)

Code of Honour: Civilised

Possessions: Patrius is usually attired and equipped in the uniform of the Patrol, with one notable exception. Unless it is necessary, he wears no armour, as it rubs on his scars and causes him considerable pain.

A fifth-generation Patrolman, Patrius Hannor is the first of his clan to rise to the rank of High Constable. He accomplished this feat because, unlike his forebears, he is what he would call a realist. He understands the way political power influences the law in Messantia and has been eager to cultivate relationships with the city's wealthy citizens. As a junior officer of the Patrol, he would turn a blind eye to certain smuggling operations or direct his Patrolmen away from an area where he knew illegal business was to be conducted. From time to time, he even had his men guard a cache of smuggled goods for one of the Merchant Houses. In time, the Houses rewarded his discreet service with the post of High Constable.

Patrius is taller and stronger than most Argosseans; his family is originally from Zotoz and fled south to Messantia when they could no longer stand the yoke of Athos. He is in his middle 50s, his once-dark hair streaked with grey. What stands out most about him, however, are the scars. Not the scars of battle, though there are more than a few of those, but rather the terrible burn scars that mar his neck, shoulder, chest and left arm.

These scars also mark the fact that Patrius is more than a mere tool of the Merchant Houses and their surrogates, and though he may be willing to bend the law, he is at heart a moral man with a clear sense of right and wrong. He received

the horrible scars a decade ago when he plunged heedlessly into a blazing tenement fire, trying to rescue the people inside. A score of people owe him their lives for that act, including a five-year-old girl named Adriana, the only member of her family Patrius was able to save from the flames.

Patrius' wife Ibolya had died in childbirth nearly a year before the day of the fire, and the son she bore was too sickly to survive his first month. To fill the void their deaths left in his life, and to care for the newly-orphaned Adriana, Patrius adopted her. She has since grown to become a beautiful, bright, wilful young woman, who loves Patrius deeply despite the trouble she has given him the past ten years.

The Hannor family legacy of serving in the Patrol holds great meaning to Patrius, and he would like to see it continue. Though he has no son, he would like to see his adopted daughter follow in his footsteps. Adriana shares that wish; she has grown up around the Patrol, and knows not only its rules and regulations and Messantian law, but also knows how to fight as well as most men on the force. However, the fact that women are barred from service in the Patrol threatens to end the legacy of Hannor service with Patrius. He has begun calling on his acquaintances in an effort to repeal that rule that Adriana might serve, but his chances of changing something so ingrained in society are not good.

THERON SHAVAN (NICHOLO)

Medium male Vampire Ophirean scholar 15

Hit Dice: 10d12+20 (108 hp)

Initiative: +23 (+6 Dex, +13 Reflex save, +4 Improved Initiative)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +12 (+5 level, +6 Dex, +1 Dodge)

Defence (Parry): +12 (+5 level, +7 Str)

Damage Reduction: 6 (natural)

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +11/+18

Attack: Akbitanan broadsword +19 or Slam +18

Full Attack: Akbitanan broadsword +19/+14/+9 melee and slam +18 melee

Damage: Akbitanan broadsword 1d10+7 or slam 1d8+7

Special Attacks: Blood Drain, Spells

Special Qualities: Children of the Night, Dominate, Fast Healing 5, Immunity to Cold, Iron Will, Knowledge is Power

Base Power Points: 14 (base 10, +4 Level)

Maximum Power Points: 56

Magic Attack Bonus: +12 (+5 Cha, +7 Level)

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +5, Ref +13, Will +18

Abilities: Str 24, Dex 22, Con -, Int 20, Wis 22, Cha 20

Skills: Appraise +10, Bluff +23, Concentration +10, Craft (alchemy) +20, Craft (herbalism) +15, Craft (finesmith) +20,

Decipher Script +15, Diplomacy +15, Gather Information +20, Hide +15, Intimidate +15, Knowledge (arcana) +24, Knowledge (geography) +12, Knowledge (history) +20, Knowledge (local (Ophir)) +15, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +24, Knowledge (nobility) +16, Knowledge (religion) +24, Listen +15, Move Silently +14, Perform (painting) +15, Search +23, Sense Motive +28, Sleight of Hand +11, Spot +14

Feats: Adept (Counterspells), Alertness, Combat Reflexes, Craftsman*, Craft Magic Item*, Dodge, Improved Initiative, Leadership, Lightning Reflexes, Martial Weapon Proficiency (broadsword), Permanent Sorcery*, Power Attack, Ritual Sacrifice, Two-Weapon Combat * These feats are detailed in *Conan: The Scrolls of Skelos*

Code of Honour: None

Sorcery Styles: Counterspells, Divination, Necromancy, Prestidigitation, Summoning

Spells: *Astrological prediction, burst barrier, conjuring, death touch, dream of wisdom, greater warding, warding, master warding, master words and signs, mind-reading, psychometry, raise corpse, summon demon, telekinesis, visions*

Possessions: Theron almost always has his broadsword with him, but the remainder of his equipment may vary wildly. He has access to a wide range of different equipment.

Theron Shavan would be a tragic figure, were he not so despicable now. He was the only son of a wealthy Ophirean family in the capital city of Ianthe. His parents, worshippers of Ishtar, tried for years to conceive an heir, but were unsuccessful, finally turning to the fertility rites of the priests of Ishtar for help. After the second ritual, Theron's mother was impregnated, and Rutino and Pagana Shavan rejoiced at the birth of their divinely-conceived child.

Theron was a passionate worshipper of Ishtar as a child, a devotion which only grew with the onset of manhood. He studied extensively with the priests, and was a quick study in sorcery, concentrating his knowledge in counterspells and divination. His belief in his divinely-blessed birth convinced him he had great responsibilities and obligations in his future. He refused to take on his father's business as a gold merchant, depriving his father of the heir Rutino wanted so badly. The cult of Ishtar hoped he would become a priest, but that too he refused. After a dream Theron thought was prophetic, he realised his true calling was to do Ishtar's work, not as a priest, but as an agent to root out and destroy the antithesis of fertility – the necromancers and undead.

It was a lofty goal, but he did it well. Accompanied by a group of loyal warriors, Theron roamed the lands of Ophir, Aquilonia, Nemedra, Corinthia and Koth tracking and slaying those who practised the blackest of arts. He thought his crusade was divinely blessed, he thought he was invincible. Until he met Nofritari, a

Stygian vampire who was travelling far from her homeland when she heard the tales of Theron and his men, and her cruel, degenerate curiosity was piqued. She slew Theron's men with ease and took him captive. How long she held him, a dominated and tortured prisoner, even he does not know. Nor does he remember how he was transformed, whether it was Nofritari's doing or his own, though he certainly has no recollection of ever casting the required spells. However it happened, the result is the same. Theron Shavan awoke one day as a vampire.

For decades, Nofritari kept him with her like a neglected pet in her travels, tortured, half-starved and unable to die. She never spoke to him except to taunt and torment him, and Theron became like a caged, ravenous beast. Then, one evening, he woke up and she was gone.

Theron spent an uncounted number of years wandering after that, slaking at last the unnatural thirst his new form had given him, burning the last of the humanity from his withered soul. Eventually, civilisation began to return to his bestial mind, prompting him to resume his sorcerous studies, though now he eagerly sought out the knowledge that as a man he had tried to destroy.

The long years passed, and Theron grew tired of wandering. Some last shred of guilt or conscience in his corrupted mind made the idea of returning to Ophir distasteful, and he at last found himself in Messantia. The bustle and vitality of the city reminded him of the life he had lost, and he decided to stay. For many years, he kept to himself, watching from the shadows and dining on the unfortunate.

He found himself missing the trappings of wealth he had been accustomed to in his youth, but had no way to acquire them other than to take what he could from his victims. As the plodding boredom of

immortality gnawed at his keen intellect, he at last decided to become involved once again with the living. His time living on the fringes of Messantia had taught him the value of information in the Golden City, something he could easily acquire with his divinatory abilities and vampiric powers. He created the persona of Nicholo, recruited a handful of servants and began practising his new profession.

Theron cares nothing for the people of Messantia. They are cattle to him, inconsequential and necessary only to provide him with those things he desires. He does what he does to alleviate his boredom, and to watch the mortals dance to whatever tune he calls. Nicholo is considered one of the two great information brokers in Messantia and generates enough wealth for Theron to live in luxury in Arena Prefect. His servants are paid, not dominated, and have no knowledge of his true nature. He prefers to dine on itinerant traders and workers, as he has no wish to alert the people of the city that a vampire is in their midst.

Theron is tall and slender, with deep eyes and dark hair shot through with a streak of silver. He is very attractive, but someone watching him will quickly perceive that something about him is not quite right. He enjoys painting, and some of his works, under various pseudonyms, hang in Ristoro's Gallery in Bazaar Prefect, as well as a number of Merchant House villas. Despite his vast knowledge, the one thing he would most like to know has eluded him. He wishes to know the location of Nofritari, so that he might visit upon her tortures that would dwarf those he endured while in her care.

MULCIBER MAKSYM

Male Argossean thief 7/pirate 5

Hit Dice: 10d8+4+20 (72 hp)

Initiative: +15 (+2 Dex, +13 Reflex save)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +8 (+2 Dex, +6 level)

Defence (Parry): +9 (+4 Str, +5 level)

Damage Reduction: –

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +8/+12

Attack: Broadsword +12 melee or unarmed strike +12 melee

Full Attack: Broadsword +12/+7 melee or unarmed strike +12/+7 melee

Damage: Broadsword 1d10+4 or unarmed strike 1d6+4

Special Attacks: Sneak Attack +4d6+1d6/4d8+1d6, Sneak Attack Style (broadsword), Sneak Attack Style (unarmed strike), To Sail a Road of Blood and Slaughter



Special Qualities: Eyes of the Cat, Ferocious Attack, Light-Footed, Mobility, Opportunist, Pirate Code (*Barachan smoke and rockets*), Seamanship +1, Trap Disarming, Trap Sense +2, Uncanny Dodge

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +8, Ref +13, Will +5

Abilities: Str 18, Dex 15, Con 15, Int 16, Wis 14, Cha 17

Skills: Appraise +10, Balance +9, Bluff +15, Escape Artist +12, Forgery +13, Gather Information +20, Hide +15, Intimidate +18, Jump +15, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +13, Listen +10, Move Silently +15, Open Lock +10, Profession (sailor) +4, Search +18, Sense Motive +12, Use Rope +4

Feats: Brawl, Combat Expertise, Improved Feint, Improved Unarmed Strike, Leadership, Steely Gaze

Code of Honour: Civilised

Possessions: Mulciber is usually dressed in fine clothing besmirched with a collection of stains. He keeps his broadsword with him at all times, but is nearly as dangerous unarmed.

Mulciber Maksym is quite possibly the most dangerous man in Messantia. He is the absolute ruler of his own little empire of crime, and while his power is nothing like that of the Merchant Houses, neither does he concern himself with the Messantian beliefs in the appearance of propriety.

Mulciber grew up in Messantia's underworld as a child in Dockside, picking pockets and running errands for his elders by the age of five. As he grew older, he took to robbery, burglary and simple thuggery, and by the time he was 17 had killed a score of men for money. He narrowly avoided death at the hands of another gang of criminals by joining up with a crew of Barachan Pirates who had docked in Messantia's harbour, and served with them for about five years. He returned to Messantia an even more dangerous man than when he left.

Blessed with gifts for planning and strategy, and combined with a large measure of luck and audacity, Mulciber began carving out the beginnings of his criminal holdings within days of his return to the city. Today, he is master of a criminal organisation with activities ranging from protection rackets to assassination. Though there are nearly a score of other men and women in Messantia who consider themselves crime bosses, Mulciber easily eclipses them all. He is currently in the process of bringing these other criminal organisations into his own, a slow and perilous task made all the more perilous by his attempts to conceal his machinations from the Merchant Houses.

Mulciber is far more intelligent than he looks, and he is fully aware of the power the Merchant Houses wield in the city and how greatly it overshadows his own. Unlike many of his less fortunate predecessors, he has willingly, even eagerly worked with the Houses when his services were required.

Secure in the knowledge of their own strength, and lulled somewhat by his co-operation, the Houses have not paid as much attention to Mulciber as they should, and his power has grown. The perceived strength of Mulciber's organisation places him in a rare position; he is at once not strong enough to be a real threat to the power of any single House, yet strong enough that moving against him would require a significant expenditure of resources from the Houses. In fact, Mulciber is stronger than the Houses realise, though he is still not a threat.

Recently, Mulciber has begun walking an even more dangerous road, but one which is extremely profitable. He was contacted two years ago by men of the Black Corsairs, and has started dealing with them, fencing their stolen loot and providing them with what goods they require. The Merchant Houses know nothing of this, and if the secret came out, Mulciber's life would surely be forfeit.

A man in his middle years, thickly and powerfully built and boasting an enormous pair of eyebrows, Mulciber can almost always be found in the cellars beneath Ilian's Lost Treasures, a second-hand shop in Dockside. From this guarded fastness, he directs his empire of pickpockets, protection rackets, smugglers, con men and assassins. Mulciber has free access to the sewers and pays the Sewer Workers Guild a hefty annual stipend for the privilege.

DANYELLA ACCERTIUS

Female Argossean thief 9

Hit Dice: 9d8+27 (79 hp)

Initiative: +16 (+4 Dex, +12 Reflex save)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +9 (+4 Dex, +4 level, +1 Dodge)

Defence (Parry): +4 (+4 level)

Damage Reduction: –

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +6/+6

Attack: Short sword +10 finesse melee or stiletto +10 finesse melee or hunting bow +10 ranged

Full Attack: Short sword +10 finesse melee or stiletto +10/+5 finesse melee or hunting bow +10/+5 ranged

Damage: Short sword 1d8, stiletto 1d4, hunting bow 1d8

Special Attacks: Sneak Attack +5d6/+5d8, Sneak Attack Style (stiletto), Sneak Attack Style (short sword), Sneak Attack Style (hunting bow)

Special Qualities: Evasion, Eyes of the Cat, Light-Footed, Poison Use, Trap Disarming, Trap Sense +2

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +6, Ref +12, Will +3

Abilities: Str 10, Dex 18, Con 16, Int 14, Wis 10, Cha 19

Skills: Appraise +5, Balance +6, Bluff +10, Climb +5, Disable Device

+10, Disguise +10, Escape Artist +10, Forgery +5, Gather Information +14, Hide +10, Jump +5, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +10, Listen +5, Move Silently +10, Open Lock +10, Perform +8, Profession (sailor) +2, Search +10, Sense Motive +6, Sleight of Hand +8, Spot +5, Swim +5, Tumble +11, Use Rope +6

Feats: Dodge, Combat Expertise, Improved Feint, Lightning Reflexes, Quick Draw, Striking Cobra

Code of Honour: Civilised

Possessions: Danyella travels light. Her possessions include a short sword, hunting bow, three concealed stilettos and a few varied sets of simple clothing. She also carries a set of lockpicks and a few coins, in addition to the treasured map.

Beautiful, lithe and generously endowed, Danyella Accertius is a woman who has just entered her 20s. Her fine features, reddish-brown hair and deep blue eyes mark her as a Hyborian of mixed blood. She speaks with a strange accent containing flavours of Argossean, Aquilonian, Shemite and Nemedian.

Danyella is the last heir of the House Accertius, once among the most powerful of the Messantian Houses. In the days before the Blackblood Plague, the Stygian sorcerer Amenkuhn murdered Karnes Accertius, the leader of the House, and stole his form. Under Amenkuhn's rule, the House grew quickly in power and influence, but at the cost of incurring the enmity of the other Houses. When Amenkuhn was unmasked and the plague began, the other Houses fell upon House Accertius with all the strength they could muster. This historic occasion marked the first and only time all the Houses worked together as one. House Accertius was quickly crushed under this

onslaught, and most of its members were killed, though some few managed to escape and flee north into other nations.

The remnants of the House eked out a living as best they could, ever fearful of staying in one place too long, lest the other Houses find them and finish what they had begun. For generations, they moved about among the various Hyborian nations. This nomadic custom continued even after the descendants of the House knew the remaining Houses had lost all interest in their fate, wandering from place to place, living mostly by thievery, had simply become part of who they were. Other wanderers and itinerants joined them and split off again as the years went by and the name Accertius was all but forgotten.

Now, the only heir of the once-great House Accertius is Danyella, or so she seems to believe. It is entirely possible she is related to that House, just as it is possible she merely believes she is. Either way, her claim cannot be proven or disproven. Danyella, like all the people in her wandering tribe, has always supported herself with thievery, a profession at which she is quite skilled. She is a consummate opportunist, with an uncanny ability to find and exploit an advantage in any situation. She is widely-travelled and worldly, and confident with good reason in her ability to manipulate men.

Danyella has recently arrived in Messantia, bearing a map and a mission. She has kept her identity a secret out of fear of the Merchant Houses, a phobia ingrained in her since childhood. Though the Houses would likely not care about some lone girl wandering through Messantia calling herself the last heir of House Accertius, they would care greatly about her map and mission. The map is of the interior of the old Accertius mausoleum in the Messantian cemetery, abandoned since the plague. A legend in the city which has never died out tells that the last members of House Accertius hid all the gold they could not carry in the old crypt when they fled the city. Numerous thieves have tried to recover it, but none that have entered the mausoleum have ever returned. Danyella's map shows the way through the tombs, through the traps and secret passages to the cache of treasure. If the Merchant Houses knew of that, of an heir to House Accertius who might simultaneously prove her heritage with the map and recover enough wealth to proclaim House Accertius was again a concern, they would care deeply. Should they learn of it, Danyella would almost certainly not survive another day.

Note: Although listed as an Argossean, Danyella was raised in a nomadic environment which took her to several Hyborian nations. Therefore, she receives the Argossean bonuses to skills, but is entitled to a standard Hyborian feat progression.

CAPTAIN MEUS FENTHENES

Male Argossean pirate 5/soldier 8

Hit Dice: 5d8+5d10+9+30 (93 hp)

Initiative: +14 (+4 Dex, +10 Reflex save)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +11 (+4 Dex, +7 level)

Defence (Parry): +12 (+4 Str, +8 level)

Damage Reduction: –

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +11/+15

Attack: War sword +16 melee or Bossonian longbow +15 ranged

Full Attack: War sword +16/+11/+6 melee or Bossonian longbow +15/+10/+5 ranged

Damage: War sword 1d12+6 or Bossonian longbow 1d12+4

Special Attacks: Sneak Attack +1d6, To Sail a Road of Blood and Slaughter,

Special Qualities: Ferocious Attack, Formation Combat (*skirmisher*), Mobility, Pirate Code (*Barachan smoke and rockets*), Seamanship +1, Uncanny Dodge

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +13, Ref +10, Will +5

Abilities: Str 18, Dex 18, Con 16, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 16

Skills: Balance +6, Bluff +8, Climb +8, Diplomacy +10, Gather Information +12, Intimidate +15, Knowledge (geography) +10, Profession (sailor) +20, Sense Motive +8, Use Rope +6

Feats: Cleave, Combat Expertise, Combat Reflexes, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Bossonian longbow), Improved Critical (war sword), Leadership, Navigation, Point Blank Shot, Power Attack, Rapid Shot, Weapon Focus (war sword), Weapon Specialisation (war sword)

Code of Honour: None

Possessions: While out and about in Trabatis, Meus is unarmoured, but does have his war sword at his side at all times.

Captain Meus Fenthenes, King Milo's appointed governor of Trabatis, has given his life to the crown and the Argossean navy. He has never married, and has no family.

Originally of Venzia, Meus began his career at sea at the age of 10, as an officer's footman aboard the Danaus. In the 30 years that followed, he served on a dozen ships and fought in scores of battles against Black Corsairs, Zingaran buccaneers and Stygian warships, in the long and quiet cold war waged between Stygia and Argos for control of the seas. At the young age of 27, he became captain of the Uiseann, an Argossean man-of-war.

Much of Meus' rapid rise was due to his skill and courage, but much was due also to his ability to cultivate the right friends. His family in Venzia, while not of noble blood, was wealthy, and provided Meus with a plethora of connections among the captains and admirals of the Argossean navy when he was still a boy. He has maintained and expanded on those connections throughout his career.

The one group among which Meus has no connections is the Merchant Houses of Messantia. He recognises the power they hold in the kingdom, but he loathes them, feeling that their influence weakens the king, and by extension, the kingdom and her navy. Being aware of the Houses' power, however, he has been too wise to make his feelings for them known, but his loyalty is to Argos and King Milo alone.

When King Milo made the decision to found Trabatis some 20 years ago, he knew he would need a military governor to oversee the settlement he had in mind. He discarded outright all those put forward by the Merchant Houses, turning to the much shorter list of candidates submitted by his admirals. He spoke at length with each, and when subtle questioning finally revealed Meus' distaste for the Merchant Houses, King Milo's decision was made.

Meus was not enthused about his assignment as governor of the fledgling settlement of Trabatis, he loved the roll of the naked deck beneath his feet and the taste of salt in the air, and had thought to spend the rest of his career commanding the mighty warships of Argos. He believes loyalty to the king is his first duty, however, and has carried out this assignment to the best of his ability for the last 20 years.

Meus is a nearly humourless man, especially in regards to discipline and order. He would prefer Trabatis be merely a naval base, without the chaos and unpredictability of its civilian population. Even more, he would prefer to be without the presence of the Merchant Houses, whose members take up residence in the Crag when they visit Orabono, and certainly without the presence of the Barachan Pirates, whom he deeply despises.

At 60 years of age, Meus knows he will soon have to step down from governorship of Trabatis into retirement. What he will do then he has no idea, as military service is all he has ever known. All he can do is continue to carry out his duties, and leave Trabatis in the best condition possible for his eventual replacement.

CANAFFO VERDELAN

Male Corinthian soldier 10

Hit Dice: 10d10+10 (81 hp)

Initiative: +7 (+2 Dex, +5 Reflex save)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +7 (+2 Dex, +5 level)

Defence (Parry): +12 (+5 Str, +7 level)

Damage Reduction: –

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +10/+15

Attack: Greatsword +16 melee or Shemite bow +12 ranged

Full Attack: Greatsword +16/+11 melee or Shemite bow +12/+7 ranged

Damage: Greatsword 2d10+7 or Shemite bow 1d10+5

Special Attacks: –

Special Qualities: Formation Combat (*heavy cavalry*), Formation Combat (*heavy infantry*)

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +8, Ref +5, Will +6

Abilities: Str 20, Dex 14, Con 12, Int 12, Wis 12, Cha 14

Skills: Bluff +5, Climb +10, Heal +6, Intimidate +8, Knowledge (geography) +5, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +5, Profession (sailor) +2, Ride +6, Sense Motive +5, Swim +7

Feats: Cleave, Combat Reflexes, Diehard, Endurance, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Shemite bow), Great Cleave, Improved Critical (greatsword), Iron Will, Mounted Archery, Mounted Combat, Power Attack, Ride-by Attack, Weapon Focus (greatsword), Weapon Specialisation (greatsword)

Code of Honour: None

Possessions: Canaffo is usually found at Seven Sails and Eight Banners, where he is unarmed but keeps several weapons handy behind the bar. If he is prepared for a fight, he will have his greatsword and bow, as well as any one of a dozen suits of armour he feels is most appropriate.

The bastard son of a minor Corinthian knight, Canaffo Verdelan gained nothing from his father, not even his name. The name 'Verdelan' is actually the name of Canaffo's mother, a tavern wench who caught his father's eye.

Canaffo spent the early years of his life living with his mother behind the tavern where she worked, before she died of a fever when he was still a boy. His childhood had taught him that nothing would ever be given to him, and he has spent the majority of his 34 years carving his way through life with a sword.

Canaffo has had a passion for the open ocean since he was a boy listening to tales spun by minstrels at the tavern. He taught himself to read simply so he could

experience more stories of the sea, and even as a child, made up his mind he would one day captain his own ship.

Living in landlocked Corinthia made that a distant dream, however, a dream that would require a hefty sum of gold to achieve. Taking up the sword as a mercenary, Canaffo spent years in bloody adventure throughout Corinthia and its neighbouring lands, ever with an eye toward his eventual move to Argos and life at sea. After 14 years of fighting, drinking, wenching and spending more than he should, he amassed enough gold to make his dream of the sea a reality, and emigrated to Messantia.

He bought a ship, outfitted and crewed her, paid for his shipmaster's license and guild membership, took on cargo and planned a short voyage to Napolitos. He was barely out of Messantia's harbour when the first pangs of seasickness struck, and he spent the entirety of the voyage huddled below decks in wretched misery. Upon his return to Messantia, he sought out cures from every herbalist in the city and advice from every sailor he could find, but nothing helped. No matter what he tried, the moment his ship reached the swells of the open ocean, the sickness set in. After two years of misery, Canaffo, for the first time in his life, surrendered. He sold his ship.

Despite the sickness, he still loves the sea. He loves the smell of it, the sound of it, the tales of it. He considered returning to his native Corinthia, but decided at last to stay in Messantia. His remaining wealth bought an old tavern in Dockside, which he renovated and enlarged to serve as a brothel, dance hall and tavern, and renamed the place Seven Sails and Eight Banners. The odd name is taken from the sails of Canaffo's ship, which now hang about the roof of the main room, and the eight banners under which he served as a mercenary, which now decorate the walls.

Canaffo's past as a mercenary is well-known, and Seven Sails and Eight Banners is a popular spot for mercenaries coming through Messantia, many of whom know him as 'Salty', the affectionate name given him by his fellow warriors for his love of the sea he had never seen. His business is feeling some of the impact of The Dove which has Bernabo Sibilius, the owner of a nearby brothel called Shoreline, so upset; he too has lost some of the women from his brothel, though his dancers have remained loyal. He has not yet agreed to any of Bernabo's hinted plans at removing The Dove and Elena Yardotos, but he has considered it.

SERGIO KOSTOKOS

Male Argossean scholar 8/soldier 2/thief 5

Hit Dice: 2d10+5d8+3d6+5+30 (80 hp)

Initiative: +12 (+3 Dex, +9 Reflex save)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +9 (+3 Dex, +6 level)

Defence (Parry): +7 (+1 Str, +6 level)

Damage Reduction: –

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +11/+12

Attack: Akbitanan poniard +17 finesse melee or Akbitanan short sword +17 finesse melee

Full Attack: Akbitanan poniard +17/+12/+7 finesse melee or Akbitanan short sword +17/+12/+7 finesse melee

Damage: Akbitanan poniard 1d6+1 or Akbitanan short sword 1d8+1

Special Attacks: Sneak Attack +3d6/+3d8, Sneak Attack Style (poniard), Sneak Attack Style (short sword), Spells

Special Qualities: Eyes of the Cat, Iron Will, Knowledge is Power, Light-Footed, Trap Disarming, Trap Sense +1

Base Power Points: 10 (+8 base, +2 level)

Maximum Power Points: 30

Magic Attack Bonus: +7 (+3 Cha, +4 level)

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +8, Ref +9, Will +11



Abilities: Str 12, Dex 16, Con 16, Int 18, Wis 18, Cha 16

Skills: Appraise +10, Balance +4, Bluff +10, Concentration +8, Craft (alchemy) +10, Craft (herbalism) +10, Craft (sculpture) +5, Decipher Script +15, Disguise +6, Forgery +10, Gather Information +22, Hide +10, Intimidate +15, Knowledge (arcana) +10, Knowledge (history) +10, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +15, Knowledge (nobility) +10, Knowledge (religion) +10, Listen +8, Move Silently +10, Open Lock +10, Profession (sailor) +6, Sense Motive +15, Sleight of Hand +5, Spot +7, Tumble +10, Use Rope +4

Feats: Combat Expertise, Focused Magical Link, Hexer, Improved Feint, Leadership, Ritual Sacrifice, Sorcerer's Boon, Steely Gaze

Sorcery Styles: Counterspells, Curses, Divination, Hypnotism

Spells: *Astrological prediction, doom of the doll, dream of wisdom, entrance, greater warding, hypnotic suggestion, lesser ill-fortune, mind-reading, psychometry, warding*

Code of Honour: None

Possessions: Labourers' clothing, poisoned Akbitanan poniard and short sword, Guildmaster's ring

The Guildmaster of the Sewer Workers Guild, Sergio Kostokos is among the most powerful men in the city of Messantia.

Sergio is the undisputed lord of the City Below. He, like all his predecessors, uses the ways of the sewers to learn Messantia's deepest secrets. It is this knowledge that keeps the guild independent.

Sergio has been a member of the guild all his life, as were his parents, grandparents and multiple generations before them. Admission to the guild as a member is exceedingly difficult to obtain and the highest posts in the guild are only open to those with a long family legacy of service. For Sergio, loyalty to the guild comes before all else, before family, before country, before king.

A short, thin, severe man with dark hair and eyes, Sergio commands the loyalty and admiration of the guildmen beneath him. He has spent all his life in the guild, and knows the sewers of Messantia better than any living man. He despises the Merchant Houses, but knows how much power they command and has no wish to move against them. As long as the independence of the guild is not endangered, he is inclined to let them do as they will, though he does maintain constant spying operations on them.

ROYAL GUARD

Male Argossean soldier 6

Hit Dice: 6d10+18 (61 hp)

Initiative: +6 (+2 Dex, +4 Reflex save)

Speed: 25 ft. (5 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +5 (+2 Dex, +3 level)

Defence (Parry): +11 (+3 Str, +4 level, +4 large shield)

Damage Reduction: 7

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +6/+9

Attack: War sword +10 melee or heavy lance +9 melee or Bossonian longbow +8 ranged

Full Attack: War sword +10/+5 melee or heavy lance +9/+4 melee or Bossonian longbow +8/+3 ranged

Damage: War sword 1d12+3 melee or heavy lance 1d10+3 melee or Bossonian longbow 1d12+3 ranged

Special Qualities: Formation Combat (*heavy cavalry*), Formation Combat (*heavy infantry*)

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +8, Ref +4, Will +4

Abilities: Str 16, Dex 14, Con 16, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 15

Skills: Balance +4, Gather Information +4, Intimidate +10, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +6, Knowledge (nobility) +6, Profession (sailor) +4, Ride +10, Search +6, Spot +10, Use Rope +4

Feats: Cleave, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Bossonian longbow), Mounted Combat, Spirited Charge, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (war sword)

Code of Honour: Civilised

Possessions: Mail hauberk, breastplate, steel cap, livery of the Royal Guard, war sword, large shield, Bossonian longbow, 20 arrows, aid whistle. During wartime this kit is also supplemented by a Hyborean warhorse and a heavy lance

These statistics represent an average Argossean Royal Guard. There are 75 such men, who keep the Dome of the Sea safe during times of peace and ride as the king's Honour Guard during times of war. They are fanatically loyal to the royal family of Argos.



PATROLMAN

Male Argossean soldier 2

Hit Dice: 2d10 (14 hp)

Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex, +0 Reflex save)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence (Dodge): +1 (+0 Dex, +1 Level)

Defence (Parry): +3 (+2 Str, +1 level)

Damage Reduction: 4

Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +4/+4

Attack: Broadsword +5 melee or poniard +4 melee

Full Attack: Broadsword +5 melee or poniard +4 melee

Damage: Broadsword 1d10+2, 19-20/x2 or poniard 1d6+2, 19-20/x2

Special Qualities: None

Space/Reach: 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square)

Saves: Fort +4, Ref +0, Will +0

Abilities: Str 14, Dex 10, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 9

Skills: Balance +2, Gather Information +1, Intimidate +2, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +3, Profession (sailor) +2, Use Rope +2

Feats: Cleave, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (broadsword)

Code of Honour: None

Possessions: Patrolman uniform, leather jerkin, leather cap, broadsword, poniard, manacles, aid whistle

These statistics represent an average Messantian Patrolman. A Patrol usually consists of between two to four Patrolmen.



Games Mastering

Bringing Messantia to Life

EFFECTIVELY AND CONVINCINGLY

presenting a city as large and complex as Messantia in a roleplaying game is one of the truest tests of a Games Master's abilities, but it is also one of the most rewarding, for both the players and the Games Master himself. Running a city poses a unique set of challenges, opportunities and possibilities for a roleplaying campaign, many of which are discussed below.

The amount of time the Player Characters spend in Messantia and what they do while in the city should, like all other things in a campaign, be based on the wishes and preferences of the roleplaying group.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

In a campaign that focuses almost entirely on wilderness adventuring and exploration, the Player Characters will be spending as little time as needed in Messantia. Their primary interests will be in establishments like taverns, outfitters, armourers and weaponsmiths, and are likely to actively avoid any entanglements with the complex flow of the city surging around them.

On the other end of the spectrum, these sourcebooks contains enough information about the city that a Games Master could easily run a campaign based entirely in Messantia, in which the Player Characters rarely, if ever, leave the city. In such a campaign, Player Characters have little choice but to become active participants in the ongoing struggles, intrigues and happenings of Messantia.

Most campaigns will fall somewhere in between these two extremes, allowing the Player Characters to become involved in some aspects of life in the city, but still providing for them to range far from the city to seek adventure in a steamy jungle or cloud-wrapped mountain range.

CONSISTENCY AND CONTINUITY

Two of the hallmarks of a successful and well-run roleplaying campaign are consistency and continuity. Players need to feel their characters are part of a larger, ongoing world. They need to see the consequences of their characters' actions on that world and feel they are in control over which path the characters are following.

It is easy for a Games Master to become excited about the latest adventure he has designed for the Player Characters, and there is always a temptation to hurry them toward it. There is nothing wrong with that, until the players begin to feel they are losing control over the fate of their characters. One of the greatest aspects of a roleplaying game is the wide set of choices and options available to the players. In a city like Messantia, those options become nearly limitless.

A campaign set in a city, or which includes frequent return trips to the same city, enjoys a distinct advantage over other campaigns in consistency and continuity. As the Player Characters become more and more involved in the city and the lives of its people, they will be able to see directly what effects their actions have on the world around them. Further, in a city with the size and diversity of Messantia, there are always dozens of things happening which present an opportunity for danger and adventure to Player Characters. Sometimes these happenings will find them, but sometimes the characters can choose factions, alliances and work as they wish, charting their own course through the campaign world and providing the Players and Games Master with a more satisfying experience.

Related to, but distinct from the ability to see the impact the actions of the Player Characters have on others is the Players' feeling that their characters are part of a larger world. Nothing in a roleplaying campaign can convey this impression to the Players as well as frequent interactions with a complex city. A well-run city will quickly dispel the 'adventuring

in a vacuum' syndrome that can infect a wilderness-based campaign, when the Players feel as if the whole world is waiting, frozen, for the arrival of the Player Characters before anything can happen.

Here are two examples of easy ways to make the Players feel their characters are moving through a living, breathing world:

❖ For the past year, the Player Characters have been loyal customers of Tradewinds, and have become well known among the rest of the clientele. One day, freshly returned to the city, they drop by the tavern only to find it in an uproar. Manfredi, the youngest son of Calviano Loritus, the owner of Tradewinds, has just returned from his two years of duty in the military with a bride on his arm. Calviano, normally reserved when not telling tales of his one victory in Seabreaker, is wide-eyed and laughing with surprise, while his wife Oradina cannot stop talking to her stunned daughter-in-law Consolella. Calviano won't hear of his friends the Player Characters leaving during this celebration, and serves drinks for free until dawn.

❖ Papero Soperclus, owner of Pointed Words in River Prefect, has always offered a warm smile and a good deal to the Player Characters whenever they enter his shop. Retirement has been on his mind the last few years, as age is beginning to take its toll on his body. His son Romigi is an officer in the Argossean navy, with no interest in the land-bound life of a shopkeeper, so Papero has decided he must sell his treasured business. House Tarchon would be interested, but Papero has no desire to see them in control of the business he laboured at for so long. If the Games Master desires, the Player Characters might become involved in finding a buyer for the shop other than House Tarchon, perhaps even buying it themselves. Otherwise, they return to the city to find Papero has sold Pointed Words, and has moved out of Messantia to the small town of Riccuomo's Bluff some 30 miles away. Should the Player Characters ever pass that way, Papero will be overjoyed to see them, and will offer them free room and board while in town.

FRIENDS, ALLIES, RIVALS AND ENEMIES

Obviously, a group of Player Characters who spend a great deal of time in a city will have many more opportunities to interact with Non-Player Characters than will a group who spend most of their time in the wilderness. For most characters, this is a double-edged sword, though it may lean a little more toward being an advantage. Adventurers have a way of picking up enemies, even if they never enter a city, but they usually have to work to acquire friends and allies.

Friends and allies within a city can be useful to the Player Characters in far too many ways to list here. A friendly shopkeeper might give the Player Characters a discount on items in his store, or might even offer a payment plan to a character that he deems trustworthy. A fence the Player Characters know well will offer a better price for goods, and may be willing to try to fulfil any special requests. A friendly Patrol officer might look the other way if he finds the Player Characters have committed a crime and a close relationship with a Merchant House lord might even let them get away with murder (until they became an embarrassment, of course).

Conversely, Player Characters with strongly antagonistic relationships toward any of these people are likely to be grossly overcharged by a shopkeeper, underpaid by a fence, arrested by a Patrol officer and conceivably murdered by a Merchant House lord.

While there are many more potential friends and allies in a city than out in the wild, there are also many more potential enemies and rivals. But the nature of these alliances and enmities is likely to be much different within the boundaries of a city than without. Messantia is full of different factions and Player Characters who align themselves with one Merchant House, for example will find that the allies and enemies of that faction treat them accordingly. Allies and rivals in a city will have more complex reasons for their feelings toward the Player Characters than they would in a wilderness treasure hunt, and have a wider range of actions they can take, directly and indirectly, to aid or impede the Player Characters.

YOU CAN'T DO THAT HERE

Adventuring in a city can be a rude awakening for a Player who is used to a wilderness setting. Adventuring in the wilderness, or in a long-abandoned ruin, is a straightforward affair, allowing the Player Characters to take whatever action they wish. On the other hand, a city by its very nature will have laws, rules and codes of conduct and will not take kindly to a motley group of ragtag adventurers flouting them.

In an ancient ruin, a thief might be able to spend an hour picking a complex lock. However, a thief attempting the same thing on the door to a Messantian shop is likely to hear a somewhat bemused, expectant throat-clearing behind him, as a group of four Patrolmen prepare to arrest him. The same would certainly hold true for a group of Player Characters who prefer to deal with locked doors by hacking their hinges off.

Likewise, if the Player Characters happen upon some longstanding enemy in the wilderness, they can draw steel and have it out right then and there. In the city, it is not so simple. It certainly could be, as in parts of the city like Docksider and Dustbiter life can be cheap. On the other hand, if the Player Characters have made an enemy among the city's wealthy, slaying him on the streets of Messantia could have them all dangling from a noose by sundown.

The way the Player Characters are equipped will also have some impact on their reception in Messantia. While there are no laws against going about one's business armed, or even armoured, a man walking down the street clad in scale mail, limbering a shield and toting a greatsword will be seen by the Patrol as a man looking for a fight. Inevitably such actions will be met with a suspicious eye and may result in the Patrol keeping a closer eye on such a character while in Messantia.

REPUTATION

It is in a city-based setting that a character's Reputation truly comes into its own. The Reputation rating of the Player Characters will colour almost every aspect of their dealings within a city. If the Player Characters are unknowns, they will receive no special treatment, one way or the other, from the people of the city. The powerful citizens of Messantia, both inside and outside the law, will not give them the time of day, shopkeepers whom they do not personally know will be purely businesslike and the Patrol will take no special interest in them.

As the Player Characters' Reputation scores grow, things will change. Exactly how things change depends on how the Player Characters have gained their Reputation. There might be a sudden hush when the Player Characters walk into a Messantian tavern, but whether that hush is of awe, fear or loathing mean very different things for the Player Characters' life in the city. If they have developed a reputation for piracy and mercenary work, they will find their reception warming among the underworld figures of the city and chilling with the more law-abiding. Likewise, if the Player Characters' reputation stems from questing through the nation righting wrongs, bringing criminals to justice and so on, they will find the Patrol becoming much friendlier, while the criminal elements of the Messantia will have little to do with them. Of course, if their reputation is compiled from acts of horror, murder and sorcery, they may not even be allowed to remain in the city.

POLITICS AND INTRIGUE

One plotline that is all but unique to a city campaign is the political or intrigue based adventure. As many conflicts in Messantia are begun and ended with a well-placed word or a sudden betrayal, as with the drawing of steel. The Merchant Houses, with their never-ending game of The Thousand Faces, are the quintessential realisation of this fact.

Games Masters may think the plotting and manoeuvring of politics and intrigue in a city-based setting are a poor fit to the rushing, frantic pace of a *Conan* campaign, but this is untrue. While many grudges and old scores may simmer for years, just as many are resolved within hours. A desperate, cut-and-thrust of favours and bribes and duels exists here, which can have the Player Characters dashing through the city, simply trying to keep up with the action.

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MESSANTIA
CITY OF RICHES



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BOOK II:
SECRETS OF THE
STREETS

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MESSANTIA - CITY OF RICHES

BOOK II: SECRETS OF THE STREETS

Credits

AUTHOR

Nick Berquist

ADDITIONAL TEXT

J. C. Alvarez

EDITOR AND LINE DEVELOPER

Richard Neale

COVER ART

Scott Clark Vitor Ishimura & Celso Mathias

INTERIOR ARTISTS

Anthea Dilly, Sergio Villa Isaza, Vitor Ishimura, Celso Mathias, Chad Sergesketter, Ronald Smith & Alejandro Villen

STUDIO MANAGER

Ian Barstow

PRODUCTION DIRECTOR

Alexander Fennell

PROOFREADING

Ron Bedison

SPECIAL THANKS

Theodore Bergquist & Fredrik Malmberg at Conan Properties.

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Peoples & Heroes

Prestige Classes in Messantia

WITHIN ARGOS AND Messantia are several fairly unique positions, which are best reflected by specialised prestige classes. Prestige classes offer a new form of multiclassing. Unlike the basic classes, characters must meet Requirements before they can take their first level of a prestige class. The rules for level advancement apply to this system, meaning the first step of advancement is always choosing a class. If a character does not meet the Requirements for a prestige class before that first step, that character cannot take the first level of that prestige class.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Here are definitions of some terms used in this section.

Character Level: The total level of the character, which is the sum of all class levels held by that character.

Class Level: The level of a character in a particular class. For a character with levels in only one class, class level and character level are the same.

MERCHANT PRINCE

Messantia is a culture of clashing nobility. The king and his many subjects throughout Argos rule the kingdom and its many baronies, serving as stewards to the kingdom and its people. In and around Messantia, a different class of nobility has evolved; the Merchant Houses. As powerful as the barons, counts and marshals of the land, the Merchant Houses also hold noble titles and are dominated by lengthy hereditary lines. Among the 21 major Merchant Houses, almost all have a level of wealth and influence equal to that of any barony, sometimes a great deal more. The merchant princes hold property, slaves, servants and most importantly, wealth and resources. Outward co-operation and the resolution of conflict through subterfuge and deception dominate the needs of a merchant prince, for traditional warfare as might be fought between two disagreeable barons cannot be resolved so easily in the densely populated streets of Messantia. Rival houses might hold property adjacent to one another, or even share competing interests. Life among the merchant houses is no simple matter.

Characteristics: A merchant prince begins his life as a member of the nobility, and struggling to achieve recognition and greatness, both within his family, and throughout the city. While there are many who would claim the title, true merchant princes are a rare sort. The world of the merchant prince is one of acquisition, commerce and intrigue, where battles are fought not by sword and bow, but with wit and intrigue. Nonetheless, a competent merchant prince can gain much by seeking fame and fortune through means both social and physical and it is this focus on building his empire of commerce that separates the merchant prince from other nobles. A merchant prince defines himself by his wealth and his connections in trade and commerce. He might not own a single scrap of land, but instead have many contacts, alliances, debtors and favours, which he will be readily cash in to further his own ends.

Religion: The merchant prince would be remiss if he did not provide both worship and a family shrine in honour of Messantia's patron deity, Mitra. While some merchant princes might privately worship other gods, such as Bel of Shem, Derketa or even Set, the public acknowledgement of Mitra is extremely important, even if only for the sake of keeping up appearances.

Background: Player Characters that wish to pursue the path of the merchant prince should place an emphasis on the acquisition of both fame and wealth. The reputation and status of the merchant prince are key to attaining recognition in his position. Likewise, a civilised code of honour is extremely important. Most importantly, an aspiring merchant prince should either be a native to Messantia and Argos or an immigrant who has married into or been sponsored by an existing house. While a native born son of Messantia can conceivably carve his own niche in the city and fight his way through the opposition to become a recognised merchant prince, foreigners can never do so without some sort of indigenous sponsorship.

Abilities: While some merchant princes like to flaunt their physical aptitude, the truth is that no true merchant

prince can succeed without a bounty of Charisma, Intelligence and Wisdom.

Hit Die: d8

REQUIREMENTS

To qualify to become a merchant prince, a character must fulfil all the following criteria.

Race: A character must either be a native-born son of Argos, or he must seek out the sponsorship of a native Merchant House, which will allow him entry. A character may also marry in to one of the Merchant Houses.

Class Ability: Title, Social Ability

Reputation: 20+

Skills: Diplomacy 6 ranks, Knowledge (local) 6 ranks

Special: No merchant of any status may practice their trade legally in Messantia without belonging to one or more guilds. See *Book 1: Games Master's Guide* for more on the guilds a character may join.

CLASS SKILLS

The merchant prince's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Appraise (Int), Bluff (Cha), Craft (any), Diplomacy (Cha), Gather Information (Cha), Handle Animal (Cha), Intimidate (Cha), Knowledge (local) (Int), Knowledge (nobility) (Int), Listen (Wis), Perform (Cha), Profession (any) (Wis), Ride (Dex), Sense Motive (Wis) and Spot (Wis).

Skill Points per level: 4 + Intelligence modifier

CLASS FEATURES

Contact: Beginning at 1st level and continuing every other level thereafter (3rd, 5th, 7th and 9th) the merchant prince may choose a contact from among the following

options. A contact is a group, individual with whom the merchant prince has established a working relationship and which may be called upon for information, aid or resources. The nature of the contact dictates the type and form of this information, aid or resources, and most importantly, access to the Assistance class feature. The possible contacts for a merchant prince should be chosen from the following list:

Barony: The merchant prince has gained the trust and alliance of one of the barons of Argos. The baronies are numerous, spread throughout the countryside of Argos, and of varying strengths and interests. The baron will willingly provide safe passage through his barony, as well as shelter and refuge to the merchant prince. Any henchmen the baron provides will likely be 1st level commoners or soldiers.

Criminal: A powerful crimelord or underworld contact is allied to the merchant prince. The criminal contact will be based in Messantia, though may have contacts and influence throughout Hyboria. Henchmen provided by the criminal ally will likely be 1st level thieves.

Foreign: A foreign ally can be either a noble or fellow merchant with whom the merchant prince engages in business. The Games Master should determine the homeland and nature of the foreign ally. Typical allies could come from Zingara, Kush, Shem, Stygia or the Barachan Isles.

Guardians: The border wardens of Argos are strong independent companies of fiercely patriotic soldiers. A Guardian captain has a keep to maintain, access to a border entry point and a garrison of men at his disposal. A merchant prince who invests in overland caravan routes

Merchant Prince

Level	BAB	Base Dodge Bonus	Base Parry Bonus	Magic Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1 st	+0	+0	+0	+0	+0	+0	+2	Assistance I, Contact, Property
2 nd	+1	+0	+1	+0	+0	+0	+3	Bonus Social Feat, Hard Bargain +1
3 rd	+2	+1	+1	+0	+1	+1	+3	Communicator, Contact, Investment
4 th	+3	+1	+2	+1	+1	+1	+4	Bonus Social Feat
5 th	+3	+1	+2	+1	+1	+1	+4	Assistance II, Communicator, Contact, Hard Bargain +2
6 th	+4	+2	+3	+1	+2	+2	+5	Bonus Social Feat, Investment
7 th	+5	+2	+3	+1	+2	+2	+5	Contact, Communicator, Entrepreneur
8 th	+6	+3	+4	+2	+2	+2	+6	Bonus Social Feat, Hard Bargain +3
9 th	+6	+3	+4	+2	+3	+3	+6	Contact, Communicator, Investment
10 th	+7	+3	+5	+2	+3	+3	+7	Bonus Social Feat, Assistance III, Hard Bargain +4

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would find such an ally handy. Guardian henchmen will likely be 1st level soldiers or borderers.

Guild: While all merchant princes must belong to a guild, if the guild is also an ally, then the close relationship of the character and guildsmen provides a stronger than usual support network. The guildsmen will be at the disposal of the merchant prince and any henchmen will likely be 1st level commoners.

Naval: A military or independent ship's captain provides safety on the sea for merchant princes with maritime investments, as well as the possibility of a ship for loan. A roguish sea captain with a penchant for piracy will provide a dubious ally who works better against your foes than with your own interests. Henchmen will likely be 1st level commoners or pirates.

Patrol: Allies within the Patrol of Messantia give a merchant prince a unique form of judicial and legal assistance. The ally will be centred around one particular prefect and will include some lenience from the Patrolmen when dealing with the servants and interests of the merchant prince. Henchmen will likely be 1st level soldiers.

Priesthood: The priests of Mitra have extended their interest into mundane matters for a variety of reasons. The priests of Mitra are strong allies from a public viewpoint, providing a certain amount of ecumenical influence to the merchant prince when engaging in public debates. He will get a +1 modifier to actions taken in social debates that do not rely on any form of underhanded tactics (blackmail, bribery, assault and so forth). Henchmen of the priesthood will likely be 1st level scholars or commoners.

Royalty: The merchant prince has made a potent ally within the king's court. This ally must be specific, and cannot be the king himself unless the Games Master approves and can justify it within the context of the campaign.

Rival House: The merchant prince has made an alliance with a rival House. This House must not be listed as an enemy of the House the merchant prince belongs to without a strong story justification approved by the Games Master. Henchmen will likely be 1st level commoners.

Property: The merchant prince is granted a property in the form of a modest house somewhere in Messantia at 1st level, from which he may stage his future ventures. The property, if sold would be worth no more than 3,000 silver pieces, but it may be improved upon and developed by the merchant prince with his own funds, increasing its worth over time as dictated by the Games Master.

Assistance I, II and III: At 1st level and continuing every five levels thereafter (5th and 10th) the merchant prince may ask for the assistance of a chosen contact. Under ordinary circumstances, the contact should not be available more than once or twice per game session, but the Games Master should use discretion in the matter, depending upon how useful or significant the contact will actually be to the merchant prince's predicament. The types of assistance that may be called upon are suggested below.

Each month, the merchant prince must sacrifice gifts, goods and coins equal to five times his level in silver pieces to each of his contacts in order to maintain their acquaintance. If he is delinquent in this donation, then contact benefits are suspended until he makes this payment. A merchant prince will often be away on business, and he may be delinquent for up to four months, provided he pays the full amount due when next he pays a visit to his allies.

All calls for assistance are one time benefits that may be asked of each contact. If the merchant prince has already asked his royal contact for a loan, he may never again presume to do so.

Assistance I: The merchant prince may ask either of the following of a contact:

Information: The contact will provide a +5 bonus to a single Gather Information check made when attempting to uncover information from the contact.

Sanctuary: The contact will always have open doors for the merchant prince, offering food and lodging at no cost for one week per three levels of the merchant prince class. After that period, he will have overextended his stay, unless he is willing to offer payment for further services.

Assistance II: The merchant prince may ask his contact to provide one of the following:

Aid: The contact can provide assistance on a Bluff, Diplomacy, Sense Motive, Craft, Knowledge or Disguise skill check by giving the merchant prince the extra help or resources necessary to aid him. This provides a single +10 bonus to the effort.

Resources: The contact will provide mundane equipment worth the character's total level x 10 silver pieces at no cost to the character.

Assistance III: The merchant prince may ask his contact to provide one of the following:

Loan: The contact will provide a loan to the merchant prince equal to his merchant prince class level x 100 gold luna. This loan must be repaid before any further

assistance can be asked of this contact. If the loan goes unpaid for more than six months, the contact will be lost and may well take action against the merchant prince to recover its funds. If the funds are restored, the contact may (at the Games Master's discretion) be re-established. *Manpower:* The ally will provide a number of henchmen to aid the merchant prince on some venture. The ally will offer a number of henchmen equal to the merchant prince's class level. These will be available for a period of one week for every five levels of the merchant prince class. The henchmen will have a class that is representative of the contact providing them.

Bonus Social Feat: At 2nd level and every other level thereafter (4th, 6th, 8th and 10th) the merchant prince may choose any one of the feats listed below. Many of these feats are social feats, which can work in conjunction with the new debate rules and serve to enhance the status, position and bargaining power of the merchant prince in the eyes of his peers and competitors.



The bonus feats may be chosen from the following: Alertness, Carouser, Deceitful, Diligent, Grateful Patron*, Informants*, Investigator, Knowledgeable, Leadership, Negotiator, Performer, Persuasive, Rapier Wit*, Shrewd Appraiser*, Silver Tongue*, Skill Focus, Slave Owner*, Social Grace*, Strong Social Standing*, Venomous Tongue*. Feats marked with an * can be found on page 20.

Hard Bargain: As he progresses in experience, the merchant prince improves his bargaining and haggling skills. He gains a permanent +1 bonus to Appraise, Bluff, Diplomacy and Sense Motive checks at 2nd, 5th and 8th level. This modifier also applies to his Wits, Grace and Social Standing score when using the debate rules on page 14.

Communicator: The merchant prince quickly becomes very adept at understanding and speaking foreign languages. At 3rd level and every other level thereafter (5th, 7th and 9th), the merchant prince may choose any language as a bonus language.

Investment: At 3rd, 6th and 9th level the merchant prince is given an opportunity to invest his money in some venture or resource sponsored by his patron House. The nature of this resource and the amount of the investment are decided by the Games Master, but at each level of advancement the merchant prince may invest more money into the venture.

At each level of advancement, the merchant prince may check his investment's return, to see if he profited or lost money on the venture. He may leave any earnings in the investment at that time, or withdraw the amount, though not the original sum of the investment. If an investment ever fails and he loses his money, then the investment is gone.

Note that the patron Merchant House sponsors these investments. The merchant prince through the normal course of play may engage additional investments with other parties.

Investments, along with the risk levels, are listed below. The risk levels indicate the likelihood of a return or loss. At each level of advancement, the merchant prince must make a d20 roll, or 'Risk check', against the risk level of the venture. If he rolls higher than the risk level of the investment then the venture did well and makes a 1d4 x 5% profit. If the merchant prince rolls under the risk level of the venture then it makes a 1d4 x 5% loss. If the Risk check roll is a 'natural 20' then the profits are doubled,

PEOPLES AND HEROES

if the Risk check roll is a 'natural 1' then the losses are doubled. A merchant prince can try to influence this roll by making a Profession (merchant) skill check (DC 20), if he succeeds, then he gains a +4 modifier to the Risk check of a single investment.

The investments include:

Local Business: Local businesses are safe and friendly investments. Risk Level 11.

Overland Trade: Overland trade is relatively safe, but fairly slow. There is a 20% chance that the caravans are away when the merchant prince comes to make his Risk check and must skip the roll until next time. Risk Level 10.

Overseas Trade: You have invested in a ship that relies on foreign trade. Risk Level is 1d10+5 (randomly determined each time checked).

Agriculture: Agriculture is a very consistent investment and farming is a constant necessity, though disaster can strike at any time. Risk Level: 8 in spring and summer, 14 in fall and winter.

Military: The merchant prince has invested in the strength of the military, through weaponsmiths, mercenaries or borderland security. Risk Level: 11.

Foreign: Any investment may be foreign. If so, it generates -2 modifier to the Risk check, but any profits are increased by 5%, conversely any losses are also increased by 5%.

Entrepreneur: At 7th level, the merchant prince become a shrewd business man and a true entrepreneur. As such, he may approach any one of his designated contacts and make a proposition for some new venture or enterprise

Entrepreneur Check Modifiers

Proposition to Ally	Modifier
Each 10% of the profit the contact stands to gain	-1
Contact gets all profits from the venture (and has reason to believe there will be a profit)	-10
For every 10% over the merchant prince's share of the cost the contact must fund	+1
For every 10% under the merchant prince's share of the cost the contact funds	-1
The contact is being asked to provide all funding for the venture	+5
The venture involves serious or criminal risk	+5
The venture involves moderate risk (long distances, bandits, pirates, etc.)	+2
The venture involves a potential return 200% or greater than the contact's investment	-4
The contact's cost is in resources instead of cash	-2
The contact must provide manpower for the venture	+2
The merchant prince absorbs all overhead after the initial investment by the contact	-2

that he would like a certain amount of backing on. The total value of the backing cannot exceed the character's level x 1,000 silver pieces. The merchant prince must make a Diplomacy check (DC of 20), with a variety of modifiers to the roll to see if the ally is willing to provide the backing and resources necessary to achieve the proposed objective.

Example: Veragos the merchant prince has decided to fund a seafaring expedition to Vendhya to retrieve wild animals and exotic goods for sale in Messantia. He goes to House Pompilios asking for the funds to begin the expedition. He calculates he will need a trading galley (15,000 silver pieces) and an additional 1,000 silver pieces to hire crew and resources for the vessel. He is a 9th level character (noble 4/merchant prince 5), so he needs to come up with 7,000 silver pieces. He goes to House Pompilios and proposes his venture, offering half of the profits in exchange for 8,000 silver pieces to fund the expedition (+5 modifier for 50% of the profit). Veragos is asking for the House to provide all of the funding, since he has to raise 7,000 on his own (-5 modifier). The route for the trip passes through the region of the Black Coast, known for piracy and possibly hostile waters beyond (-2 modifier), but Veragos convinces them that the potential return on a shipload of Vendhyan silks, exotic goods and rare animals is going to be well in excess of 50,000 silver pieces (+4 modifier). The total modifiers equal +2, for a Diplomacy check (DC 22) to convince Lord Constans to fund the venture. If Veragos is especially creative, he will get the extra 7,000 silver pieces by cashing in on his loan option for having House Pompilios as an ally, netting him 900 gold lunas, which he must repay on his return trip. If he comes back with his 50,000 silver pieces' worth of goods, then Veragos will make a final profit of 18,000 silver pieces after paying House Pompilios half of the profit and repaying his loan. He will still own a trade galley, however, and be ready for new ventures down the road.

If the merchant prince should ever garner assistance from an ally on his entrepreneurial venture but fail to make a promised return, he goes into debt with the contact, and all contact benefits are suspended until he repays this debt. Also the merchant prince may not generate any new contacts until that debt is repaid, as news of his poor business sense spreads. This will certainly lead to new adventures and roleplaying opportunities, but should the merchant prince try to escape his debt, then the ally may demand that he be brought to justice, and may even hire bounty hunters to track him down.

HOUSE AGENT

Amidst the political skulduggery of the Merchant Houses of Messantia, a hidden undercurrent of espionage and hidden conflict simmers just beneath the surface. While various nobles jockey for public favour and the ear of the king, sparring with words and wit, the house agent moves quietly in their midst, seeking out dirty secrets, shameful lies and startling crimes with which to bolster his own House's position.

The role of the house agent is especially important to the nobles, as it allows them to gather critical information against their rivals, bolster their own political positions and enhance their economic interests though deceptive or even illegal means while still being able to deny any wrong-doing. The house agent, as part of his role, is considered expendable and must always be ready and willing to deny any relations to his patron. A house agent who rats out his own House or patron is considered a pariah and loses the sponsorship of all those he betrayed, although he might earn a new respect among the enemies of his now former patron.

Characteristics: The house agent may serve a specific Merchant House or he may be an independent agent, offering his talents and familiarity with the secret world of Messantia to the highest bidder. If the house agent has a sponsor, then he is expected to pursue the interests of his sponsor to the exclusion of all other interests, and his loyalty could be cast into doubt if he tries to freelance. If the house agent is independent, then he must show an unassailable impartiality to his patrons, carrying out to specific deeds and jobs, but never betraying one employer to another. In such cases, the house agent could find himself on one side of a scheme one week, then working on the other side of the fence the next.

Religion: Though religion is far from the mind of most house agents, it is not entirely uncommon for them to offer some prayers to Bel, the god of thieves. Most house agents will offer some devotion to the god that is favoured by their patron house, if any.

Background: House agents are not necessarily natives to Messantia, but it is very difficult for a foreigner to earn the trust of the Merchant Houses. Still, it sometimes pays to be 'the newcomer' in town, as a lack of local affiliation might make certain people more likely to confide secrets in the house agent, or view him as a neutral party worth hiring. As such, unaffiliated house agents can be of any nationality, those house agents with a specific patron are more likely to be native to Messantia.

Abilities: House agents need to rely on their Wisdom and Charisma to coerce subjects in to divulging secrets. When that does not work nimble fingers and quick feet will get them into forbidden areas to try and dig up greasy secrets. As such, Dexterity is very important for a house agent.

Hit Die: d8

REQUIREMENTS

To qualify to become a house agent, a character must fulfil all the following criteria.

Feats: Deceitful or Investigator, and Light-Footed

Skills: Bluff 4 ranks, Diplomacy 4 ranks, Disguise 6 ranks

CLASS SKILLS

The house agent's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Appraise (Int), Balance (Dex), Bluff (Cha), Climb (Str), Concentration (Con), Craft (any mundane) (Int), Decipher Script (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Disable Device (Cha), Disguise (Cha), Escape Artist (Dex), Forgery (Int), Gather Information (Cha), Hide (Dex), Intimidate (Cha), Jump (Str), Knowledge (geography) (Int), Knowledge (history) (Int), Knowledge (local) (Int), Knowledge (nobility) (Int), Knowledge (religion) (Int), Listen (Wis), Move Silently (Dex), Open Lock (Dex), Perform (Cha), Profession (Wis), Ride (Dex), Search (Int), Sense Motive (Wis), Sleight of Hand (Dex), Spot (Wis), Survival (Wis), Tumble (Dex) and Use Rope (Dex).

Skill Points per level: 6 + Intelligence modifier

CLASS FEATURES

Bonus Feat: At 1st, 4th, 7th and 10th level the house agent may choose a bonus feat from the following list. These feats include new social feats, which emphasise advantages in social interaction and debate.

The bonus feats may be chosen from the following: Alertness, Blind-Fight, Carouser, Dabbler, Deceitful, Diligent, Eyes of the Cat, Fleet-Footed, Grateful Patron*, Informants*, Investigator, Knowledgeable, Negotiator, Nimble Fingers, Performer, Persuasive, Poison Use, Rapier Wit*, Shrewd Appraiser*, Silver Tongue*, Skill Focus, Street-Smart*, Venomous Tongue*. Feats marked with an * can be found on page 20.

House Agent Ability: At 1st, 3rd, 6th and 9th level the house agent may choose an ability from among the following options. He may choose some of these options more than once.

PEOPLES AND HEROES

House Agent

Level	BAB	Base Dodge Bonus	Base Parry Bonus	Magic Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1 st	+0	+0	+0	+0	+0	+2	+0	Bonus Feat, House Agent Ability
2 nd	+1	+1	+1	+0	+0	+3	+0	Shadowing +2
3 rd	+2	+1	+1	+0	+1	+3	+1	House Agent Ability
4 th	+3	+2	+2	+1	+1	+4	+1	Alias, Bonus Feat
5 th	+3	+2	+2	+1	+1	+4	+1	Shadowing +4
6 th	+4	+3	+3	+1	+2	+5	+2	House Agent Ability
7 th	+5	+3	+3	+1	+2	+5	+2	Alias, Bonus Feat
8 th	+6	+4	+4	+2	+2	+6	+2	Shadowing +6
9 th	+6	+4	+4	+2	+3	+6	+3	House Agent Ability
10 th	+7	+5	+5	+2	+3	+7	+3	Alias, Bonus Feat

Blackmail: The house agent is party to specific information on a single important individual, which provides leverage against that person. The person must actually have some secret they do not want divulged, and they may be willing to provide information, services or goods worth up to 300 silver pieces per month in order to keep the house agent silent. If the house agent demands more of the person, then the Games Master should make a Will save (DC 15) for the target to see if they are fed up with the arrangement and turn on the house agent and have him silenced by non-fiscal means.

Contact: The house agent has a close contact that will provide him with information on the street about a specific topic or region. The contact must be defined by his subject of interest, which can be a particular prefect of Messantia (such as Cranetown, Redboots, Dockside), a particular merchant house (Pephredo, Abasantis and so on), or a particular organisation (like the Patrol or the Order of Engineers). This contact will, when consulted by the house agent, be willing to divulge secrets and recent gossip granting the house agent a +4 bonus to Gather Information checks which relates to a matter on which he can consult his contact about. More obscure or valuable information may require a bribe of between 10 and 50 silver pieces depending on the importance of the information. The contact has a certain loyalty to the house agent and will never divulge his relationship with the house agent except under torture.

Friends in High Places: The house agent knows important people and can call upon them for favours. Once per game session, the house agent may call upon a noble of significant prominence within Messantian society for a favour. This favour may include: food and lodging for the house agent, sanctuary from the law, a loan of up to 50 silver pieces per house agent level or a favour of action, such as getting the agent an invitation to a royal event,

a meeting with an important political figure such as a prince or free passage on a ship. The exact nature of such a request depends on the Games Master's discretion.

Streetwise: The streets of Messantia are a second home to the house agent, who knows them like the back of his hand. He may never become lost in Messantia, and will always be able to take 20 on any Knowledge (local) check to recall some piece of information about the city and its environs. He may use the Tracking feat, if he has it, to trail a target within the streets and alleys of the city as well as any woodsman could track a deer.

Secrets of the City: As he plies his trade, the house agent has stumbled on some key and useful secrets about the city. When seeking strange and esoteric information on Messantia, the house agent may make a check equal to his Charisma modifier plus his house agent level to see if he can recall or uncover such esoteric data. The base DC depends on the nature of the secret:



Secrets of the City Check

Check DC	Nature of Information
DC 12	Mundane information (such as floor plans to a rival house's villa)
DC 16	Obscure information (such as a marked hidden pathway through the sewers to get from one prefect to another)
DC 20+	Rare and coveted information (such as a secret passage leading in to the palace). The moderation of this information is at the Games Master's discretion

Word on the Street: The house agent has a keen ear for gossip and rumour, and is an expert at eliciting such information from casual conversation or the average man on the street. He receives a permanent +4 modifier to his Gather Information when seeking out rumours and gossip in the streets. Furthermore, there is a 5% chance per house agent level that any information about an event which happened in the back alleys, taverns and rough streets of Messantia will be brought to the house agent by a thoughtful fellow, who may offer such choice information for a small fee (1d10 silver pieces). This information can be gained whether the house agent was actively seeking it or not, at the Games Master's discretion.

Shadowing: At 2nd level the house agent gains a +2 bonus to all Climb, Hide, Jump, Move Silently, Ride, Swim and Track checks when attempting to follow a subject in a crowded street, busy party or other cluttered urban environment. The bonus becomes +4 at 5th level and +6 at 8th level.

Alias: The house agent cloaks his true identity with a carefully cultivated alias that deflects suspicion away from him. An alias works like a Disguise check that almost always succeeds. In essence, the house agent becomes his alias, adopting mannerisms, dress speech patterns and other affectations that transform him into a completely different person. To assume his alias, the house agent must spend one hour dressing the part and getting into character. Once the house agent has adopted an alias, only incredibly sharp-eyed observers make any connection between the house agent and the alias. A character may make a Sense Motive check to recognise the house agent's true identity (DC 25 + the house agent's level + the house agent's ranks in the Disguise skill).

Each time the house agent gains this ability, he defines his alias as if he created a secondary character. The alias should have a background, profession and so on. All these aspects of the house agent's background are above suspicion, as the house agent spends much time and effort

creating an effective alias. The house agent does not need to have any special costumes or props to complete his alias, though if the house agent's alias is a priest of Mitra it is unlikely that he would be found wandering the streets of Messantia adorned in armour and carrying a war sword.

Note that the Games Master may require the house agent to have certain skills and feats to take on an effective alias. If the house agent's alias is from a different country, they must be able to speak the language of that country fluently. If the alias practices a specific trade, the house agent must have at least three ranks in the relevant Craft or Profession skill. Finally an alias does not render the house agent immune to arrest or suspicion. If a priest of Mitra were found in the wine cellars of House Pompilios, clearly somewhere the priest should not be, the House are almost certain to hunt down the priest for interrogation, if nothing else.

AGENT OF THE CROWN

Argos is a strong, patriotic kingdom of baronies united under the firm rule of the king. Likewise, Messantia is a veritable metropolis, which requires an active and regular constabulary in the form of the Patrol. At its highest levels, the king himself maintains an elite unit of personal agents known as the King's Hand. When no one else can get the job done, these men are called upon to resolve the issue.

Not all agents of the king belong to the Patrol or the King's Hand. The borders of Argos are defended just as much by the agents of the crown as by the Argosian Guardians. These stalwart individuals of such patriotism and virtue willingly and regularly patrol and defend the kingdom. Drawn from a mix of backgrounds, these agents report directly to the king himself, regardless of any individual loyalties.

Characteristics: Most men who serve the king are adept in whatever class and profession they pursue, but a handful of men are exceptional, and it is these men who become agents. A character that has distinguished himself in duty to the king may be placed in a senior position within the Patrol, or assigned to duty in a company of the Guardians. A handful of agents are so well regarded for their adherence to duty and the defence of Argos that the king himself invites them to join the King's Hand. All good soldiers and citizens of Argos who prove their loyalty time and again have a chance to advance in one of these esteemed positions.

PEOPLES AND HEROES

When a character becomes an agent of the crown, he must choose whether he becomes an officer of the Patrol or the Argossean Guardians. No character is immediately invited to join the King's Hand, nor are levels in this prestige class necessary to be invited. Only a deed, which demands the king's attention and respect, will garner that invitation.

Religion: A patriotic agent of Argos will always identify with Mitra, not only for the militant aspect of the god, but as a civic duty.

Background: Some of the king's best agents are not native-born Argosseans, let alone Messantians, but their loyalty to king is enough to overlook such matters. The actions of a character throughout his life are as important in evaluating a man's loyalty to Argos as his actions in the military, Patrol or as a freelancer. A character that seeks to become an agent of the crown is making a declaration of his dedication to the land and its king, and his convictions should be heartfelt, stemming from a lifetime of respect to duty and responsibility.

Abilities: Agents of the king are physical men, but a certain Wisdom and Intelligence are important to make them well-rounded and competent decision-makers. Nonetheless, Strength and Dexterity will see them through the many battles they must face.

Hit Die: d10

REQUIREMENTS

To qualify to become an agent of the crown, a character must fulfil all the following criteria.

Base Attack Bonus: +4 or better

Feats: Investigator

Skills: Diplomacy 4 ranks, Sense Motive 4 ranks, Spot 6 ranks

Special: The character must have been previously deputised as either a Patrolmen or soldier in the armies of Argos. A character may also have served under contract or letter of marquee as a mercenary to qualify.

CLASS SKILLS

The agent of the crown's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Appraise (Int), Climb (Str), Diplomacy (Cha), Gather Information (Cha), Intimidate (Cha), Jump (Str), Knowledge (geography) (Int), Knowledge (local) (Int), Knowledge (nobility) (Int), Listen (Wis), Ride (Dex), Search (Int), Sense Motive (Wis), Spot (Wis), Survival (Wis) and Use Rope (Dex).

Skill Points per level: 2 + Intelligence modifier

CLASS FEATURES

Agent of the Crown Abilities: At 1st, 4th, 7th and 10th level the agent of the crown may choose from one of the following abilities. These class abilities reflect the focus of an officer of the king and his focus as an enforcer of the law, investigator and defender of Argos:

Informant: The agent of the crown acquires an informant, who is willing to divulge secrets, gossip and odd information to him in exchange for a certain amount of lenience or camaraderie. The agent may seek out the informant garnering a +5 circumstance bonus to Gather Information, when he does so. The informant may also provide more unusual, plot specific information as determined by the Games Master.

Promotion: The agent of the crown begins at 1st level with the authority of an officer, effectively a corporal in the Patrol or Argossean Guardians. With this option he may gain a promotion, climbing in the ranks of the military. The Games Master may decide that the promotion is only permissible after the character has performed a noteworthy deed. Likewise, the Games Master may decide to award a promotion for deeds done, even if the character has not yet achieved a new ability slot. The main advantage to gaining a promotion is an improved social station within the community. There are six possible ranks of promotion in Argos: corporal (beginning), sergeant, sergeant major, lieutenant, commander, general. Each rank includes duties and responsibilities with troops, resourced, and management. No character may receive a promotion past the rank of sergeant major until he has acquired the Leadership feat.

Characters who receive a promotion must be willing to manage a unit of men. As a sergeant, the character will be in command of a squadron of men, usually 12–18 1st level soldiers. A sergeant major will work under a lieutenant or commander, and be a part of the command structure for a platoon of men, including 30–40 1st level soldiers, a sergeant of 2nd–3rd level, and one senior officer of 4th level. He will be part of a command structure. A character who reaches the rank of lieutenant will be in command of a company of men, usually 100 soldiers of 1st level with an appropriate command chain underneath. If the agent is a member of the Argossean Guardians, then his company will be part of a larger garrison of 2–4 companies under a commander. A commander of rank will be in charge of this garrison.

Agent of the Crown

Level	BAB	Base Dodge Bonus	Base Parry Bonus	Magic Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1 st	+1	+0	+0	+0	+2	+0	+0	Agent of the Crown Ability, Authority
2 nd	+2	+1	+1	+0	+3	+0	+0	Interrogation +2
3 rd	+3	+1	+2	+0	+3	+1	+1	Bonus feat
4 th	+4	+2	+3	+1	+4	+1	+1	Agent of the Crown Ability
5 th	+5	+2	+3	+1	+4	+1	+1	Interrogation +4
6 th	+6	+3	+4	+1	+5	+2	+2	Bonus feat
7 th	+6	+3	+5	+1	+5	+2	+2	Agent of the Crown Ability
8 th	+8	+4	+6	+2	+6	+2	+2	Interrogation +6
9 th	+9	+4	+6	+2	+6	+3	+3	Bonus feat
10 th	+10	+5	+7	+2	+7	+3	+3	Agent of the Crown Ability

Note that, as an agent of the crown, a character may wish to pursue a dedicated military lifestyle, but the authority he has been granted is designed to give him a certain amount of autonomy as a special agent of the crown. Though he has a place in the chain of command and may have duties due to rank, his principle job remains investigation and special duty. Nonetheless, the Games Master and Player may use these guidelines as a frame of reference for what sort of structure and resources the character has to call upon should he feel the need. Any effort to requisition troops, supplies or special duties for such will require a request from the superior officer and a Diplomacy check (DC 15). The reason for the requisition must be valid and relevant to the duty of the agent. For example, a sergeant asking to take his squad of men to an abandoned warehouse where he thinks smugglers are holed up is a valid request. Asking to take the squad into the graveyards to fight Acheronian horrors will lead to incredulous looks and possible demotion.

Street Fighting: The agent of the crown has learned how to fight in the close and confined quarters of narrow alleys, cramped houses, shantytowns and crowded marketplaces. His keen perception of his environment negates any flanking modifiers his opponents would gain against him when in urban combat.

Streetwise: As the Patrolman walks his beat, he becomes very familiar with the streets of Messantia. He may never become lost in the city, and will always be able to take 20 on any Knowledge (local) check to recall some piece of information about the city and its environs. He may use the Tracking feat, if he has it, to trail a target within the streets and alleys of the city.

Suspicious Nature: The agent of the crown has grown very careful in his duties, and has become very adept at detecting suspicious behaviour, lies and other deceit. The

agent receives a +2 bonus to any effort to Sense Motive to counter a Bluff or see through a Disguise.

Authority: As 1st level the character is granted the status of an agent, either as a corporal in the ranks of the Argossean Guardians or Patrol or as an autonomous investigator who answers directly to senior commanders. The character should decide at this time if he is either a new officer to the ranks of the Patrol of Guardians, or a special investigator. This authority grants the agent the right to make arrests in the name of the king, enforce Argos' laws and protect the borders of Argos from bandits and foreign invaders. The agent of the crown should become familiar with the codes of Messantian law (see *Book I: Games Master's Guide*).

Bonus Feat: At 3rd, 6th, and 9th level the house agent may choose any feat for which he qualifies as a bonus feat.

Interrogation: At 2nd level the agent of the crown gains a +2 bonus to all interrogation attempts using Bluff, Diplomacy or Intimidate checks. This bonus increases to +4 at 5th level and +6 at 8th level. The agent may interrogate a suspect using his favoured skill, with varying results using the contested skill use rules. Interrogations can be used to divulge withheld information, a confession or even an admission of guilt, the veracity of any information or confession gained through the use of this ability is left to the discretion of the Games Master.

Secrets of Messantia

Feats & Skills in the Golden City

LIFE IN A large coastal city introduces many new twists to the way men conduct themselves. Several existing skills have additional uses in the urban environment of Messantia, especially among the cut-throat world of Merchant Houses, politicians and royalty that drive the Argossean economy ever onward. New applications for existing skills follow, which will allow an aspiring urban adventurer to get ahead in Messantia.

In this section, rules are provided for several new techniques that you can use for a variety of skills, including haggling, investigation and public speaking. In addition, rules are provided for managing influential debates, using a system that will allow for dynamic forms of social combat and interplay through the use of deft wit and dirty tactics.

NEW USES FOR SKILLS

APPRAISE AND BLUFF

Characters may engage in the process of haggling to gain a better price for the purchase or sale of goods through these two skills.

Haggling

At its core, Appraise is a skill which lets a character get a sense of the proper worth of valuables, that he might either turn a profit or avoid a loss. Bluff is all about convincing another man that what you say is truthful. Combined, these two skills lead to the time honoured tradition of haggling.

When two men meet, and one has something the other wants, but a price has not been set, then they may haggle for it. The rules of haggling are simple: the seller needs to convince the other the buyer of his price either to sell or purchase the item in question. The character makes an Appraise roll to assess his perception of the value first, if neither character knows the actual worth, then both must make an Appraise check to establish their individual perspectives on the item's value. Each character then makes a Bluff check to convince the other that his desired price, which has nothing to do with perceived price) is, in fact, accurate and fair. This Bluff check is modified by the difference between the perceived worth of the item and the desired price. This modifier is applied

to the buyer's Bluff check. The higher result determines the 'winner' of the contest. Note that, if the buyer simply acquiesces to the asking price, then he has stopped haggling and simply accepts the seller's offer.

Haggling Modifiers (apply to buyer's Bluff check)

Circumstance	Modifier
Per 10% of difference between buyer's offer and seller's perceived value of item	-2
If buyer knows the actual real value of the item for sale	+4
If the seller has already won a Bluff contest to sell to the buyer before	-2
If the buyer has already won a Bluff contest to buy from the seller before	+2
If the buyer has 5 or more ranks of Intimidate	+2
If the seller has 5 or more ranks of Intimidate	-2
If the buyer has 5 or more ranks of Sense Motive	+2
If the seller has 5 or more ranks of Sense Motive	-2

Once the contest of Bluff checks is over with, determine the results as follows:

Haggling Results

Result	Effect
Seller lost by 5 or more	The buyer gets a discount of 10% + 1d6 x 5% off the asking price
Seller lost by less than 5	The buyer gets a 10% discount on the asking price
Tied Results	The haggling has drawn to a standstill, and unless someone relents, a new round ensues
Seller won by less than 5	The item sells for 10% over the asking price
Seller won by more than 5	The item sells by 10% over the asking price for every 5 over the contested roll was won by, rounded down. For example, if the seller rolled a Bluff of 17 and the buyer rolled 6, then he sells for 20% over his asking price

Once a price has been established, it is not customary to continue haggling. If the established price is not paid or accepted by one or the other party, then haggling may continue. However, the party which has refused the negotiated offer suffers a cumulative -2 penalty to his Bluff

check this time for each additional refusal, until one or the other party gets tired of the process and looks for an easier customer.

GATHER INFORMATION

The use of this skill in an urban environment entails seeking out individuals who are in the know and prompting them to disclose sensitive or valuable information to you. At its most basic, Gather Information is as simple as walking up to common folk on the street and asking them for information, free of charge. At its most diabolical, Gather Information involves seedy taverns and devious cut-throats who are as likely to rob you as sell sensitive gossip and secret information.

Investigation

A character may employ investigative tactics against a target, seeking out specific information by tracking down friends, relatives, associates and enemies, prompting them for knowledge on the individual in question. It may also be applied to an organisation, group or other body of more than one individual. A key component of this process is that the investigator wants to procure the sensitive information without exposing his interest in the target.

To begin an investigation, the character should seek out and spend a certain amount of time (an evening, for example) with two or more friends, relatives, associates or allies of the target. The character must be willing to spend a minimum of 20 silver pieces in entertaining the subjects to gain the information. During this time, the character is trying to maintain utter discretion, to avoid exposing his interests or the real purpose of the social occasion. The character should make a Gather Information check after a minimum of four hours (DC 20) to see what he has uncovered. Games Masters may wish to make this roll in secret.

If this check fails by more than 10, the targets of the interrogation become aware of the character's attempts to uncover secrets and become increasingly uncommunicative. Further attempts to pump them for information automatically fail and, given the opportunity, they will report your activities to the subject of the character's investigation, alerting him to their interest in him.

A check that fails by less than 10 nets the investigator nothing and does not alert the target to his intentions. However, if the character wishes to gain any information they will need to either seek out a new source or continue plying his current sources for a few more polite interrogation sessions. In order to avoid rousing suspicion, the character must wait at least a week before contacting his sources and making another Gather Information check. The DC of this check rises to 25 and any additional checks, should this check fail, require

another week's wait and a +2 increase to the DC of the Gather Information check.

On a successful check the investigator has uncovered some choice dirt on his target, assuming such information exists. The Games Master may choose the nature of information uncovered, but it should include potential crimes, treasonous behaviour, money laundering, tax evasion, suggestions of political dissent or even the participation in theft or murder. While not all of the nobility of Messantia are guilty of some crime, enough of them are that the probability of discovering some useful information is fairly high.

PERFORM (ORATORY)

The Perform skill covers a number of specialised talents, but the oratory talents of the wealthy and rich aristocrats of Messantia find this particular skill of special importance.

Public Influence

A character may speak to and influence a large crowd. This process is similar to the Debate routine described below, but involves a large audience that is mostly passive. The character can attempt to influence his audience to either improve his own image in the eyes of the crowd or to denigrate and damage a rival's image.

To change public image, the character must spend a minimum of 10 minutes in a public forum speaking to a crowd of sufficient size (Games Master's discretion, but a minimum of 50 individuals is suggested) about himself or his target. The base DC of the Perform (oratory) check is DC 15. The speaker may add his Reputation modifier to his roll, and if he is publicly denigrating another person, then the target's Reputation modifier should be applied to the base DC. Apply any of the following modifiers that might be relevant to the DC of the Perform (oratory) check.

Public Influence Modifiers

Circumstance	Modifier
The speaker is already disliked by the crowd	+2
The speaker is hated by the crowd	+4
The target of the speech is disliked	-2
The target of the speech is already reviled	-4
The speaker's topic is illegal or treasonous	+5
The speaker is foreign	+2
The speaker has offered a bribe to the crowd	Games Master's discretion (-1 for food, -2 for coin)

If the character makes his Perform (oratory) check and meets the requirements of his action, then he has influenced the

crowd in the desired manner. If he has attempted to bolster his own Reputation, then he will receive a +1 modifier for every 5 points over the target DC that the roll was made by (minimum modifier of +1) that applies to all reaction modifiers and modifiers in which his reputation score apply. Likewise, if the speaker was trying to denigrate or damage another's Reputation, then that same modifier instead applies as a negative penalty to his opponent's Reputation and any reaction modifiers. This effect will last for 1d6 days after the speech, or until the Games Master determines one or both parties have taken actions that would alter the public consensus and opinion.

If you are using the debate rules presented here, the number gained or lost through this process will also add or subtract from a character's Social Standing score, and will remain for the same amount of time listed above, or until expended in a debate.

THE THOUSAND FACES

Messantia is a city rife with political manoeuvrings, intrigue and high-stakes risk-taking between rival merchant princes, local landed nobility and even the king himself. The Hyborian world is a land of bloody conflict, in which all too often swords and axes are the principle, or even the only accepted means of resolving conflict. In cities such as Messantia, however, complex social networks have arisen in which choice words, clever rumours and a deft wit are as likely to resolve a dispute and shatter another man as any sword to the gut. Often, what you can dig up on a rival through bribery, investigation and blackmail is far more damaging than any honourable duel to the death. The oratory and debating talents of a noble can be of extreme importance when confronting, or being confronted by, a rival in a public venue.

The purpose of engaging in a public or private debate with a rival is specifically to gain a social edge or win an argument that, by virtue of the audience before which you are competing, will bolster your own political or social position within the city. You may have a specific dispute that you wish to resolve, or perhaps you simply want to gain a certain amount of notoriety or prestige in the eyes of the nobles of Messantia.

To engage in a debate, first determine who your opponent will be, then determine your goal and venue of engagement.

GOALS

Your goal determines what you intend to gain from a debate with your opponent. For purposes of this process, you are deciding to change something, an action, opinion or image.

Changing a Course of Action

You have a specific agenda, such as convincing Lord Constans Pompilius that he should grant you a ship in exchange for a percentage of profits from an upcoming trade venture you have devised. Perhaps you are seeking the daughter of a Shemite prince, now in the custody of House Gilroy and you wish to convince a member of that House to sell or release her into your custody. A course of action is a measurable goal, with a defined objective.

Swaying an Opinion

House Dulcia has determined that it shall never negotiate or do business with House Pompilius, but you, as an agent of House Pompilius, have determined that the logging interests of House Dulcia would be critical to aid the shipwrights of your House due to a recent shortfall in timber. You know you cannot bridge a gap such as these two Houses have in attitude and disposition overnight, so you set out to try and improve relations and attitudes between the Houses, so that down the road, it might be possible for the two to work together. You discover that one of Acias Dulcia's daughters will be at a social event, and decide to 'bump' into her, where you can try to sway her opinion of House Pompilius, and maybe even give House Onoria a bad name while you are at it. Swaying an opinion involves confronting one or more individuals and attempting to charm or coerce them into considering an alternative attitude to the that which they currently hold. Swaying an opinion can work on both individuals and groups.

Altering an Image

The king has known you in the royal court as a rough soldier, but tonight you are going to show the court how suave and sophisticated you are. You spot Lady Livia Gabrio, notice she is alone and decide to begin there, showing just how much of an aristocrat you are. Altering an image is a process in which you seek to change your social appearance through an impressive display of social grace and form, or to slander another by showing them up.

LOCATION FOR THE DEBATE

The place a debate is held is as important as the goal of the debate, for each will achieve very different results, depending upon whether or not you confront your target in his private residence or in the king's court. Debates may be held in private, semi-private or public arenas.

Private Arena

Under these conditions, all participants meet in private and undisturbed circumstances, sometimes by mutual consent. In a private venue, tactics such as blackmail and discussions involving illegal, criminal or treasonous affairs may be discussed more frankly and, unless protected by private

guards or trusted aides, the chance of violence erupting from a debate gone wrong is minimal. The private arena is best suited to changing a course of action, and a +2 circumstance modifier applies to all rolls made during the debate. It is least suited to changing the opinions of a group, and any action that would require a group consensus will automatically fail.

Examples of private arenas include the back room of a seedy tavern, a private residence, an abandoned warehouse or an open garden area at midnight.

Semi-Public Arena

The semi-public establishment, in which others are present and may have an interest in the debate are best reserved for the swaying of opinions, situations in which a group of people need to be influenced on a certain matter or course of action. In situations where you are trying to change an opinion on an issue, you receive a +2 modifier to all rolls in the debate. Of all the arenas, the semi-public arena is likely to be most common with affairs that are, at least on the surface, completely legal and normal. Both sides may find it more comfortable to meet in such circumstances, able to surround themselves with allies and witnesses.

Examples of semi-public arenas include an open tavern, inn or guildhall. A private residence at which both parties bring a retinue of aides and servants may also qualify. Places such as a marketplace, party or large social gathering might also qualify, if the debate is not the focus of the crowd.

Public Arena

When the character wishes to bolster an opinion or improve his own image, he may do so in the eyes of the public, before a large audience. While the debate may still continue between two individuals (or small groups), the debate itself becomes the focal point of the larger audience, and it is the opinion of the audience that now determines the winner of the debate. All goals are achievable in the public arena, provided they are something that is of interest to, or can be comprehended by the larger crowd. An action of interest would be, 'We must go to war against Zingara!' while a change of opinion might be, 'The king should pardon Lord Rolovincio for his crimes.' A character that is going before a public audience specifically to improve his own image need not necessarily have an opponent to debate. Instead, his audience becomes the target, and he must convince or impress them of his own image or convincingly slander the image of another. Such a debate is handled under the new rules for the Perform (oratory) skill (page 14).

Examples of a public arena include the open market, the courts of the king, and any large social gathering. Where there is a crowd that is attentive, and the character is given the stage, they receive a +2 circumstance bonus to all rolls in the debate to alter an image.

PLAYING OUT THE DEBATE

The following rules will allow you to ascertain the exact results of any exchange in which time or circumstance would make it prohibitive to manage the event in a standard roleplaying encounter. Likewise, any situation in which the characters confront a specific group of Non-Player Characters over a matter of debate could be arbitrated through the rules of debate even as the overarching theme is played out through the game session. For example, two men arguing over a course of action is easily roleplayed, but two princes debating for many hours before the king whether or not to take up arms against a rival nation would be well-suited to resolution through the debate rules provided here.

Grace and Wit

Each participant in the debate should receive a ranking for two new attributes: Grace and Wit. Grace is defined here as the ability of an opponent to either side step, avoid or deflect assaults upon his person, character or argument in the course of a debate. Wit is the cunning and clever approach to argumentation exercised by an opponent, modified by his aggressiveness. While Wit is the default score used for aggressive argumentation, characters will also be likely to rely on certain skills, and so Wit is not the universal method of attack in a debate. All characters will have a numerical value in each, which will be used to moderate the character's deftness in debating.

Grace will equal 10 plus the character's Charisma modifier, plus any skill modifier based on Reputation score. This is a static number. For example, Thursis of Argos has a +3 modifier to Charisma. He has a Reputation of 27 (+4 skill modifier). His Grace is 17 (10+3+4). Games Masters may opt not to have a static Grace score, and instead require that characters add 1d20 to the roll when Grace is used, instead of simply adding 10.

Wit equals the character's Wisdom modifier plus any skill modifier from a high Reputation score. This value is added to a d20 roll to calculate clever verbal attacks. For example, Thursis has a +1 modifier from his Wisdom and would have a Wit of +5.

Social Standing

All characters have a Social Standing score that reflects their own composure, public image, personal ego and general sense of discretion. This number is used to calculate the damage done to the character's own position in the course of the debate. If Social Standing ever drops to 0, then the character has been soundly beaten in an argument or debate, and must concede the point. Social Standing recovers immediately for a new debate, but cannot be recovered for

the issue on which the debate was lost unless the character finds a new and clear position to take on the issue and seeks to advertise it through enhancing his public image. Any issue which grants a temporary bonus to public image or reputation will also add to Social Standing for the duration of the next debate.

Social Standing is equal to 3 plus the character's Charisma modifier (if any) plus skill modifier derived from Reputation, plus any special modifiers due to circumstance or feat.

THE OPENING APPROACH

The initiator of the debate should first determine his opening approach. There are many different forms and ways to approach a debate, but the most common include brash assaults, clever manipulation, needling conversation and bold statements.

Brash Assault

The debate opens with a bang, as one man confronts another unexpectedly with his demand for capitulation. Such an approach works best when one side is certain of his position or holds clear evidence that supports his side and devastates his opponent. If you take this approach and you have some clear evidence with which to confront your opponent with, you may add +2 to all social modifiers in the conflict against your opponent for each significant piece of evidence so held and used.

Clever Manipulation

You approach your opponent with open arms and a sense of trust, then seek to manipulate him into accepting your position before he becomes aware of your efforts to steer him onto your desired path. Such an approach is very difficult and if you fail then your opponent becomes aware of your manipulations and will become cautious of you (-2 modifiers to all further rolls). So long as you are successful in your approach, you may gain a +2 modifier to your continued attempts to sway your target through this subtle misdirection.

Needling Conversation

You approach your target in a seemingly innocuous manner, then gradually become more aggressive and direct, at first lulling your opponent into a false sense of security, then surprising him with an increasingly more aggressive approach. By lulling your opponent into a false sense of security, he suffers a -2 modifier to Grace until your intentions become clear (after the first successful argument).

Bold Statements

It is a common gambit amongst public speakers to make a seemingly outrageous statement at the beginning of their



oration and then explain the real meaning behind the words as their speech continues. This style is best used for attempting to gain a consensus as it displays the character's assurance of his right to victory and lays his arguments out in a plain fashion. You gain a +2 circumstance bonus to any offensive debating rolls made while engaged in a social contest for consensus when using this type of engagement.

MAKING THE ARGUMENT

Once you have chosen your goal, location and opening approach, you are left only with actually confronting your opponent in debate. The process is fairly loose, for while you are engaging in a form of verbal and social combat, the manoeuvres and strikes can be quite time consuming in game

terms, and so the standard 'combat round' does not apply. Instead, use the following steps to mediate the debate:

Pre-Debate

Apply all modifiers due to location, opening approach and any miscellaneous factors. The Games Master should assess the Grace and Wit of your opponent. If you are using this system to mediate a roleplaying encounter, then let the encounter play out. The Games Master will move to the action round if and when it seems evident a conflict is imminent.

Opening Round

Having made your verbal attack, it is up to the target to mount a defence. Under ordinary circumstances, the character who initiated the debate will be first to strike, but if the oration is being roleplayed, it is possible for the aggressor to have tipped his hand early, allowing the target to catch on to the fact that he is being confronted. If the Games Master feels this has happened, he can make an Intelligence check (DC 15) to see if the character becomes wise to his opponent's intentions before they are fully realised. If he does, then the character immediately gains a +4 bonus to his Grace or Wits (target's choice).

Action

The initiating party makes his argument and either chooses from one of the special tactics of debate (below) or takes the standard, straightforward approach. In this case, he rolls 1d20, adding his Wits modifier to the roll, plus any special modifiers accrued due to location, opening approach or feats. This role must equal or exceed his opponent's Grace score, with any appropriate modifiers. If the roll equals or exceeds his opponent's score, then he has delivered a tactical blow to his opponent's position and he may calculate the damage to his opponent's Social Standing. He will normally do 1 point of damage, plus 1 extra point for every 5 points by which he exceeded his opponent's Grace score he rolled.

Tactics of Debate

There are a number of specialised tactics that may be employed as special 'manoeuvres' in the arena of debate. Each tactic includes specialised rules for use and results. When using a tactic, follow the specific rules for that tactic instead of the standard action rules. Tactics often utilise skills in place of Wits or Grace. If this is the case, treat the skill rolls as opposed contested skill checks, with the winner suffering the consequences dictated by the tactic. Tactics are usually more immediately effective than the standard debate action.

Criticals and Fumbles

If a natural 20 is rolled on a Wit score roll, then the character has gained a critical success. He may automatically double any damage dealt to his opponent's Social Standing.

Likewise, a natural 1 will result in a major social stumble, in which he has accidentally opened himself to attack. His opponent immediately makes a retaliatory remark, rolling a Wits check as above, and comparing it to the fumbling opponent's Grace score, doing any damage dealt to Social Standing as described above.

Retaliation

Once the initiator has made his attack, then his opponent may retaliate, denying or accusing in his own manner, either using a tactic of debate as listed below, or a standard attack of his own. Once over with, if both parties still have a positive Social Standing score, then the process repeats, returning to the action phase.

Defeat

When someone loses all Social Standing points, they have been thwarted, their argument cast down and proved foolish, their Reputation cast into doubt and their position rendered moot and ineffective. The winning opponent takes the spoils as he wins the debate and sways the opinion of the crowd or his opponent to his own desired course of action. The rewards for such a circumstance are determined by the actual intent of the debate and the discretion of the Games Master.

Multiple Participants

When there is more than a single social combatant on a side, each side must select one speaker as its champion. The champion makes all attacks and is target for all opposing attacks, allies simply assist their champions. During each attack, the allies all make the required skill roll against a difficulty of 10, for every ally who succeeds, the champion gains a +1 bonus to their current debate action. Clearly, the side with the most combatants is at an advantage, though a charismatic individual can overcome even a large disparity in numbers.

TACTICS OF DEBATE

Characters may employ any of these specialised techniques in the course of their debate to try and disarm, obfuscate, refute or otherwise shatter an opponent's position. Each tactic includes special rules pertaining to its use, which are employed in the 'action' phase of the debate instead of the default rules for verbal jousting.

TACTIC DESCRIPTION FORMAT

Each tactic is described below in the following format:

NAME The name of the tactic.

Skill: The skill or attribute used to employ the tactic. If some other defence than an opponent's Grace score is used to refute the tactic, it will be listed here.

Retaliation: When employing a special tactic of debate, certain forms can open up the attacking character to a retaliatory response if he fails to present his argument in a sound manner. If the tactic indicates that an opponent may have an opportunity for retaliation, it will indicate so in the text. A retaliatory attack happens if the attempted tactic fails. The retaliation happens immediately, on the instigator's action and is resolved as a standard debate action, much as if the character had rolled a fumble. If the tactic allows retaliation and the attacking character fails as well as rolling a fumble, then his opponent may retaliate with a +4 bonus to his effort for this action only.

Goal: Changes to the tactic or affects the intended goal of the aggressor, are noted here.

Description: The details of the tactic of debate and any special results or rules are noted here.

BLACKMAIL, IMPLIED

Skill: Wits

Retaliation: Yes

Goal: –

Description: This tactic is used to subtly insinuate that one of the target's damaging secrets will be revealed if the target is not more amenable to the aggressor's intentions. If this tactic is successful, the target suffers 1d3 + the aggressor's Charisma bonus in social damage. Targets who do not have any secrets to protect receive a natural +10 bonus to their Grace score against this tactic. If the aggressor does not *know* a secret of the targets, the target receives a +5 circumstance bonus to their Grace, as well.

BLACKMAIL, DIRECT

Skill: Intimidate or Wits (higher of two). Defence requires Bluff or Grace (higher of the two)

Retaliation: Yes

Goal: When this tactic is used, the aggressor's goal immediately becomes an action goal.

Description: Rather than beating around the bush, the aggressor flat out states what will happen if the defender refuses to comply with his wishes. If the aggressor uses this tactic in a semi-public or public location, his reputation may change to 'cruel', 'trickster' or 'villain' at the Games Master's discretion. Targets who do not have any secrets to protect receive a natural +10 bonus to their defence against this tactic. If the aggressor does not *know* a secret of the

targets, the target receives a +5 circumstance bonus to their defence, as well. If the tactic succeeds, the target suffers 1d4 + the aggressor's Charisma bonus in social damage.

BRIBE

Skill: Wits; Will save bonus is used for defence

Retaliation: Yes. If the target tactic fails, the target may immediately make a retaliatory action, using one of the Blackmail tactics. In addition, a target that becomes an aggressor has the advantage of knowing an indiscretion committed by the character (the attempted briber).

Goal: If this tactic fails, it may only be attempted again if the initial bribe is increased by at least 20%. If it fails a second time, the target is not susceptible to bribes and the tactic may not be used again in this challenge. Whether it succeeds or fails, the goal of the conflict must be either a desired action or swaying of an opinion. For swaying opinions, the bribe must be periodically reinforced, typically once a month and 1/10th of the initial bribe is needed for maintenance. If a payment is missed, the target is no longer swayed. However, the character automatically knows the target is guilty of an indiscretion (accepting the bribe), which can be used as an advantage in future social conflicts. Of course, the target knows the same about the character, which could limit the usefulness of that particular tactic.

Description: Bribery is an effective technique in achieving specific actions and goals, and aggressors who attempt this action will get an automatic +4 bonus to all social rolls in the attempt if both parties have previously engaged in any form of illegal action. The bribe must also vary in size. The minimum bribe necessary for this tactic to work should equal 10 times the level of the opponent in silver pieces. The coinage immediately changes to gold lunas if the opponent is noble or holds some sort of noble lineage. The bribing character may double the base amount of the bribe to gain



a +2 bonus on his bribe attempt. There is no limit to the number of times he may do this.

Example: A merchant who is bribing a local thief's guild to leave him alone meets with the boss, who is a 5th level thief. He offers him 50 silver pieces to leave his store alone for the month. Upkeep rules for the goal indicate he will be paying five silver pieces each month thereafter to keep them away. The same merchant later bribes a local merchant lord to give him exclusive rights to a certain vintage Aquilonian brew. The noble is 7th level, so he will need a minimum of 70 gold lunas to convince him that this is a good idea. To hedge his bet, he doubles that sum to 140 and gets a +2 modifier to his bribery attempt. If he had raised the bribe to 210 gold lunas, he would have gained a +4 modifier.

Games Masters may determine that the base amount of a bribe is larger (or smaller) than the default formula would suggest, based on the nature and position of the person being bribed. Bribing a major noble or member of the royal family, for example, would cost significantly more than normal. Likewise, the desired result of the bribe could dictate a much larger price. As a rule, a desired action that is clearly illegal, criminal, or very dangerous may require anywhere between two and five times the normal bribe. Conversely, if the bribe is for something exceedingly simple or innocuous, such as slipping in to a party for which the character has no invitation, but is also not barred, may only require a bribe of half or less of the default value. The Games Master should use his judgement in assessing the actual minimum worth of a bribe.

FLIRT

Skill: Bluff or Wits (use higher), Will save or Grace for defence (use higher)

Retaliation: No

Goal: –

Description: This tactic involves using sex appeal and suggestive language to fluster or temporarily confuse a target. This tactic may only be used against targets of the appropriate sexual orientation and may not be used twice in succession. If the tactic succeeds, the target suffers 1d4 + the target's Charisma bonus in social damage. If maximum damage is rolled, the target is also *shocked* by what has occurred and will miss his next action trying to recover his composure.

LOGICAL ASSAULT

Skill: Bluff, or Wits (use higher); Will save used for defence

Retaliation: Yes

Goal: –

Description: This debate action relies on a circuitous set of logical assumptions designed to lead the target into admitting his own ignorance or fallacies in his position. The logical assault can also be used to convince a target of a position's

essential goodness or its universal benefit, regardless of the truth of the matter. If this tactic succeeds, the target suffers 1d3 + the attacker's Intelligence modifier in social damage. If the attack fails, however, the target gains 1d3 points of Social Standing and is allowed retaliatory action.

LURE

Skill: Sense Motive, Will save used for defence

Retaliation: Yes

Goal: –

Description: Characters who use this tactic attempt to draw out their target, using clever words and honeyed phrases to lure the target down a particular conversational course in an attempt to reveal the target's feelings on a particular subject. While this is not particularly dangerous, it does give the character information he can use for his next attack, should this tactic succeed. When this tactic is successful, the target loses only a single point of Social Standing, but the character gains a circumstance bonus to his next tactic equal to his current Intelligence modifier. If this tactic fails, the target is aware of the character's tactic and responds by feeding him false information. The target gains an immediate retaliatory action and a +2 circumstance bonus due to the misleading course he takes the conversation down.

REAFFIRM

Skill: Sense Motive or Wits (use higher), Will save or Grace (use higher) used for defence

Retaliation: Yes

Goal: –

Description: This defensive technique allows the character to recover his confidence and re-establish his original position in an argument. If the attack succeeds, the character regains 1d4 points in Social Standing but if it fails he leaves himself open for attack, giving his opponent gains a +2 circumstance bonus on his next debate action.

THREATEN

Skill: Intimidation, Will save used for defence

Retaliation: Yes

Goal: Use of this tactic destroys any chance of achieving any goal other than action.

Description: Use of this technique is a mark of desperation. Breaking the social convention of any meeting, it involves the direct threat of physical violence to be delivered at some later time. If successful, this tactic provides the character with a circumstance bonus equal to his Strength modifier on his next debate action. Note that use of this tactic requires the aggressor to change his goal to an action goal, regardless of how the conflict started. The Games Master might alter the character's Reputation to 'cruel' if the threats are sufficiently diabolical.

FEATS OF MESSANTIA

The following feats include a new type, Social feats. Social feats place an emphasis on discourse, argumentation, haggling and other forms of social interaction that are especially common among the Merchant Houses and aristocracy of Messantia. The Games Master may decide that some of the Social feats are also General feats and can be chosen by anyone who meets the prerequisites, but most apply to the debate rules on page 14 in addition with only occasional, conventional applications.

GRATEFUL PATRON (GENERAL)

Among the Merchant Houses of Messantia and baronies of Argos, a small but noteworthy handful of men have gained the respect and trust of the powerful and elite nobility. These few have proved their loyalty through deed and word to the noble or even the king, earning his admiration, respect and more importantly, his backing. The noble's patronage goes beyond any single reward or favour, a lasting relationship has been formed. The benefits of such a relationship include loans, political support, sanctuary or protection, while the noble in turn can expect the continuation of the close friendship and alliance.

Prerequisites: Characters must have completed an important task for a noble, either of a Merchant House or a barony. This task must have been exercised in good faith and provided a noteworthy political, economic or military advantage to the noble in question.

Benefit: The noble will not perform any favours for the character that would endanger his own position, but he is quite willing to do any of the following:

- ❖ Offer a loan worth 50 gold lunas per the patron's level to the character. This is an interest free loan that must be repaid in one year.
- ❖ Offer to put in a good word for the character with other nobility. This will grant a bonus of to the Reputation score of the character for purposes of that exchange, determined by the Games Master and based on the recognition of the noble providing the good word (typically +2 if the patron's Reputation is 30 or more).
- ❖ Allow the character and his companions to reside in one of the noble's properties or estates, or possibly even his own villa or keep, for a period of no more than 10 days.
- ❖ Protect the character from local law enforcement until such time as a full inquiry can be arranged. In this

case, the character will normally be kept under house arrest until his guilt or innocence can be ascertained.

As seen in the examples, any reasonable favour within the patron's power will be granted. While this feat cannot be 'lost' by a character under normal circumstances, any action by the character which the Games Master deems harmful to the position of this patron noble will lead to a suspension of this feat's benefits until the character makes amends (fulfils the prerequisites again). If the prerequisites are never fulfilled or the damaging actions continue, the Games Master can declare this feat lost.

INFORMANTS (GENERAL)

You have a network of individuals in a given city who keep their eyes and ears open. When you are in the city, these informants make it much easier to find out what is going on there.

Prerequisite: Gather Information 5 ranks, One Week spent putting together a network of informants in a city.

Benefit: The character receives a +5 circumstance bonus to any Gather Information checks made in a city in which they have informants. It is impossible to put together a network of informants in less than a week, which is the minimum amount of time the character must spend in a city in order to establish his network and check in with his informants.

Each Gather Information check for which this feat provides a bonus requires an expenditure of 1d6 silver lunas multiplied by the DC of the Gather Information check. If the information is especially lucrative, valuable or dangerous then the Games Master may increase this price.

Special: You can gain this feat multiple times. Its effects do not stack. Each time you take the feat, it applies to a different city.

RAPIER WIT (SOCIAL)

You are adept at running circles around the competition through verbal interplay. Your banter is witty and your dialogue charming. Those who engage you in discourse are left amazed at your apparent wealth of knowledge and witticisms. During social contests, you are exceptionally well prepared for whatever debate has ensued.

Prerequisite: Charisma 15+, Wisdom 13+, Social Grace

Benefit: The character receives a +2 bonus to your Wits score in a social debate. You also receive a permanent +2 modifier to your Bluff and Diplomacy skills.

SHREWD APPRAISER (GENERAL)

You have a keen eye for the value of goods, both common and rare, valuable and worthless. You take your time scrutinising

the value of any goods in which you might have an interest, relying on your extensive experience in appraisal.

Prerequisite: Appraise 6 ranks

Benefit: The character may take 20 on an Appraise check where you would normally take 10. Furthermore, if you fail an Appraise check, then the character is entitled to one reroll of the failed check.

SILVER TONGUE (SOCIAL)

You have mastered the talents of deception and misdirection in social interaction. Over the years, you have honed your social talents to the point where you can weave circles of deception about yourself and those around you, confusing and obfuscating any conversation to the point where your real motive and intentions are baffling. In turn are exceedingly good at ferreting out the truth from your opponents.

Prerequisite: Charisma 13+, Bluff 6 ranks, Sense Motive 6 ranks, Social Grace

Benefit: Opponents receive a -4 modifier to any attempt to Sense Motive against the character. The character in turn receives a +2 modifier to all Sense Motive checks when trying to manipulate an opponent into accidentally giving away their intentions. When engaging in a professional debate, the character receives +2 to his Wits score when using the Needling Conversation approach.

SLAVE OWNER (GENERAL)

Either as part of your heritage or as a gift from your noble patron, you control a small group of slaves. The slaves are skilled but otherwise normal retainers who serve you to the best of their abilities. They may be indentured servants, and you can set a price for their freedom that they must achieve over their months or years of servitude. In all respects, the slaves should be treated as Non-Player Characters and the Games Master may veto their actions if your choices seem contrary to the expected reactions of the slaves.

Prerequisites: Noble level 1, Grateful Patron

Benefit: The character receives 3 + Charisma modifier slaves. They may have widely varying cultural backgrounds, but may only have levels in the commoner and can never advance in any other class. The character must take heed of Messantian law (or whatever local law applies) with regard to the treatment of his slaves. Retainers do not count against the number of followers a character may gain using the Leadership feat and will not leave the character unless he releases them from their duty. Slaves gain one level for every five levels gained by their master.

SOCIAL GRACE (SOCIAL)

Where others stumble over their words or become ensnared in the clever arguments of courtiers, you are able to retain

your composure and protect your social standing with grace.

Prerequisite: Charisma 12+, Wisdom 11+

Benefit: The character receives a +2 bonus to his Grace score in any social contest.

STREET-SMART (GENERAL)

You are intimately familiar with its nooks, crannies, alleys and byways. Maybe as a small child you were dodging the law while filching from the markets, as you got older your intimate familiarity with the city has become a key advantage.

Benefit: The character receives a +2 modifier to Knowledge (local) and Gather Information when attempting to use either skill in his native city. The character may also make an Intelligence check (DC 10) at any time he becomes lost or disoriented when in his native city to become reoriented.

Special: You can gain this feat multiple times. Its effects do not stack. Each time you take the feat, it applies to a different city.

STRONG SOCIAL

STANDING (SOCIAL)

By virtue of your reputation, hearty spirit and affable or unassailable nature, you have a stronger than normal social standing. Beyond merely your reputation or affable nature, others sometimes see you as unassailable when they attempt to engage you in debate.

Prerequisite: Noble level 4, Charisma 12+, Wisdom 12+

Benefit: The character receives a +4 bonus to his Social Standing score.

Special: This feat may be only be taken once.

VENOMOUS TONGUE (SOCIAL)

Your insults are so rude others are often stunned by your vile words. Though not as useful for convincing a target to change his opinion, these insults are often excellent ways to provoke a target to take a specific action.

Benefit: When making an Intimidation or Bullying attempt during a social encounter, the character receives a +2 competence bonus to his skill checks. If the character exceeds his target's Social Standing by 10 or more, the target must also make a Will save (DC equal to 10 + the character's Charisma modifier) or become *shocked* by his insults, suffering a -2 penalty to his next social attack action.

From Hero to Slave

Expanded rules for Hirelings & Slaves

DURING THE TIME of Conan, when one thinks of 'slaves' the first thing that comes to mind is a nubile virgin, head bowed, beautiful face, well-formed body, submissive and perfectly helpless. Perhaps a muscular, broken tribal youth whose fate is to be stripped of all will and forced to push a mill wheel for the rest of his natural life. Maybe even a eunuch, ordered to guard a seraglio or carry a palanquin and destined to be beheaded by the first daring adventurer that crosses his path. However, not all slaves are of the helpless, unassuming and useless kind – in the Hyborian Age it is possible to own and buy every kind of human being, from the rather pitiful examples given above to a full-grown warrior or even a scholar. The following rules are intended to handle the acquisition of above-average slaves and henchmen.

Keep in mind that adding rules to hire or buy above average slaves may seriously imbalance your game, allowing every character to acquire Non-Player Character henchmen at a relatively low cost. Also, slaves with Player Character classes, being heroes in their own right, may detract from the spotlight and glory of their masters and, worse still, the rest of the party, if their owner lets his slaves do all the dangerous work. On the other hand, having slaves with abilities and training of their own can, if properly handled and strictly watched, enrich the game experience of everyone, both Players and Games Masters. *The Black Stranger* or *Hawks over Shem* illustrate this point perfectly, being stories that not only feature, but are based on the schemes and machinations of slaves that are much more than they seemed.

SLAVE SHOPPING

The costs given for slaves in *Conan the Roleplaying Game* assume the slave to be a 1st level commoner, with no other experience or training. If you desire to introduce slaves with more experience into your game, use the Slave Cost table instead of the one found in *Conan the Roleplaying Game*.



Slave Costs

Item	Cost*
Commoner, male	10 sp per class level
Commoner, female	30 sp per class level
Noble, male	150 sp + 50 sp per class level
Noble, female	200 sp + 100 sp per class level
Scholar or soldier	40 sp per class level
Other classes	30 sp per class level

* The cost for all slaves should be halved if the slave is particularly rebellious or unpleasant (such as a captured barbarian); by the same token, double the price of any slave that is especially hardworking and/or submissive. If beauty is a desirable trait for the buyer, a slaver may further double the price for an exceptionally attractive slave (Charisma 15 or more).

To be able to sell the slave at a price given for a class other than commoner, the slaver must first be aware of the slave's character class and then provide visible proof

of it, particularly in the case of noble slaves. Otherwise, all slaves are worth no more than commoners. Slaves with more than one class have the combined cost of all their class levels.

The 90% price reduction for slaves bought in Turan applies only to the cost of commoner slaves; slaves of other classes bought in Turan cost one-half (as opposed to one-tenth) the listed price. Keep in mind that not all character classes are available in all slave markets, and particularly rare specimens can reach astronomical prices.

SLAVE ABILITIES

The above prices assume the slave has an average (non-elite) array of ability scores (13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8). If you wish the slave to have his ability scores rolled as per the standard character generation method, the total price for the slave is doubled. This doubling is cumulative with all other price increases incurred from the slave's quality and character; thus, a slave that is particularly hardworking/submissive (x2), beautiful (x2) and has an elite array of abilities (x2) costs six times the amount given in the slave cost table. Slaves with ability scores obtained by the heroic character generation method are simply not available in the Hyborian Age.



HIRING HANDS

Absolute possession is not the only method available to buy people in the Hyborian Age. Professionals can be

hired, their services paid as a salary instead of buying them outright. The following costs should apply to the service of hirelings in *Conan the Roleplaying Game*.

To be able to demand the listed price, a character must be specifically hired for the corresponding task. An expert

Hireling Services

Hireling	Cost per Day*	Notes
Apprentice	1 sp per every 2 ranks of Craft or Profession, or two character levels	Includes all tradesmen, craftsmen and other hired workers up to 5 th level
Craftsman	2 sp per every 2 ranks of Craft or Profession, or two character levels	Includes all tradesmen, craftsmen and other hired workers up to 10 th level
Master Craftsman	3 sp per every 2 ranks of Craft or Profession, or two character levels	Includes all tradesmen, craftsmen and other hired workers of 11 th level or higher
Soldier	1 sp per soldier level	Includes any soldier with up to two Formation Combat styles
Man-at-Arms	2 sp per soldier level	Includes any soldier with up to three Formation Combat styles
Officer	3 sp per soldier level	Includes any soldier with four or more Formation Combat styles
Sage	2 sp per scholar level	Includes any non-magical scholar
Priest	4 sp per scholar level	Includes any character with the Priest feat
Sorcerer	8 sp per scholar level	Included any magically-oriented scholar
Specialist	4 sp per character level	Includes specialists of any character class or profession

* All the costs listed in this table are in addition to any feeding and housing expenses, which are also the responsibility of the employer.

FROM HERO TO SLAVE

thief whose employer does not know or care about his thieving abilities is most likely to be hired (and paid) as a simple recruit.

LABOURER LOYALTY

Owning another human being is one thing; earning their loyalty is another. Most servants and henchmen in the Hyborian Age will turn on their masters immediately when faced with an apparently good reason to do it – and for a slave there are plenty of reasons.

Whenever the possibility arises for a Non-Player Character slave or hireling to disobey or betray his master, he must make a Loyalty check. The Games Master has the last word on whether a Loyalty check is called for, but a good rule of thumb is to require one whenever the slave or hireling is presented with a good opportunity to defy his master (such as a bribe, a better payment offer, a chance to escape or defect and so on) *and* he can get away with it.

The base DC for a Loyalty check is 30 plus the slave or hireling's Corruption score (if any). A hireling or slave's Loyalty check is calculated thus:

Loyalty check = 1d20 + Wisdom Bonus + Will Save

A hireling or slave may add the difference between his level and that of his master to the Loyalty check as a bonus if the slave or hireling is of a higher level than his master. If the master is a higher level than the slave or hireling then the difference between the two characters' levels is applied as a penalty to the Loyalty check. If the save fails, it means the character will gladly defy his owner or employer; that is, he will defect, take the bribe, run from the fight, desert, escape or even attack his master, depending on the circumstances that prompted the loyalty Will save.

Player Character slaves or hirelings never make loyalty Will saves; the decision whether to betray their master or not is theirs alone. Followers attained via the Leadership feat are likewise never required to make loyalty Will saves.

Allegiance: If a slave or hireling has an Allegiance to anything or anyone other than his master, apply a –2 penalty to all loyalty Will saves made by that slave or hireling. This penalty changes to –5 if the master has an Allegiance that clearly opposes that of the slave or hireling. In the rare case that a slave actually has an Allegiance to his master, treat him as if he was a follower; that is, he should not have to make loyalty Will saves.

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Slaves and hirelings will, sooner or later, advance in level. While it stands to logic for Non-Player Characters to go up in levels normally as characters do, in game terms it may quickly become unbalancing, turning a Player Character's retinue into a small army and detracting from the flavour of *Conan the Roleplaying Game*.

The Games Master is encouraged to use one of the following options to handle the level advancement of Non-Player Character slaves and hirelings.

Advancement Based on Master's Experience: Slaves and hirelings gain one quarter of all the experience earned by their master; thus, if a character earns 1,000 experience points upon finishing an adventure, each of his slaves and hirelings would gain 250 experience points. This method strains suspension of disbelief and makes it harder to keep account of experience points; nevertheless it is a thorough and balanced experience distribution system.

Advancement Based on Master's Level: Slaves and hirelings advance one level for every three character levels earned by their master. This is a safe and easy, if somewhat unrealistic, way to keep the level of Non-Player Character servants steadily advancing, while maintaining their level significantly below their master's.

Independent Advancement: Slaves and hirelings advance in levels just as other characters do, though they only earn experience if they actually take an important part in the development of an adventure. A slave or hireling that was nothing but part of the background during the adventure should earn no experience points at all. Furthermore, a slave or hireling may never earn more than 500 experience points per adventure, since his very reason for undertaking it was the design of another character. This is the most realistic of the systems suggested herein, yet it requires the Games Master to keep a separate record for each slave and hireling in the party, which may be a daunting task when dealing with large groups.

From Ruins & Catacombs

Sorcery in Argos

WHILE SORCERY IS an uncommon practice among Argosseans and active sorcerers take many risks when attempting to practice their art within the city of Messantia, the land itself has an ancient history of magic. Long ago, the Acheronians were a powerful force in the Hyborian world and Argos was a centre point in their expansive empire. Messantia itself was founded atop the ruins of a great Acheronian city, now buried and forgotten by all but a few. Of the handful of sorcerers who have sought to plumb the depths of these ruins and catacombs for secrets, a few have been rewarded with terrifying and potent discoveries. The following new spells are representative of such magic, including those uncovered by the sorcerer Amenkuhn and his descendant, Zuthelia. Games Masters may wish to restrict discovery of these spells to characters that have sought to mount expeditions into the Acheronian ruins beneath the city or the distant heights of Orinolo.

DIVINATION SPELLS

SHADE

PP Cost: 2 plus 1/extra 10 minutes

Components: V, S

Casting Time: Five minutes

Range: See below

Targets: Special

Duration: 10 minutes per level

Saving Throw: Special (see below)

Prerequisites: Scholar level 3, Hide 4 ranks, *visions*

Magic Attack Roll: Sets DC to dispel via *warding*

The shade is an incorporeal shadow of the sorcerer's spirit, pulled from his aura and sent out to uncover secrets and esoteric knowledge for the scholar while his mind and body rest in safety. The shade is an insubstantial projection of the scholar's spiritual essence, through which the scholar may observe, but may not interact.

The shade is summoned through a complicated process by which the scholar attunes his mind to esoteric signs and symbols, drawn in the ether of his dreams. Once performed, the very shadow of the caster separates from his body, moving about as he would command it. The shadow can move at twice the speed of the caster and may travel any distance it can reach provided that both the start and end points of the

journey are in areas of shadowy illumination. The caster can increase the duration of the spell by expending power points.

Through his shade, the sorcerer can hear normally and see as if he has darkvision for 60 feet. He may attempt Listen, Spot and Search rolls, provided he does not need to move or alter the environment to make the skill check. The shade automatically has a Hide and Move Silently skill of 10 for purposes of avoiding detection. Though it is difficult to detect, the shade appears to be a shadow of a man that moves independently.

Any sorcerer who casts a *warding* spell in the presence of the shade must defeat the DC set by the shade master's magic attack roll to dispel the projection and severing its penumbral tie to its caster.

NECROMANCY SPELLS

AMENKUHN'S GOLEM

PP Cost: 10 plus 1/extra HD/see below

Components: V, S, M

Casting Time: One week

Range: See below

Targets: Special

Duration: Permanent

Saving Throw: Special (see below)

Prerequisites: Scholar level 5, *raise corpse*, Knowledge (arcana) 8 ranks, Decipher Script 8 ranks

Magic Attack Roll: None

Whispered into the ears of Zuthelia by Amenkuhn's foul spirit, this ancient spell may well have been created in the decadent, forgotten of the Acheronians. It is just as likely that Amenkuhn himself culled the spell from the forbidden knowledge made available to his ethereal spirit, while trapped in the nameless limbo beyond.

To cast this spell, a sorcerer must gather a dozen or more corpses inside a magic circle that must be drawn from ancient arcane script derived from the Acheronian language. The corpses must have been the victims, directly or indirectly or sorcery. If the sorcerer intends for the golem to be possessed,

FROM RUINS AND CATACOMBS

then he must have possession of the possessing spirit's soul, either in the form of a body part or a magical device which contains the soul.

The spell takes one week to prepare, during which the bodies must be ritually sewn together inside the circle of magic, with a lengthy litany of enchantments spoken during this period. At the end of the week, the sorcerer must spend one hour investing his power points into the golem, bringing it to life. The creature (page 28) will complete its sorcerous animation as the desiccated flesh takes on a strange unlife and the golem's various components coagulate into a terrible whole. The creature will function as an automaton, albeit one with a strange thirst for destruction.

The golem is controllable by its creator, who must invest one power point per day in the creature to keep control of it in a ritual that takes 10 minutes, during which the golem must remain within the circle of power in which it was created. Should the sorcerer fail to make this offering, the golem will become autonomous, killing at random. The sorcerer may re-establish control by offering a sacrifice of four power points and making a Will save (DC 20) to bring the golem back under his control.

Should the sorcerer wish to provide a possessing spirit to bring sentience to the golem, he must offer up the artefact or object containing the soul of the possessor. It must be placed on or in the body of the golem and allowed six days to bond with the creature, during which time the spirit must make a Will save (DC 20) to take control of the body. The spirit will have a Will save equal to that which it had in life. If the spirit fails, then the golem rejects the possessor, ripping the object from its body and losing control, becoming violent to all around it, including its creator. The sorcerer may not regain control of the raging construct as what little mind it had is now completely unhinged. If the possessing spirit succeeds, then the golem becomes, effectively, a new body for the wayward soul and the golem is now under control of this spirit, rather than its creator.

BLACKBLOOD PLAGUE

PP Cost: 18 points/vial

Components: V, S, M

Casting Time: One evening (8 hours)

Range: See below

Targets: Special

Duration: Permanent

Saving Throw: Fortitude negates (see below)

Prerequisites: Scholar level 8, *raise corpse*, Craft (alchemy) 12 ranks, Knowledge (arcana) 12 ranks, Ritual Sacrifice

Magic Attack Roll: Sets DC for target's saving throws

The Blackblood plague was a terrifying disease unleashed upon Messantia and was responsible for the death of thousands.

Behind this terrible spell was the Stygian, Amenkuhn, whose quest for ancient power and revenge nearly laid the city low before his death. The Blackblood plague spreads through filth, vermin and human contact. It is extremely contagious and once someone is within 30 feet of an infected subject, they are immediately subject to the Fortitude saving throw to stave of the disease. Likewise, moving through filth in a plague-ridden area or being bitten or touched by diseased animals is sufficient for exposure.

The Blackblood plague begins with a small vial of blackish, sanguine liquid distilled from a mixture of ancient mummies and the blood of a suitable human sacrifice. The sorcerer must perform the ritual over a day, after grinding the flesh of a desiccated mummy into powder with a pestle made of human bone. The sacrificial victim must be virginal, pure of spirit and deed. The ritual must be performed on the night of a new moon. If all requirements are met, then the spell maybe cast. The sorcerer must have a special vial, a reliquary in which to store the tainted blood, which is mixed with the powdered mummy flesh. The end product is about two ounces of deadly liquid, a pure form of the Blackblood plague that will infect on contact.

Victims of Blackblood suffer initially from trembling limbs and black, bloody welts that begin to spread across their bodies. For each day of infection, the victim may make a Fortitude save against the DC, which is based on the sorcerer's magical attack bonus. Because of the nature of the contagion, the DC is calculated once as a value equal to 10 + the magical attack bonus and Charisma modifier of the sorcerer. This applies to those who are subjected to the pure form of Blackblood. The DC is -4 for saving throws of those who are exposed indirectly through infected people or areas.

For each daily Fortitude save failed on the daily checks, a target suffers the permanent loss of 1d3 points of Constitution, Strength and Charisma. If the victim's Charisma eventually reaches 0 first, then the disease goes into remission and the victim falls into a coma. The character may make a Fortitude save once a week to see if he recovers; success means he regains one point of Charisma and the disease ceases its continued ravaging of the victim's body. However, the effects already inflicted on the victim remain. If the victim's Strength of Constitution reach 0 first, then the character dies. Death by Blackblood is a terrible sight and victims are rarely recognisable towards the final stages of the disease as they are covered in welts, cough blackened blood from their rotting lungs and bleed from every orifice.

SUMMONING SPELLS

LESSER POSSESSION

PP Cost: 6 points

Components: V, M

Casting Time: One minute

Range: 25 feet + 5 ft./level

Targets: One target

Duration: 3 rounds plus 1 round per level

Saving Throw: Will negates

Prerequisites: Magical attack bonus +4, Knowledge (arcana) 6 ranks, *demonic pact*, *master-words and signs*

Magic Attack Roll: Sets DC for target's saving throws

It is possible to summon entities that can be offered a human vessel for possession. Such beings may act for a short period in the mortal realm, usually at the behest of the summoner. The exact nature of the possessing being is variable, depending upon the intention and interest of the sorcerer or his sect. Some entities may come from the outer darkness, while others may be disembodied spirits, souls of the dead or occasionally even the strong dominant mental presence of some dark, demonic god.

The target of a lesser possession will usually be in the presence of the caster. The caster must activate the spell by mentally contacting the presence of an entity, which he then directs at the target. The entity will immediately attempt to invade the target's mind, provoking a Will saving throw. The DC for this save is based on the scholar's magic attack roll, as this reflects the strongest entity he can summon. If the target fails, he becomes dominated by the entity. Depending upon the nature of the entity, it may have a fairly varied agenda, and will obey the sorcerer only to the limits of its own discretion. The sorcerer should make a Will save (DC 20), to see if the entity will comply with his commands. If the save fails, then the entity will ignore or attack the caster instead of obey him.

At the end of the spell duration, the possessed victim is released and regains control of his own self. He will have full clarity of the possession, as if he were watching himself from behind his own shoulder.

GREATER POSSESSION

PP Cost: 12 points

Components: V, M

Casting Time: 10 minutes

Range: 100 miles plus 50 miles per level

Targets: One target

Duration: 1 hour per level

Saving Throw: Will negates

Prerequisites: Magical attack bonus +6, Knowledge (arcana) 8 ranks, *demonic pact*, *master-words and signs*

Magic Attack Roll: Sets DC for target's saving throws

Like lesser possession, greater possession allows the caster to make mental contact with entities from beyond and offer them a moment's freedom in the mortal shells of unwitting humans. The entity is usually a being that either is unable to become corporeal or that roams the many dimensions of reality seeking a means of release onto the physical plane. These beings are often demonic gods, dark and powerful beings that could be very dangerous to the summoner without precautions.

This spell works as *lesser possession* in all respects except those noted above.

SPAWN OF THE BLACK HEART

PP Cost: 15 points

Components: S, V, M

Casting Time: One hour

Range: Special

Targets: None

Duration: Permanent

Saving Throw: Fortitude negates and see below

Prerequisites: Scholar level 4+, Knowledge (arcana) 6 ranks, Craft (alchemy) 6 ranks

Magic Attack Roll: None

The Acheronians created a mechanism by which a heart could be extracted and magically treated to turn it into a leathery, slowly beating necrotic egg. The heart can later be used as the focal point used to summon forth the terrible spawn of the black heart (page 29) from the outer darkness.

The sorcerer who casts this spell must prepare a heart using the ancient Acheronian techniques, diluting the mortal blood of the fresh organ and then preserving it in the necrotic fluids extracted from the brain matter of ghouls. The heart is hardened and reanimated through a series of incantations, at which time the demonic being is summoned, it's essence trapped within the organ. The spawn of the black heart, thus created, is a permanent entity until destroyed. The spell is disrupted should the heart ever be destroyed.

The spawn of the black heart, once summoned, will obey one command from its summoner, after which it leaves to perform its task, becoming an independent entity. The summoner must attempt a pact with it to gain further access to the creature. The one command the spawn of the black heart receives must be succinct and stated on one sentence, such as 'Kill my husband' or 'Guard this tomb.' The spawn will not obey commands of a sweeping or broadly interpreted nature, such as 'Destroy the kingdom' or 'Hunt down all my enemies'.

Bestiary of Argos

Dark Denizens of Sea, Street & Sewer

Within the kingdom of Argos, ancient entities still exist that are a testament to the ancient might and fearsome magic of lost Acheron. Some of these beings were the product of Acheronian magic, and a handful of such beings still lurk in the darkest corners of the Acheronian ruins even today. Messantia, built atop these ruins, is not free from horrific visitations by these beasts.

BILE RAT

Small Animal

Hit Dice: 1d8 (5 hp)

Initiative: +5 (+3 Dex, +2 Reflex)

Speed: Walk 30 ft. or Swim 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence Value: 13 (+3 Dex)

Damage Reduction: 1 (tough hide)

Base Attack/Grapple: +1/+1

Attack: Bite +4 melee (1d4)

Full Attack: Bite +4 melee (1d4)

Space/Reach: 5 ft. /5 ft.

Special Attacks: Diseased Bite

Special Qualities: Darkvision 120 ft., Scent

Saves: Fort +2, Ref +5, Will +0

Abilities: Str 10, Dex 17, Con 10, Int 2, Wis 10, Cha 2

Skills: Hide +11, Move Silently +11, Spot +1, Swim +8

Feats: Weapon Finesse (bite)

Climate/Terrain: Any urban, subterranean, swamp

Organisation: Packs (2-20) or swarms (40-100)

Advancement: 2 – 3 HD (Medium); 4 – 6 HD (Large)

Viscous, sanguine eyes stare out at you from the darkness, the scuttle of sharp claws brings the bile rat into view. Almost the size of a small dog, its body is covered with matted, bristle-like black fur, long, razor-sharp buck teeth glint in the half-light, while its tail, a thick pink cord, whips back and forth.

Moving like wild dogs, these large rodents dwarf their more common cousins. Living in large colonies of up to 1,000, the bile rat are as predatory as wolves. Though they are known to have infested the sewers, tunnels and middens of the city, these scabrous, bristle-haired monsters all but reign the Swills of Messantia. The bile rat preys on its lesser cousins as readily as it eats garbage and will willingly attack game animals, children or even an unsuspecting adult if they move in a pack.

COMBAT

Diseased Bite (Ex): The bite of the bile rat is particularly virulent and disease-ridden. Any attack which inflicts damage forces the bitten target to make a Fortitude save (DC 12), or be stricken with a disease that deals 1d3 points of Constitution damage per day. Each day thereafter, the victim may make another Fortitude save (DC 15) to recover, failure to make this save causes the victim to suffer another 1d3 points of Constitution damage. If the victim makes his saving throw, he recovers and begins healing.

Skills: Bile rats receive a racial bonus of +8 to the Hide, Move Silently and Swim skills.

BONE GOLEM

Large Construct (demon)

Hit Dice: 12d10 (66 hp)

Initiative: +4 (+4 Reflex)

Speed: 20 ft. (4 squares)

Defence Value: 19 (+9 natural)

Damage Reduction: 4

Base Attack/Grapple: +9/+20

Attack: Slam +17 melee (1d8+7)

Full Attack: Two slams +17 melee (1d8+7 each)

Space/Reach: 10 ft. (2)/15 ft. (3)

Special Attacks: Absorbing Attack

Special Qualities: Darkvision 60 ft.

Saves: Fort +8, Ref +8, Will +4

Abilities: Str 24, Dex 10, Con –, Int 3*, Wis 10, Cha 1

Skills: Listen +6, Spot +6

Feats: Greater Cleave, Multiattack, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (slam)

Climate/Terrain: Any

Organisation: Solitary

Advancement: 13 – 15 HD (huge); 16 – 18 HD (colossal)

* The intelligence of a controlling spirit will supplement the golem's base Intelligence

It staggers forward, a giant mass of dried sinew, flesh and bone move as one, bound together by tar and sorcery. A dozen foul mouths open, vomiting black, viscous tar from their lolling jaws, gurgling and wailing the cries of the damned. There is no head upon the behemoth's shoulders, merely a sodden stump of bone and muscle, pulsing pitch with each step.

The bone golem is close to 10-feet tall and very broad in shoulder. Its mass is composed of the mummified remains of its host subjects, crushed and congealed together with a black, vicious tar that leaks like blood. The golem has no head, though a number of human skulls are imbedded in its mass. These skulls shift across the golems body surfacing to let out a low, terrifying wail before sinking into its body once again.

Creating a bone golem requires the use of *Amenkubn's bone golem* spell (see page 25). The process involves dozens of mummified bodies, all of which must have died from a disease, and when completed can become the receptacle for a powerful wizard's spirit. The spirit of the sorcerer must be contained within a bone fragment of his original body in order for it to fuse with the constructed body. Without the head, the bone golem is merely a very insidious, demonic being of animal intelligence and a lust for slaughter. It can only ever obeys its creator or the will of its controlling spirit.

COMBAT

Bone golems are surprisingly fast, for although they lumber along at an even pace, they can make short and sudden bursts to grab and absorb opponents. The bone golem's primary tactic is to bash a target into submission before attempting to absorb it into its mass. The golem will gradually expand its body in this fashion, adding to its own dimensions. Bone golems created by the ancient Acheronians were said to grow to a staggering 20-feet.



Absorbing Attack (Ex): If the bone golem succeeds in a grapple attack, then it inflicts its full slam damage on the first round and each round thereafter will attempt to absorb its grappled opponent into its own mass. The grappled target must make a Fortitude saving throw (DC 16) on each successive round or suffer 1d3 points of Constitution drain in addition to the continued slam damage. The bone golem will gain five additional hit points for each point of Constitution its victim loses. When the grappled target has lost all of its Constitution, then it is dead and has become a part of the bone golem's body. The bone golem will gain a permanent extra hit die and will retain the absorbed hit points for 24 hours or until depleted.

Darkvision (Ex): The bone golem can see in the dark up to 60-feet. Darkvision enables the bone golem to see in black and white only, but it is otherwise like normal sight, and golem can function perfectly well with no light at all.

SPAWN OF THE BLACK HEART

Medium Outsider (demon)

Hit Dice: 3d8+12 (25 hp)

Initiative: +11 (+4 Dex, +3 Reflex, +4 Improved Initiative)

Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares), fly 60 ft. (good) (12 squares)

Defence Value: 16 (+4 Dex, +2 natural)

Damage Reduction: 3 (porous body)

Base Attack/Grapple: +3/+10

Attack: Slam +4 melee (1d8+1)

Full Attack: Slam +4 melee (1d8+1)

Space/Reach: 5ft. (1)/5 ft. (1)

Special Attacks: Smothering Strike

Special Qualities: Banished by Sunlight, Darkvision 120 ft., Malleable Form

Saves: Fort +7, Ref +7, Will +2

Abilities: Str 13, Dex 18, Con 18, Int 10, Wis 13, Cha 3

Skills: Hide +22, Listen +13, Move Silently +9, Spot +6

Feats: Improved Initiative, Weapon Focus (slam)

Climate/Terrain: Any land or underground

Organisation: Solitary

Advancement: 4 – 5 HD (Medium); 6 – 8 HD (Large)

Manifesting like a shadowy cloud of luminous, sanguine eyes glowing in the dark, the spawn of the black heart is ever changing, its form shifting from a great, winged demon wreathed in smoke to an amorphous mass which drapes about its victims like a death shroud. Its eyes grow brighter, twitching more furiously, with each kill.

The spawn of the black heart is a demon from some unknown outer region summoned by a sorcerer who gains possession of, or creates the vessel necessary to call upon this terrible being. The creature focuses its dreadful essence upon a

BESTIARY OF ARGOS

mummified black heart, which has been properly prepared according to a series of dark summoning rituals to bind its essence to the mortal realm. The creature manifests as a floating monstrosity, composed entirely of writhing strands of smoke wrapped around a pulsing, porous membrane which is stretched over a vicious fluid in which the heart, and dozens of glowing red eyes reside. It can close these eyes and draw itself into the shadows, all but disappearing from sight. The beast is able to change its form to parody any number of shapes, though it commonly takes the shape of a pulsing, gargoyle-like monstrosity carried aloft on great wings.

If the beast is slain in combat, then its corpse will begin to dissolve into a powdery, charcoal-like substance, leaving only a shrivelled black heart, which beats with an unnatural life. If the blackened heart is not destroyed by fire, then the beast will arise again the following night, to pursue its slayers. Scholars with a familiarity in the school of Summoning might identify the foul object for what it is, the key ingredient in the *black heart of darkness* ritual.

Because the spawn are banished by the light of the sun, these beasts have an unnatural fear of all light, shunning those places which are well lit in the night time. As cunning beings, they are very patient, and will wait months, years, or even a lifetime if need be to slay their prey.

Acheronian sorcerers called upon the spawn as minions in their terrifying schemes. The first black hearts were created in this ancient era and are prized by sorcerers who can still find them, beating in dark and hidden ruins. These most ancient spawn are said to have grown to immense size and their black hearts have expanded from shrivelled, fist-sized lumps to hideous, pulsing hearts the size of a horse's head.

COMBAT

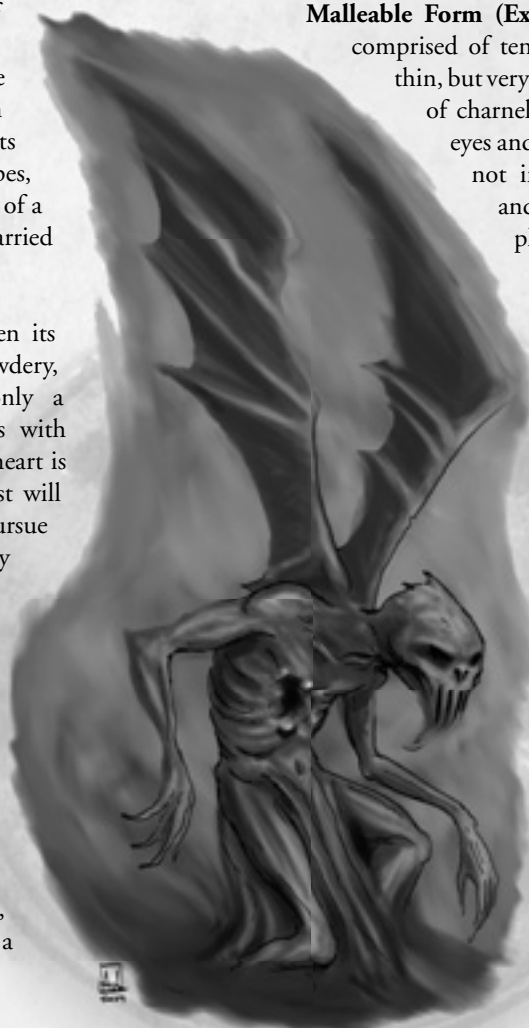
Banished by Sunlight (Su): The spawn of the black heart is unable to bear the light of the sun and will be banished back to its nameless hell when exposed to the full light of the sun. It is not destroyed by the sunlight and cannot take any other action once exposed.

Darkvision (Ex): The spawn of the black heart can see in the dark up to 120-feet. Darkvision enables the spawn of the black heart to see in black and white only, but it is otherwise like normal sight, and spawn can function perfectly well with no light at all.

Malleable Form (Ex): The spawn of the black heart is comprised of tendrils of smoke-stained liquid and a thin, but very strong and pliable, porous membrane of charnel tissue, in which dozens of glowing eyes and its black heart are imbedded. While not immune to critical attacks (its eyes and heart can be struck), the spawn's pliable and ever-changing body make it especially resilient to damage. The spawn of the black heart may ignore the AP value of penetrating attacks from piercing weapons. It may also shift its body into whatever shape or form it needs to pass through cracks and passages, no matter how small. At the Games Master's discretion, it may take 1d4 combat rounds for the spawn of the black heart to reshape or flatten its body to squeeze through such gaps.

Smothering Strike (Ex): The spawn of the black heart may attempt to grapple with a foe. If it wins a grapple check, then it may immediately attempt a smothering strike. It receives a +6 modifier to its base grapple attack due to the demon's malleable body. Once it has engulfed a target, it immediately inflicts slam damage and the target immediately begins to suffocate as the spawn of the black heart forces itself into the mouth of its victim's and into his lungs. Each round after the initial attack, the victim must make a Fortitude save (DC 16) or fall into unconsciousness from lack of oxygen. The spawn will continue to inflict full slam damage each round until dislodged from the grapple.

Skills: All spawn of the black heart receive a +8 racial modifier to their Hide and Listen skills. The porous, smoke-like body of the spawn make for excellent cover under darkness. Due to their multiple glowing red eyes, this Hide bonus works only when motionless, with eyes hidden in the folds of their own body. As such, while wreathed in darkness and hidden, the spawn of the black heart must be treated as if they are blind for purposes of Spot checks. Because of this drawback, the spawn's hearing is especially keen, accounting for their improved Listen skill.



WATER DRAGON

Huge Magical Beast (aquatic)

Hit Dice: 8d8+32 (68 hp)

Initiative: +6 (+6 Reflex)

Speed: 15 ft. (3 squares), Swim 30 ft. (6 squares)

Defence Value: 16 (+6 natural)

Damage Reduction: 4 (tough hide) / 1 along underbelly (soft hide)

Base Attack/Grapple: +8/+25

Attack: Bite +17 melee (1d10+9)

Full Attack: Bite +17 melee (1d10+9)

Space/Reach: 15 ft. (3)/10 ft. (2)

Special Attacks: Constricting Grapple

Special Qualities: Darkvision 60 ft., Scent, Sorcerous Sensitivity, Weak Underbelly

Saves: Fort +10, Ref +6, Will +4

Abilities: Str 28, Dex 11, Con 19, Int 10, Wis 15, Cha 7

Skills: Hide +6, Listen +10, Spot +10, Swim +19

Feats: Cleave, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (slam)

Climate/Terrain: Aquatic, subterranean

Organisation: Solitary

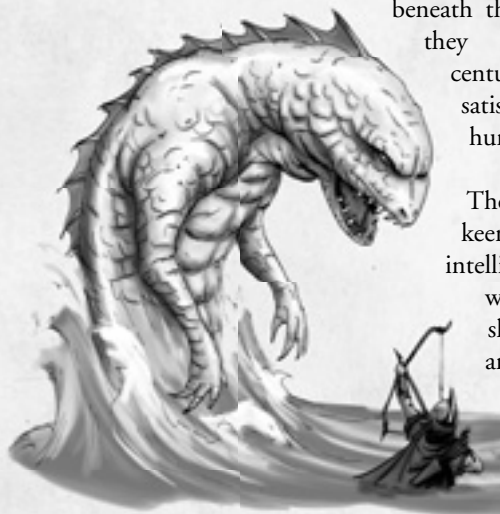
Advancement: 9 – 12 HD (Colossal); 13 – 16 HD (Gargantuan)

Stretching 30 or more feet in length, a sinuous body somewhere between a great snake and a massive crocodile, the water dragon moves on four bow legs, swinging its tail back and forth, a thick crest of armoured platelets running along its spine. The head is immense, all teeth and jaws, waiting for a chance to snatch at slow moving targets to crush them. In the water, it swims with terrifying grace for its size. Only its white, scaly underbelly seems devoid of armoured platelets.

In ancient times, the water dragons were carefully bred guardians for the Acheronian aqueducts and estates. As the ancient empire was swept away by time, only a few of these ancient, long lived reptiles survived, burying themselves deep in the bowels of subterranean caverns or covering

themselves in murky silt beneath the Khorotas until they would awaken, centuries later, to satisfy their insatiable hunger.

Though they have a keen, almost human intelligence, the water dragons are sluggish reptiles, and extremely territorial. But for their longevity, they would



long ago have become entirely extinct. Every few decades, another one will awaken somewhere, sometimes due to hunger, other times sensing the presence of potent sorceries that remind it instinctively of its forgotten masters. It may awaken for a few weeks before returning to slumber or it may lurk for many years, greedily consuming all it can find.

COMBAT

Constricting Grapple (Ex): The water dragon may perform this attack against any target that is in the water with it. In water, the beast can attempt a grapple against an opponent. If successful, the target becomes coiled in the grip of the beast's sinuous body and becomes constricted. The beast will automatically deal 1d8+9 points of constriction damage per round until the target manages to break the grapple. During this time, it cannot dodge attacks.

Darkvision (Ex): The water dragon can see in the dark up to 60-feet. Darkvision enables the water dragon to see in black and white only, but it is otherwise like normal sight, and dragon can function perfectly well with no light at all.

Scent (Ex): This special quality allows the water dragon to detect approaching enemies, sniff out hidden foes and track by sense of smell. The water dragon can identify familiar odours just as humans do familiar sights.

The water dragon can detect opponents within 30-feet by sense of smell. If the opponent is upwind, the range increases to 60-feet; if downwind, it drops to 15-feet. Strong scents, such as smoke or rotting garbage, can be detected at twice the ranges noted above. Overpowering scents, such as skunk musk, can be detected at triple normal range.

When a water dragon detects a scent, the exact location of the source is not revealed – only its presence somewhere within range. The water dragon can take a move action to note the direction of the scent. Whenever the water dragon comes within five-feet of the source, it instantly pinpoints the source's location.

Sorcerous Sensitivity (Su): The water dragon is the product of ancient Acheronian breeding and experimentation, as such it has a keen sense for magical energy. When a magical being or character with active magic moves within a mile of the water dragon's lair, it is awakened and can automatically sense the presence and general direction of the magical source.

Weak Underbelly (Ex): The water dragon's chief weakness is its soft white underbelly, where it is poorly armoured. Any strike which is aimed at this part of the body suffers a –4 penalty to attack rolls, but a successful strike will double any damage dealt.

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MESSANTIA
CITY OF RICHES



CONAN



BOOK III:
VENGEANCE OF
THE GOLDEN
SKULL

CONAN®

MESSANTIA - CITY OF RICHES

BOOK III:

VENGENCE OF THE GOLDEN SKULL

Credits

AUTHOR

Nick Berquist

EDITOR AND LINE DEVELOPER

Richard Neale

COVER ART

Scott Clark, Vitor Ishimura & Celso Mathias

INTERIOR ARTISTS

Anthea Dilly, Sergio Villa Isaza, Vitor Ishimura, Celso Mathias, Chad Sergesketter, Ronald Smith & Alejandro Villen

CARTOGRAPHY

Jesus Barony

STUDIO MANAGER

Ian Barstow

PRODUCTION DIRECTOR

Alexander Fennell

PROOFREADING

Ron Bedison

SPECIAL THANKS

Theodore Bergquist & Fredrik Malmberg at Conan Properties

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Introduction

WHILE ROAD-WEARY MERCHANTS seek to relax and discuss business in public baths, an assassin lurks, seeking his unsuspecting victim. Amidst the babble of bargaining, gossip and scheming can be heard a particularly raucous, bellowing voice, a man known for his many connections and a habit of acquiring valuable secrets. As the assassin plunges his grooved blade deep into this man's back, he dies knowing that some secrets are too dangerous to hold. The public pool runs red with the blood of silence and a party of adventurers who were this man's allies are plunged into a deadly web on intrigue.

Messantia is a city that thrives on wealth and commerce, a powerful centre of trade. No Merchant House or guild would dare to disrupt the profitable balance of intrigue, bribery and occasional honest diplomacy that transpires among the corpulent and wealthy citizenry. Hidden in the darkest recesses of the city, however, are those who would seek to strike at the very heart of this status quo, for power, wealth and even revenge. A trio of deadly conspirators has united within the great city, united by a common desire to sow chaos throughout the city that they may each attain one of these diabolical goals. As the Player Characters are drawn into the mystery by the death of a good friend, they discover that there is a deep mystery and foul murder to be solved, as well as a dire threat to the city, which could destroy Messantia if unleashed.

Vengeance of the Golden Skull encompasses the length and breadth of Messantia, and Player Characters will have an opportunity to travel from to the bloody pits of the Arena Prefect, the dusty grounds of Dustbiter and all places in between. The tale is written in a series of encounters, over the course of which the mystery will be solved and the adventurers must stride forth to stop an ancient evil from exacting ultimate revenge.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE GAMES MASTER

The various Non-Player Characters for this adventure are provided in the text of this adventure and more detailed information on them can be found in the other books of this boxed set. Games Masters are encouraged, however, to add additional characters of their own for more verisimilitude and campaign continuity if needed.

The Games Master will need *Conan the Roleplaying Game* and *Books I and II* of this boxed set to make full use of the material included in this adventure. *Conan: The Scrolls of Skelos* and *Conan: The Road of Kings* may also prove helpful,

but are not a necessity. Players should have access to a copy of *Conan the Roleplaying Game*.

Games Masters should be familiar with the material presented in both Books I and II before attempting to begin running this adventure. Of special interest is the Movers & Shakers chapter of *Book I: Games Master's Guide* in which the backstory of ancient Amenkuhn and his terrible act of destruction against Messantia is described. The principle villain in this tale is a descendant of Amenkuhn, and she seeks to fulfil the desires of her dead ancestor.

BACKGROUND

Decades ago, the merchant noble Calandro Gilroy was a stern man who ran his slaving enterprise with ruthless efficiency. He took many mistresses, from nearly every land his ships and caravans visited. His favourite mistress was a beautiful Stygian woman named Enekheth, a talented girl caught in a border raid against Stygia by mercenaries. She was grateful for her purchase by the Argossean noble, but dismayed to learn that her fate as a slave would be no different with him. Enekheth gave birth to five daughters in her years with Calandro and schemed to assassinate his Argossean wife and even his other mistresses, before she was hanged eight years ago by her own eldest daughter. It was whispered in the halls of the Gilroy estate that she heard voices, which told her to do terrible things.

Zuthelia was born the youngest daughter of Calandro and Enekheth. Her future was destined to be little more than a token offering as wife to some lesser Merchant House, or perhaps a gift to a foreign business partner. As Zuthelia matured, a voice began to speak to her, which claimed to belong to the long dead Amenkuhn, who had at last found the strength in a kindred spirit to reach out to, much as he had with her mother. In fact, her lineage was descended from Amenkuhn's on both sides of the family, for somewhere in Calandro's past was a descendant of Amenkuhn. The Stygian once had a dalliance with an Argossean slave girl named Hespera, whom he later slew during a ceremony. The descendants of Zuthelia's mother, Enekheth, were directly related to his Stygian family line. At last, he had a vessel through which to see the world he had left behind centuries past.

At the beckoning of Amenkuhn's spirit, Zuthelia used her meagre influence to bring about a wedding between her and a member of House Pephredo. The young man was a cousin of Lord Severyn, named Olidaro, who was not at all comfortable with the Stygian connections of his family, and so hoped to find an ally in his new marriage to a daughter of House Gilroy. To his horror, Olidaro learned too late that Zuthelia was using him to position herself within House Pephredo, that she might seek a tutor in the sorcerous arts. Not long after her father died, she made the acquaintance of

the Stygian sorcerer Nephri Toth, who realised her potential and brought her into the fold.

Through the daily teachings of Nephri Toth, Zuthelia developed a strong understanding of the dark arts, though through the dreamlike whisperings of Amenkuhn's dispossessed spirit, she gained visions of many greater, darker arts. Three years later, Zuthelia realised she had learned all she could from Nephri Toth, and that the time had come to seek out the artefacts of Amenkuhn's sorceries, that she may learn their secrets and reclaim the lost heritage of her true family.

During the course of her marriage, Zuthelia had also used her position in House Pephredo to develop a number of contacts and relationships with the other houses of Messantia. She gradually discovered a network of disgruntled merchants, officers, nobles and commoners who all shared her disdain for Messantia's governance. Men who found legal trade too cumbersome, bore a death mark for heinous crimes, had run afoul of the goodwill of their Merchant House or robbed their customers blind, all were privy to this loose collection of rogues and villains dwelling like a film upon the surface of Messantian society. Directed by the scheming whispers of dead Amenkuhn, Zuthelia began to cement a and give structure to this loose band of rogues, creating a secret society of which she was master. Using her ever growing powers of sorcery and filtering stolen wealth from the coffers of both House Pephredo and Gilroy, Zuthelia created a potent underground network of men who were dedicated entirely to dissension. Zuthelia has named this secret society the Order of the Golden Skull, in honour of the skull of her ancestor, locked within a golden cage deep in the bowels of the king's palace. The image of a skull in a golden cage adorns the doorways of their secret meeting halls and younger members have taken to tattooing themselves with an actual golden skull, as the true story of Amenkuhn is known to but a few learned men in the city.

Two years ago Zuthelia's schemes and money laundering from House Pephredo were uncovered by her husband, who she nearly slew before escaping into Messantia's crowded streets. Zuthelia was free at last of the pretence of being a social woman and she could operate exclusively through her underground network. She immediately set about to uncovering the last lair of her esteemed ancestor and from there began to hone her necromantic talents, that she could commune with his spirit all the better.

A diminutive administrator named Antolio Kustos and a dour former nobleman named Rolovincio Chiani became Zuthelia's closest allies during this time. Antolio served King Milo loyally for years while secretly stealing from the royal coffers and forging royal documents for those with the money to pay, while Rolovincio lost all of his lands and holdings

when King Milo swept in and bought him out. Though still loyal to the kingdom, Rolovincio was convinced that the generous offer of Milo to alleviate his debts was merely a ploy to discredit and disarm him. In the course of Rolovincio's vengeful ire, Zuthelia saw her chance and seduced him into believing that it was he, ultimately, who deserved to rule Argos as a true patriot of the land, to rid it of corruption and cast down his enemies.

This adventure opens as Zuthelia's schemes near fruition. Hidden within her ancestral lair, the necromancer has learned powerful magic, but she has also discovered that the secret to the most powerful of Amenkuhn's rituals lie within an ebony sarcophagus buried deep in a catacomb beneath the old graveyards. As Zuthelia schemes to unleash the plague, her servants have set plans in motion to sow chaos in the city, by assassinating the king during the day known as the King's Ear, in which the king holds audience with the common men of his lands. Throughout the city, agents of the Golden Skull position themselves to strike out in the chaos following an assassination. With promises made by Zuthelia to richly reward those who destroy order within Messantia, her servants go blindly down a dark path which she has laid before them.

SYNOPSIS

This adventure takes place over the course of six encounters. In *Encounter One: The Death of Argentio*, the Player Characters meet Argentio, an information broker who has stumbled on a royal assassination plot. As Argentio reaches out to his old friends for help, he is slain by an assassin before their very eyes. With his death, the characters must avenge Argentio and stop this mysterious Order of the Golden Skull by whatever means possible.

In *Encounter 2: Dulcetia* the characters have a chance to meet Argentio's wife, Dulcetia. She possesses a deciphered copy of the scroll detailing the assassination plot and who also offers a safe house for adventurers without a base of operations in the city. The characters may also have gone to the officials about this plot, and become recruits in the service of King Milo.

As they begin their investigation in *Encounter Three: Path of Deception*, the characters gradually piece together the bigger picture and learn that the Order of the Golden Skull has a hideout in the Redboots area of the city.

Travelling to the Redboots Prefect in *Encounter Four: Bloody Trails*, the characters seek out the hidden lair of the Order of the Golden Skulls, where they face the conspirators and something worse in the sewers. There, they learn that something strange is going on in the old cemetery.

INTRODUCTION

In *Encounter Five: The Blackest Pits* the intrepid adventurers uncover a secret excavation in the cemetery, where grave robbers have been unearthing ancient sarcophagi. It is revealed that they have found interred remains of the earliest plague victims and sent the mummies to a mysterious location to the east of the city.

At last, in *Encounter Six: Zuthelia*, the adventurers discover Zuthelia's hidden fortress, where she plots the destruction of the city with a bloodthirsty band of cut-throats. Zuthelia seeks to recover her ancestor's skull, sequestered away in the treasury of the king, as well as to unleash the Blackblood Plague once more upon the city, to claim her bloodline's legacy. Will the characters stop her in time, or will the Blackblood Plague again ravage Messantia?

THE ADVENTURERS

Vengeance of the Golden Skull is intended for four to six low-level characters of between 3rd and 4th level, though can be made suitable for higher-level characters with only some minor adjustments. All characters will find plenty to do in this scenario, and higher-level characters will still find plenty of challenging encounters to be had. The group will find a thief and scholar especially handy, though are not essential.

Games Masters can scale this adventure for lower or higher level adventurers fairly easily. Reducing the number or level of certain foes or giving the Player Characters more opportunities to escape from the supernatural threats will make it easier for a lower-level party. Increasing the number and level of opponents will conversely make it a tougher ride for higher-level characters. A fair portion of the adventure involves investigative work and characters of any level will find the task of hunting down the Order of the Golden Skull equally challenging.

The adventure is written with the assumption that the characters have some prior connection to Messantia and the kingdom of Argos, though they need not be natives and that the characters have a vested interest in saving the city from those who would seek to destroy it. The adventure depends on a certain degree of loyalty to Messantia by the characters. If they are a band of marauding Picts who would as soon burn the city down as save it, then they will find this an awkward adventure to complete.

The following plot hooks should be introduced by the Games Master to his characters, as seems appropriate, and at least one character should be chosen as a friend and former comrade of Argentio. While not essential, if the Games Master deems it appropriate, the possibility of employment as guards in the Patrol is also encouraged for those new to roleplaying.

FRIENDS OF ARGENTIO

One or more characters should be a former friend, ally or even co-conspirator of the roguish Argentio. For years now Argentio has plied his trade as broker of gossip, rumours, secrets and dangerous information that he gathers from his network of contacts, agents and alliances in the city. A merchant lord might be considered foolish to act against a rival in some hostile takeover if he failed to check in with Argentio first to learn of what the word on the street was. At the opening of encounter one, Argentio is alive and well and has paid handsomely for a reserved public bath. He is frantic with concern over some dark secret divulged to him by contacts from Docksider, who claims that a coup against King Milo is underway. Though Argentio feels a certain amount of civic pride, he can not attempt to contact the authorities himself, lest he be identified and hung for numerous previous crimes and indiscretions.

A clever mechanism by which the Games Master can make Argentio a more important character is to introduce the relationship between him and the chosen character(s) in an earlier adventure. The characters could have a series of minor adventures in or around Messantia prior to the introduction of this scenario, in which Argentio comes to their aid and befriends them. This will make his appearance and demise in the opening encounter even more meaningful.





NATIVES OF MESSANTIA

Some of the characters could, and perhaps even should be native born citizens of the golden city. A character with knowledge of Messantia's history and streets would have a chance to seek out likely friends and contacts based on his earlier career in the city and generally showcase a familiarity that a band composed entirely of foreigners would be unable to appreciate. If the Games Master feels confident enough to field such questions if this option is made available, then it is certainly recommended. A character that has his roots in Messantia will also, inevitably, have a strong and compelling reason to want to save the city from its threatened fate.

AGENTS OF THE KING

Within the repertoire of special agents for King Milo is a rough and ready crowd known as the King's Hand, a small but elite squadron of loyal mercenaries who work as the King's personal investigators. This group is led by the rough and ready Captain Vestarius and has a small number of members, but the Games Master should feel free to replace as many of the established agents of the King's Hand with the Player Characters as he sees fit. Such a scenario would create a rather unique blend of sword and sorcery with the potential for some medieval noir detective work as the characters, serving the king, attempt to unravel the mystery of the Golden Skull through legal channels.

An alternative to this option, in which the characters are not as important as those in the King's Hand, is to make the characters soldiers, officers and mercenaries working for the Patrol of the city. Yet another option is that they are visiting Argossean Guardians who have received rest and recuperation passes and are drawn to Messantia from the borders by rumours of danger in the capital. Such characters would have authority, but not necessarily the recognition of the King's Hand.

All of the characters will begin encounter one with Argentio just before his assassination, conducting business with the man who knows the truth behind the Golden Skull.

ENCOUNTER FORMAT

Each encounter entry will include a body of descriptive text that may be read to the Players by the Games Master to open the scene. Additional text will provide the necessary instructions for managing the encounter.

Encounter One: The Death of Argentio

NO SOONER HAVE the characters arrived in the prefect of Dustbiter to relax with an old friend than does the situation explode into an assassination attempt, both on Argentio and all of his companions. A dozen young women, all trained in the art of the dagger, shed their disguises as servants to strike down Argentio and his unwitting conspirators.

The public baths of Dustbiter are guild sponsored and made available to all of the workers and labourers of the prefect who seek to wash the dust of the road and the grime of the livestock from their bodies. Though used regularly, the small but dedicated staff which maintains the bathhouses manage to keep the pools surprisingly fresh and clean. On occasion, some merchants can pay for a certain amount of privacy and gain exclusive access to one or more wings of the baths.

The bathhouse itself is situated along the length of a cross, with the master pools connecting like a great 'X' beneath the colonnaded roof. Adjacent to each wing of the public pool are a total of four smaller pools, all of which is connected to one another via narrow channels through which bathers can swim. On most days, the pools are a chaotic mix of filthy labourers fresh from the road seeking a moment of relief, and throngs of local merchants taking the time to haggle and barter over goods and services in the comfort of the pools.

On the day the characters arrive to meet Argentio, the public baths are exceptionally busy, but Argentio has paid for privacy screens around one of the round side pools. As the assassins strike, the characters will quickly realise their predicament. All their clothes and equipment, arms and armour are resting on benches nearby. No Hyborian worth his salt will likely leave himself completely unarmed and Games Masters should allow at least one Player Character to have a weapon within arms' reach.

Read or paraphrase the following to the Players:

In Messantia, summers are always hot and if a weary traveller is lucky, then the humidity of the Western Ocean is not too difficult to bear. You have all come to the prefect known as Dustbiter, a great sprawl of staging yards, cattle pens, taverns, brothels, hostels and countless bickering merchants. Nestled at the beginning of the Road of Kings, the prefect of Dustbiter is a place only men of business would seek out and it is business which has brought you here.

THE DEATH OF ARGENTIO

Reclining in the cool waters of the public bathhouse, your party has gathered to meet with an old companion, an Argossean known as Argentio. As portly and hairy as ever, Argentio is the very model of indulgence. He has managed, with some effort, to secure a modicum of privacy in the spacious public bathhouse, no doubt paying handsomely to ensure the privacy of an entire wing of the great pool. A nearby bench hold your clothes, arms and armour while the sweat and grime of hard travel is washed away by the gentle lapping water that surrounds you. Several young women in silken togas bring silver trays laden with luscious fruits as Argentio drools on.

'Friends, I am so glad you have come to my summons. As happy as I am to see you all, I confess my real purpose for this meeting is dire and I fear I am in very real danger. I have, as you know, been the eyes and ears of the streets for many years now. People come to me, bartering one secret for another, seeking knowledge both secret and dangerous. I have found something now that worries me and I offer it to you, my friends, because I fear that I can not take it to those who would profit most from this information. My friends, I fear that the king himself may be under threat from an enemy that has been growing unseen within the bowels of the city for several years now. But I am getting ahead of myself; I shall start from the beginning.'

'Not ten days past, I was witness to an interrogation by certain individuals who captured a man bearing a sealed scroll. Upon that scroll, written in code, was a message these men brought to me to decipher. Being something of a cipher, I took it upon myself to reveal the hidden message within, and discovered it to be no less than a code which I myself had created some years ago and sold to certain individuals, including members of House Pompilius. When I read the contents, I was aghast, for outlined within was a scheme to assassinate King Milo himself, in the name of a cause described as the Order of the Golden Skull. I have the scroll with me, though I have hidden the deciphered copy away until the matter of what should be done with it is discussed.'

'How such a cabal of dissent could manifest in this fair city without being discovered was beyond me, and so I set about establishing the veracity of this message. According to the man who had been found with the message, there was indeed an assassin of professional recruit, of Zingaran origin, or so I was led to believe, already ensconced within the city. Furthermore, when I sought out my contacts in House Pompilius, I found myself at an impasse with my former confidants, who were suddenly unwilling to speak with me on any matter of import. By Mitra, I, who am the master of secrets, have been blinded to the secrets of others!'

Argentio looks momentarily confused before the bloody tip of a dagger abruptly bursts forth from his chest. The information broker sputters a froth of blood from his lips before falling forward into the water to reveal the slip of a girl who has brought not only plates of food, but death to your friend Argentios. From around the chamber, a dozen other servants drop their trays and pull forth slender daggers hidden in their folds of their garb!

ASSASSINS

Argossean thief 1; HD: 1d8+2 (10 hp); **Init:** +8; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 12 (15); **Parry DV:** 10 (13); **DR:** – (6); **Atk:** Dagger +2 melee finesse or short sword +2 melee finesse; **Full Atk:** Dagger +2 melee finesse or short sword +2 melee finesse; **Dmg:** Dagger 1d4 19-20/x2 AP 1 or short sword 1d8 19-20/x2 AP 1; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Sneak Attack 1d6/1d8; **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Sneak Attack Style (dagger), Trap Disarming; **SV:** Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +1; Str 11, Dex 15, Con 14, Int, 12, Wis 13, Cha 10
Skills & Feats: Balance +6, Bluff +2, Climb +2, Disable Device +6, Disguise +4, Escape Artist +6, Gather Information +6, Hide +7, Jump +4, Knowledge (local) +5, Listen +4, Move Silently +7, Open Lock +2, Profession (sailor) +4, Sleight of Hand +2, Spot +5, Tumble +6, Use Rope +4; Improved Initiative, Stealthy
Possessions: Dagger or short sword, toga (*Encounter Six Only*: Short sword, targe, mail shirt, steel cap)

Each of the 12 assailants are armed with daggers, some of the assassins have a small tattoo of a stylised golden skull on their shoulders. The assassins are mostly young and idealistic, but if more than half of their number is slain they will attempt to flee. If the Player Characters manage to capture one or more alive, they will discover that their captive is a babbling convert to something she calls the Order of the Golden Skull. A simple Intimidate check (DC 12) will get the captive talking. Each of the assassins have been recruited from the disenfranchised youth of the city streets, and almost all are runaways or escaped slaves. They met in secret in a house in the Arena Prefect where they were trained to kill by several men, including one who they knew only as 'Rolo'. Each assassin has been clearly brainwashed to believe in a strangely nihilistic mantra, in which the throne of Messantia and Argos must be cast down, to end the grip of the Merchant Houses upon the land. The Golden Skull, they say, is the name of their mysterious prophet, who would appear before them hidden in voluminous black robes.

The Player Characters might not capture one of the assassins, and so this information may not become immediately available. Nonetheless, a quick search of the scene (Search check DC 10) will reveal that Argentio had come with clues. Hidden in his garments on the bench is a scroll, written in a tight and seemingly indecipherable script (see The Assassin's Scroll). Astute characters may realise that this is the very

parchment which he sought to decipher, and which allegedly contains the description of a detailed assassination plot against King Milo. In the wrong hands, it could prove very dangerous.

Within a few minutes of the fight, a squadron of patrolmen will arrive, alerted to the fight by concerned patrons. A frantic guildsman will begin wailing about how thugs in the public bath assaulted and slew a dozen of his servants and fingers will quickly point to the characters. Anyone who makes a Sense Motive check (DC 10) will easily determine that the caretaker of the public baths is either misguided or intentionally trying to instigate a conflict between the Patrol and the characters. It will take a quick wit or some official identification to talk their way out of conflict or arrest with the Patrol. Anyone who attempts a Diplomacy check (DC 18) or Bluff (DC 16) may succeed in convincing the guards to stand down and hear them out. Failure will lead to a demand by the guard that the characters immediately lay down their arms and surrender.

PATROLMAN

Male Argossean soldier 2; HD: 2d10 (14 hp); **Init:** +0; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** +1; **Parry DV:** +3; **DR:** 4; **BAB/Grp:** +4/+6; **Atk:** Broadsword +5 melee or poniard +4 melee; **Full Atk:** Broadsword +5 melee or poniard +4 melee; **Dmg:** Broadsword 1d10+2, 19-20/x2 or poniard 1d6+2, 19-20/x2; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square); **SA:** -; **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **SV:** Fort +4, Ref +0, Will +0; Str 14, Dex 10, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 9
Skills & Feats: Balance +2, Gather Information +1, Intimidate +2, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +3, Profession (sailor) +2, Use Rope +2; Cleave, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (broadsword)
Possessions: Patrolman uniform, leather jerkin, leather cap, broadsword, poniard, manacles, aid whistle

If the characters are not now in conflict with the law or about to be arrested, then they may have a chance to explain what has transpired. Any honesty regarding Argentio and his information will lead to the guard captain demanding that they accompany him to the Palace Patrol Station in the King's Prefect for proper interrogation. The Patrol captain, named Ruofu, recognises the corpse of Argentio and so is immediately suspicious, for Argentio was suspected of a variety of treasonous crimes.

Any other tale that the characters try to spin is likely to end with a threat of Third Order punishment for the death of another man's slaves. Unless the characters are immediately willing to cough up a hefty sum of coins to both the guildsman and Patrol captain (at least 50 silver per slave killed), then they will be expected to comply with an arrest pending punishment, most likely a public flogging in the

streets of Dustbiter. They will then be taken to Dustbiter's local Patrol Station for detention and sentencing.

The likeliest end to this encounter is a flight from the scene, perhaps even the subdual and death of a number of Patrolmen and a pact of vengeance against those who murdered Argentio and got the characters into hot water to begin with. It is even possible the characters will seek out a means of warning the king of the planned assassination. Characters who pursue the leads provided by Argentio on the matter of this secret society and its plans may proceed to *Encounters Two* and *Three*. Characters who rush post haste to the defence of the king (or who told their full tale to the guards and were escorted to the Patrol Office in the King's Prefect) may continue with *In the Service of the King* (page 9). The Games Master may adjudicate all other actions according to circumstance. Note that it is likely, so long as witnesses to the fight survive, The Order of the Golden Skull will seek to eliminate the characters and recover the scroll containing the assassination plans. Such harassment might bring wandering adventurers back into the thick of the tale if they realise that they have inherited an explosive problem from the late Argentio.

THE ASSASSIN'S SCROLL

This scroll found amidst Argentio's a possession is written in tight encryption which Argentio himself once created and then sold to others for use in sensitive documents. The script requires a Decipher Script check at DC 28 to comprehend. A successful roll allows the reader to decipher the text into Argossean. Games Masters should not allow characters to take 20 on this check, and might disallow further efforts until the deciphering character makes an effort to do some local research on the nature and development of such ciphers.

The scroll's message is actually fairly simple, a series of repeating letters hidden among nonsense text which fills the bulk of the script. The message itself reads:

'Revenge falls on the day of King's Ear. The Golden Skulls must be in position, as requested. Death will fall upon Milo this day.'

A quick check of the Messantian calendar will reveal that the day of King's Ear, in which Milo listens to the plight of the common man, is but two days away. This should lend some urgency to the actions of the characters.

If the characters are unable to decipher the scroll, will not take it to authorities or have somehow missed its significance, the Games Master may allow any character identified as an old friend of Argentio to recall that Argentio did have a wife, named Dulcetia. The Games Master can suggest to the Player Characters that she might know where his deciphered copy of the scroll is kept. If this is the case move on to *Encounter Two: Dulcetia*.

Encounter Two: Dulcetia

ARGENTIO WAS A man with many friends and modest wealth, but his debts and enemies were always more numerous. As word of his death spreads throughout the city, the opportunity for those to seek some restitution from his estates becomes imperative. While Argentio never actually owned any property, he hid much of his wealth around the city and kept a wife named Dulcetia, a woman who remains attractive even as she reaches her 30th year. Dulcetia has been well-kept in a small house located in the River Prefect, with a sooty roof from the nearby smithies and a view of one side of the river itself. Dulcetia has two children, which she supports as best she can, her son Argentio II and Mikara, her daughter.

Dulcetia has been making a living as a singer, moving through the taverns and inns of the city, plying her trade in the company of a small troupe of musicians who struggle for daily living. It is generally accepted that, but for her fine voice, the troupe would never find gigs at all but the most desperate of taverns.

When Dulcetia learns of Argentio's death, she is stricken and flees to her home. There, three debt collectors, who press her to hand over the property and wealth Argentio had in his possession, accost her. They will break into the establishment, ripping it apart to find Argentio's imagined fortunes. In fact, there is only one item of value which Argentio left in the establishment: a deciphered copy of the scroll that he took with him to the bathhouses.

Characters who are stumped for clues or who feel that a deciphered copy of the scroll would be eminently handy, should be given an opportunity to discover Dulcetia's whereabouts. Games Master should time their arrival to coincide with the appearance of the thugs terrorising the poor woman and her children.

Reluctant or stubborn characters might obstinately seek to avoid pursuing the matter of Argentio's death and the looming mystery of a royal assassination. It is even possible that, as the Games Master dispatches hordes of Zuthelia's agents to slay the characters and retrieve the evidence of their plans, that they have already discarded the scroll, moved on to other issues and are utterly baffled as to why anyone would want to silence them.

In such a case, Dulcetia is a solid lynch pin on which to hinge a purpose to the more obstinate characters' attentions. She could be aware of her imminent danger now that Argentio is

dead and knowing that his friends have come to the city for business with him, she might seek the party out to beg them for help. Dulcetia will be keen to see Argentio avenged and might have a small sum of money pocketed away somewhere, enough perhaps to motivate greedy adventurers, while her plight as a widowed woman with two children would almost certainly provoke the stalwart protectors in the party to take heed of her plight.

When the characters arrive at Dulcetia's house, read or paraphrase the following:

Winding your way through the soot-choked alleys of the River Prefect, you at last come to the small, lean stone house nestled close to a busy smithy, along a muddy stretch of the flowing river. The house, one of many favoured by workers in the area, is noted for the smattering of multicoloured flowers that grow tentatively at the base of its walls, in stark contrast to the bleak and industrial look of most of the prefect. As you arrive, you hear a woman's scream for help from within, punctuated by a sharp slap and a guttural curse as rough shadows play about against the drawn curtains of the home. The door is open and lamp light from within shows that rugged thieves move about inside, threatening a comely woman with long blonde locks, who has fallen to the floor. Two children cower nearby.

THUG

Male Argossean thief 3; HD: 3d8+6 (21 hp); **Init:** +6; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 14; **Parry DV:** 12; **DR:** - (6); **BAB/Grp:** +2/+5; **Atk:** Unarmed +5 melee finesse or club +3 melee (cutlass +3 melee or Shemite bow +5 ranged); **Full Atk:** Unarmed +5 melee finesse or club +3 melee (cutlass +3 melee or Shemite bow +5 ranged); **Dmg:** Unarmed 1d6+1 x2 or club 1d8+1 x2 AP 2 (Cutlass 1d10+1 19-20/x2 AP 3 or Shemite bow +5 1d10 x3 AP 4); **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Sneak Attack 2d6/2d8; **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Sneak Attack Style (unarmed), Trap Disarming, Trap Sense +1; **SV:** Fort +2, Ref +6, Will -1; Str 12, Dex 17, Con 15, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 12

Skills & Feats: Balance +7, Gather Information +5, Hide +9, Intimidate +7, Jump +7, Knowledge (local) +6, Listen +5, Profession (sailor) +3, Sleight of Hand +9, Spot +5, Tumble +9, Use Rope +7; Improved Initiative, Improved Unarmed Strike

Possessions: Club, 1d10 silver pieces each (*Encounter Six Only*: Mail hauberk cutlass, Shemite bow, 20 arrows)

Should the characters rescue Dulcetia, they will find her both grateful and mortified at the loss of her husband. She offers her house as a place for the party to stay and rest while in Messantia if the group does not already have accommodations. Although she knows very little about Argentio's latest schemes, she will gladly hand them the

IN THE SERVICE OF THE KING

Characters who either working for King Milo in the King's Hand, or who have joined as members of the Patrol have plenty of motive to root out the conspirators and assassins that threaten Messantia. If the characters were compliant in *Encounter One* with the Patrol they will be given a chance to present their case to no less than High Constable Patrius Hannor (see pg. 84 of *Book I: Games Master's Guide*). Patrius will listen carefully to the tale the characters present him and study the evidence they provide. If they have the encrypted scroll, he will take it to be decrypted. If they can provide a decrypted copy, from Dulcetia, for example, then he will verify the correct cipher himself and than thank the characters for exposing this threat.

If the characters are unaffiliated with the Patrol at this time, then Patrius Hannor will offer them a chance to join its ranks, at least temporarily, to stop the threat of the attempted assassination. He will display an uncharacteristic level of trust in the loyalty or patriotism of the adventurers and offer a bounty for both the assassin and the head of this mysterious Order. Patrius will escort the characters to the palace to meet with Prince Cassio. He will listen to what Patrius has learned and hear the adventurers out, then agree to sign a Letter of Marquee over to the characters, granting them full authority as agents in the Patrol. He will order both Patrius and the adventurers to begin scouring the city immediately for the murderous Order of the Golden Skull and increases Patrius' offer to 100 gold luna for each man who captures or slays the assassin and the mastermind behind this plot and brings forth the evidence.

Patrius will not personally wish to work with the characters, instead preferring that they use their own tactics and means to deal with the matter. His plan is to lead a large force into the city and begin house to house searches. Prince Cassio countermands his orders, though, explaining that such a group as this has been secretive enough that they have escaped detection this long and that a house to house search will almost certainly alert them and allow the culprits to escape and make new plans at a later date. Instead, he orders Patrius to see to the protection of the palace and the safety of the king, while Cassio will send the King's Hand and a number of other handpicked Patrolmen into the city to begin a quiet investigation among the houses. He will order the characters to do the same, and to avoid alerting the Order to the fact that they have been compromised.

Games Masters should exercise caution at this point of the scenario, to ensure that the Player Characters have as much freedom as possible to resolve the threat on their own and not make it too easy for them to call for back up. The characters should want to solve the mystery themselves, to gain the full reward, rather than sharing it with other agents of the king. Play up the fact that the other agents of the king are either suspicious of the characters or unwilling to work with them, due to rivalry and jealousy.

deciphered scroll, which was kept in a locked chest beneath her bed, and mention to them the fact that she overheard Argentio speaking very highly of his good friend(s) within the party. She also recalls another detail, one which she was somewhat suspect of: Argentio was spending an abnormal amount of time prowling around the Redboots Prefect, a damnable location if ever there was one, though she cannot say what was so important about that area.

DULCETIA

HD: 3d4 (9 hp); **Init:** +2; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 12; **Parry DV:** 12; **DR:** 0; **BAB/Grp:** +1/+1; **Atk:** Knife +1 melee; **Full Atk:** Knife +1 melee; **Dmg:** Knife 1d4/AP 0; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** -; **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Literacy (purchased); **SV:** Fort +1, Ref +2, Will +1; Str 10, Dex 12, Con 11, Int 13, Wis 11, Cha 17

Skills & Feats: Craft (seamstress) +4, Gather Information +4, Knowledge (local) +4, Perform (singing) +9, Profession (musician) +4, Spot +2; Skill Focus (Knowledge (local)), Skill Focus (Perform (singing))

Possessions: Long dress, soft leather boots, knife and hip scabbard

Dulcetia has the calm and beautiful demeanour of a common girl, but age haunts her eyes. She has just reached 30 years of age and has given birth to two children. She has tried many professions and made some money as a seamstress, but her only real talent lies in singing, which she has strived to perfect, in spite of her lack of formal training. Dulcetia knows many bawdy bar songs, but she also strives to learn more sophisticated ballads. She was taught to read and write Argossean by a kindly priest of Mitra.

Dulcetia will prove more hindrance than help to the characters should they drag her along, but her familiarity with Messantia could make her a useful guide, especially if none of the characters are native to the city. Still, she will be reluctant to leave her children without protection.

Encounter Three: Path of Deception

WHETHER THE CHARACTERS follow up with Dulcetia in Encounter Two or not, they may well take to the streets to learn what they can of the Order of the Golden Skull. The Games Master should give the Player Characters ample opportunity to explore whatever nooks and crannies of Messantia they feel will divulge some useful information. In the course of their explorations, any number of smaller encounters can be introduced at the leisure of the Games Master in response to the actions of the party. A sampling of encounters and unusual Non-Player Characters with useful information and rumours can be found in the Street Encounters table.

During the course of their investigation, the Games Master should find ways to remind the Player Characters of the urgency of their mission. With the King's Ear only two days away, they have only so much time in which to hunt down the assassins, both for revenge and the safety of the king.

Street Encounters

1d20	Encounter
1-3	Desperate merchant selling wares
4-6	Suspicious thugs
7-8	Patrol
9-10	Strange seer
11	Information broker
12-14	Golden Skull assassins
15-17	Drunken louts and mercenaries
18-19	Prostitutes
20	Strange shadows

DESCRIPTION OF ENCOUNTERS

Desperate merchant selling wares: A man of middle years seems frantic to make a sale and pesters the characters for a chance to haggle and sell some seemingly useless item. If the characters take pity upon the man and purchase the item, he will be extremely grateful and leave in haste. Characters who scrutinise the item will notice that a scrap of parchment has been wedged into the object. On it is written, 'You are being watched.'

Suspicious Thugs: A gang of men take notice of the characters and begin to follow them. They are eager for a fight and will readily take any provocation as a chance to engage the characters. There are a total number of thugs equal to the number of characters in the party plus 1d10,

thus their sense of bravery. Use statistics provided for *Encounter One's* assassins.

Patrol: A dozen members of the city Patrol stop the characters to speak with them. If the characters are affiliated with the Patrol, then it is a friendly chat. If the characters are evading the law, then the Patrol feels the characters were being suspicious and has decided to shake them up a bit and see if they will confess to anything or run. Likewise, if the characters seem armed and dangerous, that will be reason enough to confront them. The size of the Patrol squad is equal to the number of Player Characters. Use statistics provided in *Encounter One* for the Patrol.

Strange Seer: A wizened, blind old man who is begging for handouts in a side street calls out to one of the characters by name. 'I know you', he will say. 'I have seen you, fighting the great serpent that coils about this city. You must slay the serpent, for it's venom will bring rot and plague upon the land!' He will begin babbling incoherent nonsense, though if the character is persistent, the seer will point vaguely in the direction of the Dome of the Sea in the King's Prefect and says 'Do you not see the serpent? It coils to strike!'

Information Broker: A shifty rogue who seems very nervous will beckon from a side alley. 'I can sell you the information you seek', he will offer. 'Only a few silver, and I will tell all.' When or if the characters ask for information on the Order of the Golden Skull or its members, the man will grow pale and try to flee. 'You don't want to cross them! Look what they did to me!' He will lift his left pant leg and expose his wooden foot. If the characters offer a significant sum of money (50 gold luna or more) then he will loosen up a bit and offer to take them to a known hideout of the Golden Skulls. At the Games Master's discretion, this can either be the entrance to the Redboots coven, or some other hideout, either active or abandoned.

Golden Skull Assassins: The characters either take a wrong turn down a dark alley, come across the wrong crowd or one of them notices that they are being followed. Depending on the circumstances, they have come to the attention of a group of assassins who have been given a description of Argentio's co-conspirators, the characters. There will be 3d4 assassins. If the fight ensues in a public place, then members of the Patrol will arrive in 2d10 combat rounds to break up the fight and arrest everyone.

Drunken Louts and Mercenaries: Unlike the suspicious thugs entry, these men are not out to start a fight. Rather, the characters stumble across a party of sailors or mercenaries, likely accompanied by several young women, who have had too much drink and have been making merry after being kicked out of the last establishment they were in. They harass the characters, trying to get them to join in their

singing and revelry. This is primarily a nuisance encounter. Later that evening, the Games Master should reintroduce the same drunken crowd, but this time there are only a few of them, battered and beaten after having been robbed by some suspicious thugs. The characters may even walk in on the middle of the robbery. If they come to the aid of the men, they will later discover that one of them was a wealthy sea captain who, in his gratitude, offers them free passage to the next port of call on his ship.

Prostitutes: One or more ladies of the night takes an interest in the characters and tries to curry some interest in his rough and ready crowd. If they are snubbed, then nothing comes of it. Otherwise, the women will try to follow the party and will see if they can get one or more of the characters sufficiently drunk to roll him for his wealth. If the characters ask information of the prostitutes or mention the Golden Skulls, Zuthelia or any other information, one of the girls will mention that she has heard of a man named Olidaro who might know more about such matters. She suggests that the characters look in taverns and brothels around Dockside to find him.

Strange Shadows: (*Note:* This encounter will only happen after dark.) Give one or more characters a chance to make a Spot roll (DC 15) as they travel through the night. Those who succeed notice a strange, winged shadow pass overhead, perhaps blotting the moon out for but a moment. Any character that made a roll of 20 or better could swear that he saw strange, blinking eyes hover in the darkness for a moment. No one can be certain what it was that they saw. Games Masters who are particularly cruel may introduce an encounter with the spawn of the black heart (page 14), which hunts Olidaro.

SEARCHING FOR CLUES

As the characters move through the city seeking information, they should have a chance to attempt Gather Information checks with a variable DC to determine what they learn. The Games Master should allow for some roleplaying in the acquisition of this knowledge and perhaps even a bonus modifier to their success if the characters choose to offer bribes or payment for the information. Likewise, a rowdier crowd of adventurers who want to bash some heads could well attempt to interrogate likely suspects with similar results. Add 5 to all DCs below for information garnered through intimidation.

RUMOURS AND SECRETS

Read or paraphrase any of these rumours in the context of a conversation to the characters. The characters could meet any number of ruffians and scallywags throughout the many taverns of Messantia willing to speak for a jack of rum or ale.

DC 8 Rumours: *'Aye, I've heard rumours of such a group, but no, I couldn't tell you were they be hereabouts. You should look somewhere else, and keep your voice quiet about it, too. People have been known to disappear when they ask such questions, and I'm not about to be one o' them folk!'*

'I heard that they mark themselves with skulls, and I know one man who said he saw an abandoned house over in the Arena Prefect what that had the markings of a skull, but like it was in some sort of cage. Haven't seen him in a while, though. Bastard owes me money.'

'I've heard a man named Olidaro speak about these things. He seems to know what he's talking about.'

DC 12 Rumours: *'I heard that these Golden Skull people are anarchists, rebels, murders and thieves. They've got a grudge against the king, they do. Those bastards, Mitra cast them down! All hail King Milo!'*

'You best be careful asking such questions around here, people tend to disappear. Why, I heard just the other day that a man was asking about Redboots, looking for something having to do with them, and next thing you know, he's floating face down in a public bath, a dagger 'tween his shoulders. You best be careful! If you really want to know what's going on over there, you should talk to my cousin, Ventios, who runs a abattoir out there.'

'Aye, and I've also heard that there's something suspect going on outside o' town, near the old graveyard. My cousin, he's a Patrolman, says they arrested a man trying to jump the gates of that hellish place, and that he had a little tattoo on his arm, of a golden skull. The man wouldn't talk, so they flogged him the next day for trespassing. Damn fool.'

'This man, Olidaro, he knows a lot about the Golden Skulls and their dealings. I've heard he hangs out around Dockside, trying to drink himself to death with that swill they serve sailors.'

DC 16 Rumours: *'My brother was approached by a man who offered him a chance to join the Order of the Golden Skull. Claimed it was by invite only, except you couldn't refuse the offer, it sounded like, without making real enemies of this group. I've heard one of the organisers is that nobleman, Rolovincio, the one who lost all of his land and estates a few years back. Heard he's out for revenge against the king, no less. My brother turned them down, of course. He had to head north, to Shamar in Aquilonia where he's conducting business. They took his prize hunting dog and nailed it to his door, mind.'*

PATH OF DECEPTION

'There's rumours of a hidden enclave within the sewers of Redboot, but I've also heard that you have to get to it through the grate where they say the beast lives. You don't think there's a beast down in those sewers, eating the charnel garbage they toss down there, and the occasional drunkard who falls prey to its claws? I'll tell you otherwise, I saw it with my own eyes! Fifty feet long, easily, white underbelly and snake-like, but with a draconian head the likes of which I've never seen. Moved on eight legs, at least. By Mitra, I was nearly one of those hapless drunkards that night.'

'You should look for Olidaro, he's supposed to be hanging out at the Seven Sails and Eight Banners. Good place, like the dancers, but you should really go to The Dove, they've got the best girls there.'

DC 22+ Rumours: Characters who do this well in gathering information have a special encounter: they find the embittered ex-husband of Zuthelia, Olidaro, out for an evening of drinking and bitter recollection. When he overhears the characters searching for information, he'll swagger on up and make himself readily available. Proceed to *Meeting Olidaro* on page 13.

Following up the Rumours

In the course of their investigations, characters can gain several leads. The following possible events could transpire, depending on which paths they choose to follow.

The Abandoned House in the Arena Prefect

This property is located in the Arena Prefect and is the same house in which the assassins from *Encounter One* were trained. A quick survey of the property reveals a common villa, which once belonged to some lesser merchant lord, who obviously fell into ruin due to bad business, gambling debts or some other misfortune. The property is now owned by a local man and if characters take the time to seek out public records or bribe the proper officials they will learn that it is owned by Antolio Kustos, a royal administrator. A little more digging (Gather Information check DC 10) uncovers that Antolio who owns a villa in the countryside some five miles east of the main city. Indeed, he seems to hold a number of properties that are either abandoned or available for rent.

If the characters investigate the villa, a detailed Search (DC 15) will reveal a small symbol near the main entry, depicting what appears to be a skull-like symbol, surrounded by golden bars. Within the main house of the villa characters will discover that the complex is still occupied. A single man and several students still reside here, learning the art of the assassin. The man is named Charomis, and he will most likely be found in the common room of the first floor. Charomis is the master assassin who trained the youths

that have joined the Order of the Golden Skull. He holds no personal allegiance to the Order himself, but he is paid very well for his tutelage. Unless the characters are trying to penetrate the compound by stealth, they will most likely have alerted Charomis and his students.

The compound itself consists of a man-high outer wall surrounding a small courtyard, at the centre of which is a two-storey house with a front and rear entrance. The first floor holds a large common room used for training and a dozen or so sleeping mats hug the walls. There is a dining hall, kitchen and two guest rooms. The second storey is reached by a single staircase in the common room and contains four bedrooms and a private bath. At the rear of the building can be found a storage shed, a servant's shack and an outhouse.

Charomis will seek to hunt and kill all intruders to the villa. He will utilise his students, but order them to flee if they realise they are outclassed. There are five students here, use statistics for the assassins in *Encounter One: The Death of Argentio*. Charomis himself is a potent nemesis.

CHAROMIS

Argossean male, thief 5/soldier 2; HD: 5d8+2d10+7 (40 hp); **Init:** +8; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 17; **Parry DV:** 17; **DR:** 3; **BAB/Grp:** +5/+8; **Atk:** Scimitar +6 melee; **Full Atk:** Scimitar +6 melee; **Dmg:** Scimitar 1d8+4*/AP 2; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Sneak Attack +3d6/3d8, Sneak Attack Style (scimitar), Sneak Attack Style (dagger); **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Trap Disarming, Trap Sense +1; **SV:** Fort +5, Ref +8, Will +2; Str 16, Dex 18, Con 12, Int 13, Wis 13, Cha 12

Skills & Feats: Appraise +7, Balance +10, Bluff +10, Climb +10, Disable Device +12, Disguise +12, Gather Information +6, Hide +11, Intimidate +6, Jump +9, Listen +5, Move Silently +10, Open Locks +9, Profession (sailor) +3, Sleight of Hand +8, Spot +5, Use Rope +8; Deceitful, Dodge, Eyes of the Cat^{bonus}, Light-footed^{bonus}, Mobility, Point Blank Shot, Weapon Focus (scimitar)

Possessions: Quilted jerkin, two daggers, scimitar, sash, leather sandals, cloak, purse with ground pepper (ranged touch attack, range 10-feet; DC 12 Fort save or stunned for one round)

* Two-handed weapon style damage bonus

Charomis grew up on the streets of Messantia as a child, orphaned by a mother who died in childbirth and a father who was sailing through. He was raised in an orphanage managed by priests of Mitra until he was of an age to join the militia. After defending the borders of Argos for two years, Charomis fled after slaying his superior officer in a drunken brawl. Wanted and desperate, he moved amongst the various thieves' gangs which prowl the streets of Messantia by night, until eventually discovering that he was an especially

effective assassin, willing to take on any job for the right price. Charomis eventually joined the Order of the Golden Skull when Rolovincio offered him a generous stipend to train the Order's members.

If the characters defeat Charomis, they will find on his person little to suggest any further course of action, but a Search check (DC 10) will reveal some telling evidence in a second storey closet. Inside the closet are several pairs of bloodstained, reddened boots, which have clearly and recently passed through some sort of charnel mess. Any character who does not make the connection immediately can make a Knowledge (local) check (DC 10) to guess that the boots must have been through Redboots, where the abattoirs can be found.

Investigating Redboots

Characters who heard the rumour of strange things in Redboots may have also heard that they should speak with a butcher named Ventios, who manages an abattoir. They may have found evidence of something going on in the prefect in the abandoned house in the Arena Prefect or they may simply have wandered there on their own accord. When characters at last make it to this infamous and disgusting quarter of town proceed to *Encounter Four: Bloody Trails*.

Meeting Olidaro

Games Masters should either award characters this encounter for an exceptional Gather Information check (DC 22 or better) or time it to provide the characters with a critical information break. It is also possible for them to learn of Olidaro's existence through the rumour mill and then track him down. If the characters are wandering town with no immediate direction, then assume that they meet Olidaro in the Seven Sails and Eight Banners Tavern in Dockside.

Olidaro is the bitter former husband of Zuthelia, a survivor of her early madness and although he has not seen her in more than a year, he is well aware of some of her strange proclivities. Unknown to Olidaro, he is a carefully watched man, and remains alive for only two reasons. Zuthelia has a certain distant affection for him, a soft part in her otherwise steel heart, for although he was simply another obstacle to her ambitions, Olidaro always treated her well and tried hard to come to terms with the strange madness which seemed to overwhelm his wife. She also keeps him alive because she feels that his sudden demise would alarm members of House Pephredo, to the fact that she still dwells in Messantia and is continuing her dark schemes.

Olidaro is already somewhat drunk when the characters meet him, but it takes very little to get him talking. He is dying to share his story with anyone who will listen, although no one listens to him anymore, seeing him as another washed up minor noble of some Merchant House.

Read or paraphrase the following introduction to Olidaro:

'You want to know of the Order of the Golden Skulls? Brave men and fools speak their name! I'll tell you what I know, for I once slept with the cursed wench that founded the blasted group. Oh, they're a motley bunch all right and almost all of them have some grudge against the king and his rule, even if they do deserve whatever fate Mitra has planned for them. But I'll tell you, my wife, Zuthelia, she was the worst of them all, betrayed me and everyone she knew, driven by some madness of the spirits which I shudder to think of even now.'

Olidaro will answer everyone's questions as best he can, but he has not actually seen Zuthelia for two years now, and the last time was at sword point, with a demonic entity hanging behind her every step. He will tell his tale as best he can, and answer all of the questions posed to him.

Olidaro continues with his tale.

'I was a faithful husband, but two years ago, growing increasingly suspicious of my wife's regular absences and strange liaisons with other members of House Pephredo, I took it upon myself to spy on her. What I discovered at first angered and then terrified me. I discovered that she had been siphoning funds and resources away from House Pephredo, seemingly under the very nose of Lord Severyn, though it almost seemed as if the man approved. I then learned that she had been making strange alliances with men in the city who were wanted as murders and traitors. They called themselves the Order of the Golden Skulls. I heard rumours she had been seen clutching the arm of that traitorous nobleman, Rolovincio... something-or-other, another man who has made himself scarce these days. Some say he leads the Golden Skulls.

'It was when I walked in on one of Zuthelia's daily lessons in the private halls of the Stygian Nephri Toth, that I discovered Zuthelia, performing dark sorceries. Before her were etchings upon the floor, which were filled with blood from a nearby bowl. In the centre of the room, a billowing mass of darkness arose and I saw terrifying red eyes, dozens of them staring right at me. My knees buckled and I felt a terror unlike anything I had ever experienced course through my veins. Still, I had to show her I knew. Revealing myself, I confronted her and was horrified when Zuthelia commanded the beast she had summoned to slay me!

'I fled in the night and wandered for days, a gibbering madman before I recovered from the terrors I had witnessed. When I at last returned to my house and property, I found that she had fled, leaving only a note saying she was sorry for what had to be done. I went

PATH OF DECEPTION

to Lord Severyn and showed him what I had discovered. Curiously, Severyn seemed less than impressed at the allegations of sorcery, instead became singularly furious at the theft of the money, goods and slaves from his coffers and warehouses. He banished Zuthelia then, even though she had already fled.

'Since then I have been a haunted man. My business and estate suffers for my obsessive madness, my percentage of the family wealth has dwindled to mere scraps.' He takes a long swig from his mug.

Olidaro finishes his tale with a warning. *'It's been two years, but you must know that before dark each evening I come to some bar, always one which never closes and drink the madness away. You see, she may have apologised for what she did, but the damnable beast is still out there, waiting for me in the darkness. I know, in my heart, that if I were to find myself trapped in the utter darkness, it would be there, waiting for me. I am a doomed man.'*

His haunted eyes cast a weary glance at the audience listening to him. The unending terror flickers, even now, in his hollow gaze.

Whether the characters take Olidaro's claims of a demonic stalker seriously or not, they will find that he would sooner fight to the death than leave the safety of a tavern. He believes that it is only the presence of people, lights, noise and heat that keep the beast at bay and that somewhere outside, in the dark, it continues to stalk him.

If the characters should suddenly take it upon themselves to aid Olidaro in his plight, then they need only convince him to journey with them into the dark. Nothing short of a masterful Intimidate check (DC 28) will bring Olidaro to willingly journey into the darkness. Once they are sufficiently far from any light source, it will be less than ten minutes before the hunter in the dark manifests to seize its prey and slay him. This particular demon is called the spawn of the black heart and is a potent hunter summoned from the darkness of space. Should the characters somehow prevail against this supernatural threat and keep Olidaro alive at the same time, they will have a grateful ally who will willingly join them in their quest.

OLIDARO

Argossean noble 5; HD: 5d8+10 (32 hp); **Init:** +3; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 13; **Parry DV:** 14; **DR:** 4; **BAB/Grp:** +3/+5; **Atk:** Broadsword +5 melee; **Full Atk:** Broadsword +5 melee; **Dmg:** Broadsword 1d10+2/AP 3; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** —; **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **SV:** Fort +3, Ref +3, Will +5; Str 14, Dex 15, Con 14, Int 12, Wis 13, Cha 9
Skills & Feats: Appraise +6, Balance +4, Bluff +4, Diplomacy +5, Gather Information +6, Knowledge (local)

+5, Knowledge (nobility) +5, Profession (sailor) +3, Ride +5, Spot +9, Use Rope +4; Rank Hath Its Privileges, Sleep Mastery, Social Ability (family ties), Special Regional Feature, Title, Venomous Tongue*

Possessions: Broadsword, scabbard, leather jerkin, light boots, cloak, purse with 60 silver pieces

* New feat detailed in *Book II: Secrets of the Streets*

Olidaro favours a one-handed fighting style with the broadsword, but does not use a shield. He relies on his martial skills mostly to aid in escape when he has become so offensive and drunk that he antagonises some thug or criminal in to assaulting him. Olidaro, because of his obsessive fear of the dark, has grown very adept at managing his sleeping habits.

Zuthelia summoned the demonic beast from the outer darkness and though it persists in hunting Olidaro, the creature will always return to the safety of Zuthelia's hidden lair, east of the city in Amenkuhn's lost enclave. Should the characters either reduce the beast to within 25% of its hit points or fail to prevent it from slaying Olidaro, then the monster will flee back to its home. The beast flies with unnatural speed, but a character with a keen eye can keep track of the shadowy demon as it glides through the night to make its escape (Spot check, DC 18). Such a character will see the beast fly east, out of the city and into the hills beyond.

SPAWN OF THE BLACK HEART

HD: 3d8+12 (25 hp), **Init:** +11; **Spd:** 30 ft., fly 60 ft.; **DV:** 16; **DR:** 3; **BAB/Grp:** +3/+10; **Atk:** Slam +4 melee; **Full Atk:** Slam +4 melee; **Dmg:** Slam 1d8+1; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Smothering Strike; **SQ:** Banished by Sunlight, Darkvision 120 ft., Malleable Form; **SV:** Fort +7, Ref +7, Will +2; Str 13, Dex 18, Con 18, Int 10, Wis 13, Cha 3

Skills & Feats: Hide +22, Listen +13, Move Silently +9, Spot +6; Improved Initiative, Weapon Focus (slam)

Possessions: None

Investigating House Pephredo

Upon hearing Olidaro's story, characters may grow suspicious of House Pephredo. More about the House can be found in *Book I: Games Master's Guide*. Lord Severyn Pephredo is not a man who enjoys unnecessary interruptions, nor will he take kindly to violent action on his property. If characters have the authority of the king behind them (as agents or with a letter of marquee, for example) or they have Olidaro to vouch for them, then Severyn will reluctantly meet with the group to discuss the issue. If they have none of these, then Severyn will send a flunky to deal with the pesky intruders. Alternatively, an especially diplomatic character may attempt

a Diplomacy check (DC 20) to convince the merchant lord to speak directly with them. Any assault or invasion of the property will lead to bloody combat and possibly a sorcerous defence by the Stygian priesthood to Set which dwells on the premises.

Severyn will, under courteous circumstances, verify what Olidaro may have already told the party. He will express his utter contempt for Lady Zuthelia and her callous abuse of the House's trust. If the characters ask to speak with Nephri Toth or try to seek him out, Severyn will have him summoned. Nephri Toth will be very evasive about any questions concerning Zuthelia's occult tutelage and will not admit to performing any sorcery himself, instead suggesting that Zuthelia somehow stole the knowledge from forbidden tomes. If Nephri Toth or Severyn should be confronted in a violent fashion, they will defend themselves and 2d4 well-armed guards will rush to his aid. Use statistics for the Royal Guard in *Encounter Six: Zuthelia* for House Pephredo guards.

NEPHRI TOTH

Stygian scholar 8/noble 4; HD: 8d6+4d8-12 (32 hp); **Init:** +5; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 16; **Parry DV:** 17; **DR:** -; **BAB/Grp:** +9/+9; **Atk:** Short sword +9 melee or Stygian bow +12 ranged; **Full Atk:** Short sword +9/+4 melee or Stygian bow +12/+7 ranged; **Dmg:** Short sword 1d8/AP 1 or Stygian bow 1d12/AP 2; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **Magic Attack Bonus:** +6; **Base PPs:** 9; **SQ:** Stygian Traits; **SV:** Fort +2, Ref +5, Will +13; Str 11, Dex 15, Con 8, Int 17, Wis 17, Cha 18

Skills & Feats: Appraise +8, Bluff +19, Craft (alchemy) +20, Decipher Script +11, Diplomacy +9, Disguise +5, Forgery +6, Gather Information +10, Intimidate +10, Knowledge (arcana) +20, Knowledge (history) +13, Knowledge (nobility) +9, Knowledge (religion) +18, Listen +9, Perform (ritual) +16, Sense Motive +14, Ride +8, Spot +8; Background (lay priest), Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Stygian bow), Hexer, Informants*, Priest, Rank Hath Its Privileges, Ritual Sacrifice, Social Ability (*family ties*), Scholar, Special Regional Feature (+1 to magic attack bonus), Title, Tortured Sacrifice

Sorcery Styles: Counterspells, Curses, Divination, Hypnotism; **Spells:** *astrological prediction, curse of Yizil, domination, entrance, greater ill-fortune, greater warding, ill-fortune, lesser ill-fortune, master warding, visions, shade**, warding*

Possessions: Short sword, scabbard, priestly garments, sandals, sacrificial dagger, Stygian bow, 20 arrows in quiver, purse with 35 gold coins and 20 silver coins, two golden serpent armllets. In his temple he has a vast library of arcane lore, including a copy of the Eragoth Scriptures, an Acheronian tome containing the spells *spawn of the black heart**, lesser possession** and greater possession***. He has not learned these yet

* New feat detailed in *Book II: Secrets of the Streets*.

** New Spell detailed in *Book II: Secrets of the Streets*.

Nephri Toth prefers to let others do his fighting for him, but he will call upon all his abilities if necessary to escape personal harm.

LORD SEVERYN

PEPHREDO

Argossean male noble 15; HD: 15d8 (67 hp); **Init:** +6; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 14; **Parry DV:** 15; **DR:** 8*; **BAB/Grp:** +11/+12; **Atk:** Broadsword +15 melee; **Full Atk:** Broadsword +15/+10/+5 melee; **Dmg:** Broadsword 1d10+3/AP 3; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** -; **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **SV:** Fort +5, Ref +6, Will +11; Str 12, Dex 13, Con 10, Int 14, Wis 15, Cha 16

Skills & Feats: Appraise +20, Balance +3, Bluff +18, Diplomacy +18, Disguise +4, Gather Information +15, Intimidate +18, Knowledge (history) +6, Knowledge (nobility) +10, Profession (sailor) +4, Sense Motive +17, Spot +8, Use Rope +3; Do You Know Who I Am?, Enhanced Leadership, Lead by Example +6, Rank Hath Its Privileges, Shield Proficiency, Silver Tongue*, Social Ability (*family ties*), Social Ability (*savoir-faire*), Social Ability (*smear others*), Social Grace*, Special Regional Feature +3 (broadsword), Title (merchant lord), Weapon Specialisation (broadsword).

Possessions: Broadsword, scabbard, buckler, breastplate, large shield, heavy boots, warhorse, purse with 40 gold lunas. Always accompanied by four bodyguards (use statistics provided for Royal guard in *Encounter Six: Zuthelia*)

* With +2 modifier for shield.

* New feat detailed in *Book II: Secrets of the Streets*.

Lord Severyn is the latest in the Pephredo line, a dedicated servant to the mysterious aims and interests of his House. His preferred fighting style is the classic broadsword and buckler. He always has his four bodyguards present.

While House Pephredo is far from innocent in strange and duplicitous affairs, they are at least not directly involved in Zuthelia's crimes. Indeed, they are somewhat concerned about her schemes, for Zuthelia's actions against the city might well upset the cleverly laid plans of both Severyn and Nephri Toth. If the Games Master feels it is called for, he might allow the Non-Player Characters to provide some assistance to the characters, perhaps offering information that will lead them to the sewers of Redboots or the abandoned house in the Arena Prefect where assassins are being trained. Nephri Toth might be more forthcoming to any scholars amongst the characters, if he can speak with them privately might attempt some form of divination to assist them in the investigation, but if he feels at all threatened by the Player Characters, he will avoid this option entirely. Beyond this, House Pephredo and its own devious plots are left to the Games Master to flesh out as he sees fit.

Encounter Four: Bloody Trails

READ OR PARAPHRASE this to the Players when they reach Redboots:

Most civilised men avoid the reeking streets of Redboots, for here it is the abattoirs and tanneries that dominate. The blood-clogged sewer drains, the stench of tanning hides stretched taut and the putrescent fumes of rotting entrails and stripped carcasses make it easy to see why Redboots is the least attractive of all the prefects in Messantia.

You pick your way carefully through the stone canals that run red with the blood that drains from slaughtered livestock, dangling from high poles in the yard of a nearby slaughterhouse. Nearby, the charnel fluids drain into a thick iron grate, which exposes the darkness of another world, somewhere beneath your feet. As you move carefully to avoid stepping in the rotting viscera and coagulating blood, workers move freely amidst the drainage canals, boots stained dark red by their trade, hauling great hocks of beef, lamb and other animals to sundry shops in the rest of the city.

If ever there was a place both men and monster could safely ensconce themselves away from prying eyes and curious ears it would be here.

The characters will find this area utterly inhospitable. If they have arrived to follow up on the rumour of a butcher named Ventios, then a few questions from the locals will get them quick directions to the abattoir where Ventios works. This particular slaughterhouse is particularly busy today, as dozens of cattle are herded, one by one, through a slanted entrance in the cattle pens, to pass into the main abattoir where they are quickly caged and slain with precise blows to the head. Ventios is readily identified, as he is directing the process. The cattle, once slain, are then butchered for skins, cuts of meat, bones and marrow, fatty tissue, almost all of it needed for some trade or industry, somewhere in Messantia. The intestines, offal and blood are almost the only remains to be dispatched to the drainage gutters, where water pumps managed by young apprentices send gushing liquid down the tracts to carry the remains into the sewer.

Ventios is a nice man and his trade is perhaps not so morbid to warriors in the group who have brained far more men than they have cows. He will be happy to answer the characters' questions, seeming almost delighted to relay any tales of the strange things that he has seen in Redboots over the years.

Among other tales, he will mention that he has seen more men coming and going late at night in the area. *'No one lives in Redboots'*, he will explain. *'But on some nights I have been forced to work late, to keep up with production. Over the last few months, I have noticed many strange men come and go through the area. I have seen men enter and leave one particular sewer entrance on occasion. I could show you where it is.'*

Ventios will happily escort the characters to the location of the sewer grate in question. *'Children in the area, my youngest apprentices included, swear that some beast lurks beyond this grate. I don't know about such things, but I can tell you that many men have heard odd noises from somewhere inside. I have heard that the rats grow very large in the area of the Swills, some sewer workers I have known say that they have seen rats bigger than a dog lurking about. I would be careful, if I were you. Rats are filthy vermin, bringing disease, perhaps even the plague with them.'*

The sewer grate covers a man-sized entry through a drainage hole in the street, into which the viscous fluid of the sewers runs. The grate itself is sealed with a heavy bolt lock. A stalwart character could break the lock and open the grate with a Strength check (DC 26) or smash it (hardness 10, 30 hit points). A Gather Information check (DC 12) will garner the location of the nearest sewer worker's station, at which a guildsman on duty can be paid a simple bribe of five silver pieces to open the grate for them with the proper key. For 10 silver pieces more he will simply give them the key. Characters might also try and pick the lock requiring an Open Lock check (DC 25).

The sewers are a murky network beneath Messantia's streets, a hopelessly complicated maze into which the adventurers must venture to find an elusive nemesis. If they decide to brave the sewers on their own, then the characters must work their way through a maze of filthy tunnels, looking for elusive tracks or marks to suggest that they are on the right course. Alternatively, they might stake the area out, waiting to see if any of the strangers seen entering and leaving appear. Finally, some characters might think of paying a guide, perhaps the sewer worker with the key, to lead them through the maze. They will be surprised to learn that no amount of money will buy the services of the sewer workers, however, who explains that they work only to keep the grates open, the ducts clear and remove any necessary blockages. All of them, however, have a deep and certain dread of the network in this area. The worker will claim to have seen something huge, white and grey in colour, gnawing on what looked like a man's body.

Characters who take the time to stake out the entrance should make Hide checks and be patient. After dark, when most

of the workers in Redboots have gone home, a trio of men will approach the grate. The Games Master should roll Spot checks for the men. Use statistics for the thugs presented in *Encounter Two: Dulcetia*. They have a key to the sewer grate and will undo the grate, then close it behind them, leaving it unlocked as they climb down into the tunnels.

The three men are agents of the Golden Skull, delivering the latest information to Rolovincio, who is working behind the scenes, in his hidden headquarters to mastermind the assassination. In fact, the word they bring has to do with the Player Characters, which have so far avoided being caught or silenced. They also bear news that the king's men have been alerted, if indeed the characters have done so. All of this information is in their heads, so if the characters stop them now, they will be silenced, but unable to divulge the pathway to their hideout. If the characters wait until they have entered the sewers, then after a short period they may follow the men with a Tracking roll (DC 20) or by listening to their movements ahead in the tunnel (Listen check DC 15). Likewise, characters that do not wish to be heard should attempt Move Silently checks opposed by the Listen checks of the agents to also avoid being heard by their quarry. If they succeed, then the characters manage to follow the men to the entrance to the hideout (A1). If at any point the men become aware of being followed, they will divert from the trail to the area where the water dragon lies (A2). From there, they will make their way up another sewer drain exit to somewhere in the King's Prefect while the Player Characters stumble upon the water dragon.

THE SEWER HIDEOUT

The sewers include the following locations:

A1. Entrance to the Hideout: The entrance to the Order's hideout is disguised as an ordinary stretch of stone brick wall, covered in slick, black slime that is characteristic of this entire section of the sewer. A careful Search roll check (DC 18) made in the area will reveal that a large, detailed mural of a skull floating within a golden cage adorns the wall. If the Player Characters have not already encountered this symbol, the characters may get the idea that this is the mark of the Order of the Golden Skull.

There is no evident switch or mechanism that seems to trigger the door to open. A careful inspection of the wall (Search check DC 16) will reveal seams to the left and right of the mural and a floor seam about two feet above the murky sewage. A further search of the floor beneath the sewage (Search check DC 20) will reveal that, submerged beneath the water is a narrow opening, about two-feet-tall and wide, which a thin man could swim through if he was brave enough. Any character that wishes to wiggle through the hole will find that it extends for about 10-feet before opening into a dark room. The room inside contains a large

iron crank, which requires a Strength check (DC 10) to operate. This will retract the door from the wall outside, opening a space for everyone else to pass through.

If the adventurers try to smash their way through the foot-thick hard stone of the door has a hardness of 8, and 180 hit points. The noise of bashing this door down has a strong chance of summoning the water dragon (A2) to investigate.

A2. The Water Dragon's Lair: This region of the sewers opens up into a more expansive chamber, which looks to have been some basement or other building that somehow became integrated with the sewer network in the early days of the city. The high arched ceiling suggests a sealed building, perhaps, with peculiar, ancient murals just barely visible through the muck on the walls. This chamber reeks of filth and one corner holds an immense stack of bones, both human and animal. The water is chest deep, rising almost five-feet from the floor.

There is a good (60%) chance that the water dragon will be present when the characters enter, but it will be submerged in the murky water. The water dragon is a crafty beast of keen intelligence, though only a handful of these ancient monsters still exist. Though it is in no way a loyal beast, Rolovincio and his minions have learned to keep it fed, to ensure that it does not try to make a meal of them. This arrangement has worked well for the water dragon and has kept it from falling back into the dreamy slumber of the eons.

There is a chamber entrance on the far side of the water dragon's lair that leads to a side passage, where a ladder reaches up to a drainage grate in the ceiling. This grate opens into an alley in the King's Prefect. If the characters had earlier followed the three minions who then tried to elude them by heading to the lair of the water dragon, then they will have taken this path to get out of the beast's way.

One of the many exits in this area leads, after a long, winding path, to the lair of the guardian in area A8. It is not hidden from this end, but because of the maze-like nature of the sewers, it is unlikely that the characters will stumble on it unless they are meticulously mapping out the network of tunnels.

WATER DRAGON

HD: 8d8+32 (68 hp); **Init:** +6; **Spd:** 15 ft., swim 30 ft.; **DV:** 16; **DR:** 4/underbelly 1; **BAB/Grp:** +8/+25; **Atk:** Bite +17 melee; **Full Atk:** Bite +17 melee; **Dmg:** Bite 1d10+9; **Space/Reach:** 15 ft. (3)/10 ft. (2); **SA:** Constricting Grapple; **SQ:** Darkvision 60 ft., Scent; **SV:** Fort +10, Ref +6, Will +4; Str 28, Dex 11, Con 19, Int 10, Wis 15, Cha 7
Skills & Feats: Hide +6, Listen +10, Spot +10, Swim +19; Cleave, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (slam)
Possessions: None

A3. The Pit: The first major obstacle the characters will encounter on entering the inner sanctum of the Golden Skull hideout is a 30-foot square pit, which spreads from one corner of the chamber to the other. The pit is deep, with a 40-foot deep and its floor is covered foul water from which large spikes emerge. The pit is obviously designed to be a swift and obvious deterrent from entry into the compound. Floating in the murk or impaled on the spikes are several bodies, all former victims of this pit who were either foolish enough to fall or be pushed in. Last but not least are a number of thick chains dangling from the ceiling.

It is possible to climb down into the pit (Climb check DC 20) or slowly shuffle along the walls to the left or right, making Balance checks (DC 20) along the way until safely across. It is also possible to grab onto the chains and attempt to swing across. If anyone tries to investigate the chains first, let them make a Spot check (DC 18). If they succeed, they will notice that all of the chains, in fact, slide into narrow holes in the roof except for one, which is bolted. A firm tug from a safe spot will reveal that the chains have some give. If someone tries to swing across on the chains without taking precautions, they will discover that the chains simply slide loosely out of their holes on hinged releases, and characters are plunged into the depths of the spiked pit. Characters falling into the pit take 4d6 falling damage plus an additional 1d6+3 points of damage from each of the 1d6-1spikes they land on, these spikes slide cleanly through the victim's armour, ignoring DR modifiers.

The only safe way to swing across is on the one bolted chain. If this is attempted, the character need only make a Dexterity check (DC 14) to get across. If the character fails the check by more than five, he may make a Balance check (DC 16) fall with enough momentum to land on the far side, anyway. Failure of this Balance check means a plunge into the pit (see damage, above).

A4. Prison Chamber: The Order of the Golden Skull has enemies it wishes to silence. Kept isolated in dank cells filled with bones, there are a handful of men, starving and riddled with disease, who have been kept in these cells for two or more years now. There are two guards in here at any given time, checking on the prisoners or feeding them gruel and bread. Use statistics for the Patrol provided in *Encounter One: The Death of Argentio*.

Among the prisoners is Gerodos, a former Patrol captain who went missing a year ago when he accidentally discovered the ongoing plots of the secret Order. The order arranged for his capture and interrogation and Rolovincio, once a friend of Gerodos, decided to keep him alive rather than simply kill him. Gerodos is weak, but could provide some aid to the Players if freed and given time to heal.

The other men are of no real importance, being former members of the Order who fell out of favour or botched one too many missions. If anyone has lost a character in play recently, the Games Master could use this location as a way to bring in a new replacement character, which has been imprisoned by the Golden Skull and who now seeks revenge.

A5. Meeting Hall: This large chamber looks like it might once have been some sort of bilging station for the sewers that was later converted into a gathering chamber for criminals and desperados. It has carried the tradition ever since and now serves as the staging ground for the Order.

In this chamber is a long table, some three dozen chairs, a large map of Messantia covers one wall and a bewildering variety of kegs, crates of combustibles, kerosene and armaments and stolen goods litter the room. There are a dozen cots lining the west wall of this chamber. At any given moment these is a 50% chance that 2d4 Order members will occupy these. Use an equal number of Patrol and assassin statistics provided in *Encounter One: The Death of Argentio*.

A6. Staging Bunker: The bunker contains the war room used by Rolovincio and his senior officers to plan out the various attacks in the city on the day of the assassination. A detailed map of the city, with markers indicating each major location to be hit, as well as additional markers indicating key bases for the Order of the Golden Skull are all strategically marked. In addition, an observant character (Spot check DC 10) will notice a base marked in a hilly region where no other settlements are located, in the outlying region of Messantia on the map. An additional marker can be found in the old cemetery outside of the city, with the words 'Eredamos Crypt' scrawled on the map. The marker seems to note a specific location in the old cemetery. There are also stacks of encrypted scrolls on the shelf along one wall.

Depending on the time the characters arrive here and whether or not they have made much noise, there is a 50% chance of at least three senior officers of the Order working in here to co-ordinate different groups. Use the statistics for Royal Guards provided in *Encounter Six: Zuthelia*. If they can shout out in alarm, they will almost certainly attempt to summon help from the other areas of the hideout, including Rolovincio himself.

A7. Rolovincio's Private Chambers: The Spartan nature of this otherwise spacious complex, with a private bath, clean facilities in spite of the setting and a personal sparring ring is in contrast with the elegant weaponry displayed on the walls and weapons' racks around the room. Rolovincio is most likely to be found here, if he has not already rushed to the aid of his men when the Player Characters' invasion of the complex is discovered.

Rolovincio is not a man of many words and will try to calculate the likelihood he can defeat the invaders before determining if he should escape or not. If it seems like a good idea to flee, then he will make for the hidden exit in the guardian's chamber (A8). He will leave the city if he can, to reunite with Zuthelia in her hidden fortress. Especially crafty characters may well be able to follow him to the lair.

Rolovincio will not let himself be taken alive and will fight to the death if necessary to keep Zuthelia's plans secret. Should he somehow be captured alive, only the most skilled of torturers will be able to extract any information from him.

ROLOVINCIO

Argossean male, noble 3/soldier 5; HD: 3d8+5d10+24 (21 hp); **Init:** +3; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 14; **Parry DV:** 15; **DR:** 10*; **BAB/Grp:** +7/+11; **Atk:** Broadsword +9 melee; **Full Atk:** Broadsword +9/+4 melee; **Dmg:** Broadsword 1d10+4/AP 3; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **SV:** Fort +8, Ref +3, Will +4; Str 18, Dex 13, Con 17, Int 15, Wis 11, Cha 17

Skills & Feats: Appraise +6, Balance +3, Bluff +8, Climb +8, Diplomacy +10, Disguise +5, Gather Information +7, Intimidate +9, Knowledge (history) +6, Knowledge (nobility) +6, Listen +6, Profession (sailor) +4, Sense Motive +4, Spot +2, Use Rope +3; Combat Reflexes, Formation Combat (*skirmisher*), Leadership, Power Attack, Rank Hath It's Privileges, Shield Proficiency, Social Ability (*refuge*), Special Regional Feature, Title (baron), Weapon Specialisation (broadsword).

Possessions: Broadsword, scabbard, breastplate, large shield, heavy boots, warhorse, purse with 10 gold lunas and 30 silver pieces

* Includes +4 shield bonus

Rolovincio fights with a large shield and the family broadsword, the last relic of his once great. Rolovincio looks to be a rugged man of middle years, with somewhat unkempt hair and beard and a strange, callous gleam in his eye. He despises almost everything and lives only for vengeance, though the chance to seize the throne and make Milo pay is his primary goal. Though he is tempted by Zuthelia's charms, Rolovincio recognises that she is a true temptress and is wary of her own hidden agenda.

Rolovincio is a dour, taciturn man whose bitterness towards the loss of his barony has left him very angry. Convinced that Zuthelia's scheme is for the best, Rolovincio sees a future in which King Milo and his sons are killed and overthrown and Rolovincio is elevated to the throne by the will of the people and the backing of the Order of the Golden Skull. He does not know that Zuthelia does everything at the behest of a spirit which whispers in her mind, nor does he truly care, for his own sort of madness has clouded his vision. If confronted by the characters on the matter of his treasonous

actions, he will scoff, and say, 'I do more now for Argos and Messantia than Milo and his sons could ever accomplish. By fomenting rebellion, I awaken the hearts and minds of the people to their stagnation. When the deed is done, they will see that I was right and I will become their king. The time has come!'

A8. The Guardian's Lair: The guardian is a nickname given by Rolovincio to the horrific beast that Zuthelia acquired as a protector for the hideout. In fact, the beast proved to be completely unmanageable, killing those it was meant to protect as readily as it defended the complex. Rolovincio had the beast chained in this wide, circular hub of the sewers that served as the back entrance to the hideout.

The beast is a grey devil (see *Conan: The Scrolls of Skelos* for more details), captured and hauled from distant Kush and transported to this hideout, where Zuthelia commanded it to defend the complex. The creature bides its time, seeking sustenance from those who foolishly get too close. Rolovincio will release the beast if he flees in this direction, otherwise it will be chained in this room, unable to leave, though able to freely roam the circumference of its prison.

GREY DEVIL

HD: 10d8+20 (65 hp); **Init:** +7; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 18; **DR:** 7; **BAB/Grp:** +10/+21; **Atk:** Slam +17 melee; **Full Atk:** 2 Slams +17 melee; **Dmg:** Slam 2d6+7; **Space/Reach:** 10 ft. (2)/10 ft. (2); **SA:** Improved Grab, Trip, Crush (4d6+10); **SQ:** Darkvision 60 ft.; **SV:** Fort +9, Ref +8, Will +5; Str 25, Dex 13, Con 15, Int 8, Wis 14, Cha 7

Skills & Feats: Hide -2, Listen +4, Move Silently +14, Spot +4; Cleave, Dodge, Improved Bull Rush, Power Attack

Possessions: None



Encounter Five: The Blackest Pits

WHETHER THEY HAVE grown suspicious due to rumours overheard in *Encounter Three: Path of Deception* or because of the strange markers in the staging bunker of the Golden Skull hideout in *Encounter Four: Bloody Trails*, the Player Characters may well have decided to visit the old cemetery at some point. Located a mile east of Dustbiter, the cemetery was abandoned long ago by Messantia in favour of cremation of the dead, a tradition that began during the time of the Blackblood Plague. The cemetery is still maintained and guarded by Patrolmen, but it is otherwise neglected. More about the cemetery can be found in *Book I: Games Master's Guide*.

Contrary to some rumours, there have not been very many sightings of strange figures on or about the cemetery at all, or at least, the figures are not so strange as one would expect. In fact, most of the men who have entered and left the site are supposedly there on official business. Antolio, loyal administrator in the service of the king, has been overseeing a variety of surveys in the cemetery, while managing a small, but hearty group of men who are supposed to be surveyors and engineers, all lifelong members of the Order of Engineers. Standing guard over these men are a dedicated band of mercenaries, only occasionally do the well-bribed Patrolmen on duty wonder why armed mercenaries would be needed for protection in a place of the dead.

Antolio's role in the grand conspiracy of the Golden Skull is to forge a new Order in Messantia after the coup, even if it means killing everyone who would dare oppose him. Just as Rolovincio thinks Zuthelia will place him on the crown when Milo's reign is cast down, so too does Antolio believe he will become the Supreme Intendent of the city the true and secret power behind the throne. His interests do not lie in military might or conquest as Rolovincio's do, but rather in the acquisition of real power through information and secrecy.

Antolio's small band of supporters are all members of the Order of Engineers, young men who swore to great secrecy the knowledge they uncovered of the ancient legacy beneath the surface of Messantia. The legacy of the Acheronians is enigmatic at best, as much a fable or myth to the men of today, but this small group of engineers learned of Ferino Elimosius' frightening discoveries beneath the cemetery in hidden records that should never have been found. They also learned of a crypt, now sealed and forgotten, which once held the mummified remains of a entire Merchant House called Eredamos which suffered so terribly during the time

of the Blackblood Plague that the entire House, did not live out the year. The last surviving member of this family, Pergein Eredamos, ordered that the crypt be sealed after his internment and the passage to it collapsed. Thus did the legacy of an ancient family end.

Antolio's obsession with the cemetery is two-fold. Zuthelia has persuaded her co-conspirators to uncover this crypt, using the ancient records they discovered. In turn, they have been obediently transporting the mummified bodies from the crypt to Zuthelia's hidden lair for some time now. The process has been slow, for it turns out that there are a great many things hidden beneath the cemetery that they did not expect. The first night that they found the collapsed passage to the crypt was fraught with terror as, upon unsealing the ancient passage, a monstrous horde of ghoulish beings exploded outward and slew almost all of the workers.

The beasts were driven back in a furious subterranean clash with Rolovincio's loyal men. Since then, however, the excavators have been much more cautious, wearing protective charms given to them by Zuthelia while burning many torches and keeping a number of loyal mercenaries on hand. They made a second attempt to enter the crypt and discovered that the beasts were now reluctant to approach. The crypt had been compromised in three locations where the ghouls had dug through and the engineers set about sealing the holes, to prevent the ghouls from attacking them while they exhumed the bodies for transport. For several weeks now this has been the routine for the conspirators turned grave robbers. They have moved over 80 bodies so far, all carefully extracted and bundled up in seemingly innocent looking crates, then sent out under cover of darkness to Zuthelia's lair in the eastern hills.

The excavation took in a strange turn when, not three days past, Zuthelia ordered Antolio to end the excavation and for the engineers to unseal the entrances to the ghouls' warrens. Furthermore, she ordered that the crypt itself remains unsealed and that Antolio and his cohorts were to venture into the cemetery no more. These commands coincided with her orders to Rolovincio regarding the assassination, sent by the very runner who was intercepted by Argentio in *Encounter One: The Death of Argentio*. Antolio obeyed, as did the engineers, although they were all growing very nervous about what exactly it was that Zuthelia had planned for Messantia. Tragically, their instincts proved right, for as they unblocked the first of the holes, a veritable horde of ghouls poured out and slew all of the mercenaries and engineers. Only Antolio escaped the crypt, sealing the cemetery entrance as he fled, condemning his companions to death. Antolio fled to Zuthelia's lair, but he has left in his wake a horrific mess for the Player Characters to stumble across.

There are many unusual locations in the cemetery, but only the crypt to the lost house of Eredamos is significant to Zuthelia and her plans right now. If the characters have wandered here on a hunch, they might well spend a great deal of time getting into all sorts of mischief and the Games Master can read the more detailed information on the old cemetery to be prepared for their curious adventures. The cemetery is guarded at all times by 10 Patrolmen. These men are very bored most of the time, but on the day of Argentio's death, they have grown somewhat more nervous, as on several occasions now one or more furtive figures have been spotted moving among the graves. The captain of the watch is nervous about the fact that just last night Antolio, who entered the cemetery in the morning with two dozen men, showed up in the middle of the night at the gates alone. Antolio demanded a horse and rode off as fast as the steed could carry him, providing no explanation as to the whereabouts of his cohorts. Since last night, the Patrolmen have been spooked, swearing to have spotted odd, hunched figures moving amidst the grave stones, hunched over and sometimes on all fours. Not one of the Patrolmen has been willing to enter the cemetery since.

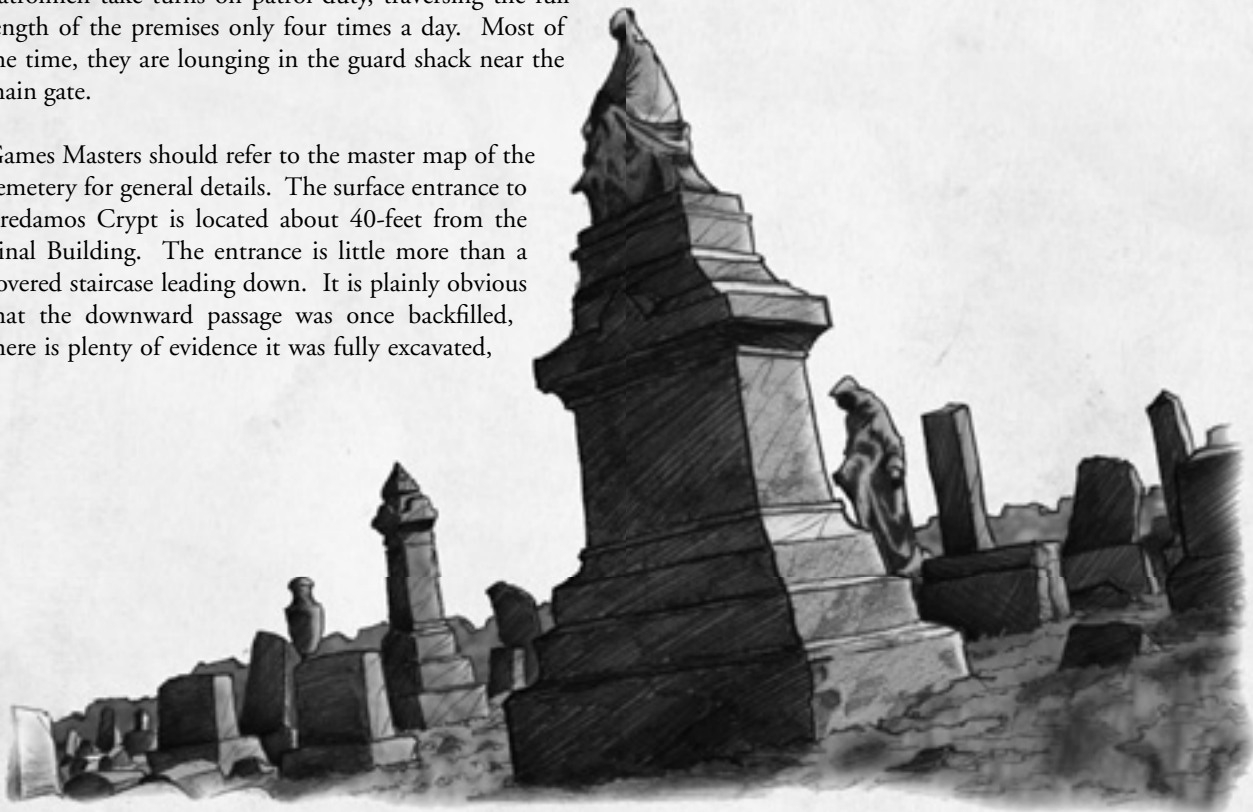
If the characters arrive in any official capacity, the Patrolmen will let them through unquestioned. For all other circumstances, a bribe of 20 silver pieces or the equivalent value in good food and drink will get them through the gates. Frugal characters can simply approach the cemetery wall from another direction, well away from the entrance, and climb the 15-foot fence (Climb check DC 10). The Patrolmen take turns on patrol duty, traversing the full length of the premises only four times a day. Most of the time, they are lounging in the guard shack near the main gate.

Games Masters should refer to the master map of the cemetery for general details. The surface entrance to Eredamos Crypt is located about 40-feet from the Final Building. The entrance is little more than a covered staircase leading down. It is plainly obvious that the downward passage was once backfilled, there is plenty of evidence it was fully excavated,

as the dirt is heaped nearby. There are lots of footprints, almost a trail in its own right leading from this crypt to the main path. A good tracker can tell (Track check DC 15) that many of the prints are booted, but the most recent prints are of a single pair of sandaled feet, moving at a good running pace, perhaps a day old, followed by a miscellany of fresher prints, looking like deformed bare footprints with oddly elongated toe nails. There is a smattering of these prints, but not enough to tell how many there are or where they went.

While in the cemetery, there is a 15% chance in the day of spotting an errant figure lurking about, watching the party. On closer inspection the figure will dash away and disappear into the freshly churned soil of a gravesite. Evidence of what might be taken for an animal's burrow can be seen in the unearthed grave and a Tracking check (DC 10) will indicate that the figure's prints look vaguely humanoid, like distended bare feet with protruding claws. Whatever the beast was, it managed to pull the tunnel in on itself, and the task of digging out the tunnel will be an arduous process.

By night, the chance of spotting something increases to 30%, but the ghouls will now make an effort to hide before being seen. If someone spots or approaches them, the ghouls will not flee to some burrow, but instead prepare an ambush, hiding among ancient grave stones and behind crypt entrances. There will be 1d6 of them initially. Ghouls are fully detailed in *Conan the Roleplaying Game*.





GHOUL

HD: 6d8+12 (39 hp); **Init:** +7; **Spd:** 40 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 16; **DR:** 2; **BAB/Grp:** +6/+9; **Atk:** Claw +9 melee; **Full Atk:** Two claws +9 melee, bite +7 melee; **Dmg:** Claw 1d4+3, bite 1d8+1, AP 4; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Improved Grab, Relentless Jaws; **SV:** Fort +6, Ref +7, Will +2; Str 16, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 1

Skills & Feats: Hide +13, Listen +5, Move Silently +13, Spot +5; Multiattack, Power Attack, Toughness

Possessions: None

THE CRYPT

Throughout the catacombs and crypt the characters will have a chance to battle many of the hundreds of ghouls waiting to feed. There are many ghouls living in the seclusion of the forests along the Zingaran and Argossean border, but these ghouls have taken residence in the warrens, crypts and catacombs beneath the graves. Something terrifying and unknown within the subterranean ruins of the ancient Acheronians calls to them and the ghouls are compelled to obey.

An important note for Games Masters about this particular section of the adventure: this encounter has a deadly potential, for the cemetery has a large clan of ghouls dwelling beneath it. If the Player Characters are not careful and do not retreat in the face of obvious death, then it is very easy for them to be wiped out. To avoid this, Games Masters are encouraged to reduce the number of suggested ghouls encountered to suit their party, below. Alternatively, Games Masters who

feel that their Players need a humbling lesson can play it straight and let the dice fall where they may.

B1. The Eredamos Crypt Entrance: Characters who find the entrance to Eredamos Crypt will see that a large stone door has been pulled shut at the base of the staircase. A long wooden bar, which was placed across it, has been shattered, as if a strong force from inside broke the wooden plank, splintering it outward. The door is now shut, but evidence suggests it was forced open recently. Characters have no problem swinging it open. Inside, a dark passage slopes downward and a rancid stench fills the corridor.

B2. The Tunnels: The tunnels are rarely big enough for more than one person to pass through at a time and there is just barely six feet of headroom. Any character that finds himself fighting in such cramped conditions will suffer a -4 penalty on his attacks due to the limited swing room. Likewise, if torches are being used for illumination, the smoke builds rapidly along the ceiling and taller characters will want to hunker down to avoid smoke inhalation. The walls of the catacombs are lined with narrow ledges cut into the stone, where bodies would have once been laid to rest. Save for the occasional scrap of petrified cloth, there are no bodies to be found, anywhere.

The tunnels are a network of old catacombs. About 30-feet in the catacombs begin branching into different directions. Anyone who tries to search carefully as they move along (Search Check DC 10) will notice that previous visitors have painted yellow marks along a specific route in the tunnels. This was the path that Antolio and his crew took and if the characters stick with it, they will eventually arrive at the inner entrance to the crypt.

If the characters deviate from the marked path and begin wandering the catacombs they will start to notice that there are no bodies at all interred within. This may seem normal at first, if they assume that the bodies were burned long ago during the time of the plague, but eventually it becomes evident that they are now moving through catacombs that would have been used long before the plague ever came to Messantia. At some point, they will begin to hear furtive noises echoing through the catacombs and then at last a horde of ghouls who have smelled the characters scent will converge upon their position. The Games Master should moderate the number of ghouls, but the wave will initially consist of one to two ghouls per character, subsequent waves arrive every 1d20 rounds and contain two to three ghouls per character. It will become a blood bath very quickly.

B3. The Inner Entrance: The crypt's large stone entrance is haphazardly cast open. The passage leading up to it opens up into a 20-foot wide, 30-foot long chamber that shows evidence of ancient ceremonial decorations and the remains

ANTOLIO'S NOTES

Read or give this handout to the Player who succeeded the Decipher Script check in The Crypt (C4).

Day 12: I have located the buried entrance to Fredamos Crypt with the help of Justivan and the other engineers. It will be a difficult task, but we shall find the bodies as per Luthelia's wishes. She will see that I am the better of her servants, unlike Relevincio, who care little for her plans.

Day 32: At last we have found the entrance to the crypt. The catacombs are a twisted maze. We still have not found Revarius, who seems to have become lost. Tomorrow we shall open the crypt and see if Luthelia is right. If so, then she will have exactly what she needs to follow in Amenkuhn's footsteps.

Day 33: The gods have cursed this foul place! The crypt was opened, revealing that we were not the first to enter it. Three holes had been dug through the walls, and many of the bodies had been violated and gnawed, as if eaten. A terrible stench overwhelmed the workers and a great wave of beasts, which looked much like men but with bloody fangs and claws and grey skin swarmed over my team. It was a slaughter. Relevincio is gloating, for he and his men fought the tidal wave of savagery back into the holes, but Justivan is dead and all of our labourers have perished. It is just as well, now I need not put them to death myself to keep our work secret. We have begun sealing the holes these beasts had dug. I think they live down here, but I wonder how they sustain themselves. The sewers, perhaps?

Day 37: We have brought forth over forty corpses now. We have found almost all that are intact and have not been damaged by these ghouls. I still have not found the woman, however. I wonder if it is possible that Luthelia is wrong? If this woman was a slave girl of House Fredamos, it seems unlikely she would have been interred here. I have plenty of time to ponder such matters, as the meticulous preparations of each corpse, as per Luthelia's strict dictates, can take most of a day to complete. It is as if they are being embalmed all over again, to insure that their bodies are all but immune to the test of time.

Day 51: Much rejoicing among the men! When we broke into the alcove holding a coffin for one Lady Vulchessa. On opening it I found the corpse of a woman wearing a simple slave girl's shift, bearing a unique reliquary in her grasp. The men have no idea what it is she holds or they would have fled by now and slain me for a traitor, not just of Messantia, but of all men. It is hard to believe that this slave girl, Hespera, was the vessel by which Amenkuhn spread the Blackblood Plague. He placed a vial of the terrible liquid that he used to begin the infection in her hands, in the form of this ancient reliquary. One wonders if he had a keen affection for this girl, or if he had foreseen his fate? No matter. Luthelia will be very pleased.

Day 74: I do not dare question her, but if we reopen the holes to the ghoul warrens, the beasts will be free to roam the cemetery. If someone discovers us and seeks to stop these beasts, they might see what has been unearthed here and begin to wonder what has been going on. Damn that woman and her strange ideas!

Day 76: We must leave immediately. I will go ahead, and await my men who shall reopen the holes. I can smell the stench already. Mitra take pity on our blackened souls.

THE BLACK SCRIPTS

of once beautiful marble architecture. It is likely that this chamber was once where the final mourning of a deceased family member was held, before the proper burial in the crypt.

On the floor of this chamber are perhaps a dozen bodies of well-armed men and workers who have been brutally murdered and half-eaten. Other bodies are not so easily identifiable, having been stripped of all flesh, leaving only a gristly carcass and tatters of clothing. There are clearly no survivors here.

B4. The Crypt: The crypt itself is a 60-foot long, 30-foot wide chamber with a high, arched ceiling that was once painted to depict a scene of blue sky and clouds. The floor, hidden beneath dust and grime, was a stuccoed depiction of an ancient ceremony to Mitra. Along the walls are alcoves, each sealed with a heavy stone door to protect the bodies within. Unfortunately, more than half of the alcoves have been opened and the bodies removed. Along the walls are three crude holes, approximately two- to three-feet in diameter, which open into the crypt. Crumbled masonry near each hole shows that they were recently sealed and then reopened.

Characters who make a careful search of the area (Search check DC 18) will discover a leather-bound folio with several loose sheets of parchment in one corner, with a severed hand still attached to it. The sheets contain crude floor plans, a detailed, but very antiquated description of the cemetery and a large number of cribbed notes written in some sort of shorthand. A character trying to make sense of the notes (Decipher Script check DC 15) will be able to glean the information from the fragments of information and scribbled notes of a man named Antolios. The most recent entry was dated last night. The oldest entry goes back over two months. See the Antolio's Notes sidebar.

Characters who have spent a few minutes in the crypt should make a Listen check (DC 15) to see if they hear an odd scratching noise and a muffled cry. It quickly becomes evident that someone is inside the crypt, perhaps locked in one of the sealed alcoves. A quick Search (DC 10) will reveal that the noise comes from one particular alcove, about head-height, with the name 'Lady Vulchessa' etched upon it. The wax seal around the stone door has been broken, but the door seems to have jammed. A Strength check (DC 18) will force the door open, exposing the narrow, coffin-sized alcove stretching into darkness. A frantic man with bloodied fingers and wild eyes gasps for breath, his voice hoarse and ragged from screaming. If the characters pull him out and try to calm him down (Charisma check DC 10), then he will catch his breath and begin to relax.

The man's name is Tolomas and he is the only other survivor of the massacre. Tolomas was one of the Order of Engineers who had schemed with Antolio, so he is fairly knowledgeable about what has been happening here. He is grateful to the characters for saving him, and will explain the immediate peril they face. Indeed, he only survived before by realising he had no chance of escape, so he climbed into the vacant alcove and jammed the hatch shut, well enough in fact that he trapped himself. He spent hours listening to the ghouls feeding and prowling about before they finally left.

Characters have about 10 to 15 minutes in the crypt before they begin to notice a terrible stench emanating from the holes. Within 1d6 rounds, the stench fills the chamber and ghouls begin to surge forth at the rate of 1d3 per round, until up to 30 of the foul beasts have emerged. The moment Tolomas smells the stench, he will grow frantic and beg the characters to flee with him. If they do not, then he will bolt for the exit and, depending on the Games Master, might never be seen again.

If the characters show a sense of prudence and take flight before the horde of ghouls erupts from the depths, they will probably survive the experience. If it is daylight outside, then escape into sunlight will be enough to warrant their safety. If it is dark, then the ghouls will pursue them all the way to the cemetery gates before turning back.

Assuming Tolomas survives this experience, he will beg forgiveness for any harm his actions may have indirectly caused by aiding Antolio and the Order of the Golden Skull. Furthermore, he will provide a critical clue for the characters: he knows the location of Zuthelia's lair in the eastern hills. He will warn them that it is well-defended and that Zuthelia will very likely be ready for an attack if she suspects that anyone knows she is there. If the characters are agents of the king, then Tolomas will urge them to consider seeking the aid of King Milo and his forces, for Zuthelia will almost certainly have several hundred men at her disposal. The plot should progress to *Encounter Six: Zuthelia*.

B5. The Warrens: If for some reason the characters should choose to enter the holes leading to the warrens, then they will find themselves confronting the entire clan of ghouls. Hidden in a maze of tunnels ranging from two- to five-feet in diameter, is close to 100 ghouls. The likelihood of the adventurers surviving is slim, but a kind Games Master should give them some chance to realise their error and take flight. Failing that, a valiant death as wave after wave of the beasts come charging down tight quarters for one great final stand is an equally interesting conclusion to the adventure, but new characters might want to begin investigating the death of their predecessors, rather than that of Argentio!

ENCOUNTER SIX: Zuthelia

BY NOW, THE adventurers have either learned of Zuthelia's hidden fortress from Tolomas, followed Rolovincio in his flight or managed to deduce its location from the maps found in the staging bunker of the Redboots hideout. If the characters are agents of the king and they have learned enough of the matter to report their findings to the king. If they have deduced that Zuthelia is the descendant of Amenkuhn, then scholars of the king will reluctantly relay details of the origins of the Blackblood Plague and the battle against Amenkuhn, as well as the location of his old fortress in the eastern hills.

If all else fails and the characters seem to need help, then the Games Master could provide the clue more directly, such as a disturbed member of the Order of the Golden Skull appearing before the characters, offering to take them there, since he only now realizes the horror that Zuthelia plans for the city. Alternatively, for a more traditionally villainous approach, Zuthelia could dispatch Antolio with a squadron of her loyal mercenaries to find the characters and invite them to her fortress, where she wishes to meet the strangers who appeared intown on the eve of her victory and badly disrupted her schemes. Finally, it is always possible that the characters will be unable to find Zuthelia and must instead look to the protection of the king to thwart his imminent assassination.

FINALE OPTION A: THE DAY OF KING'S EAR

It is possible that the characters take longer than two days to resolve the mystery at hand or that rather than confront Zuthelia in her lair, they decide to be present on the day of the appointed assassination. If the Player Characters take this course of action, then a decidedly different finale ensues.

On the day of King's Ear, King Milo entertains a selection of common men and women from throughout Argos, listening to their requests and concerns and getting a feel for their needs and wants. He is guarded during this event by two very formidable guards who have placed wax in their ears, so that they may not impart any of the conversations that take place between the king and his subjects.

If the officials are aware of the assassination, then Prince Cassio will have taken great pains to screen those who will see the king, as well as providing very heavy security for the palace and grounds. The characters, if working for the king, will be expected to be present on the grounds of the palace,

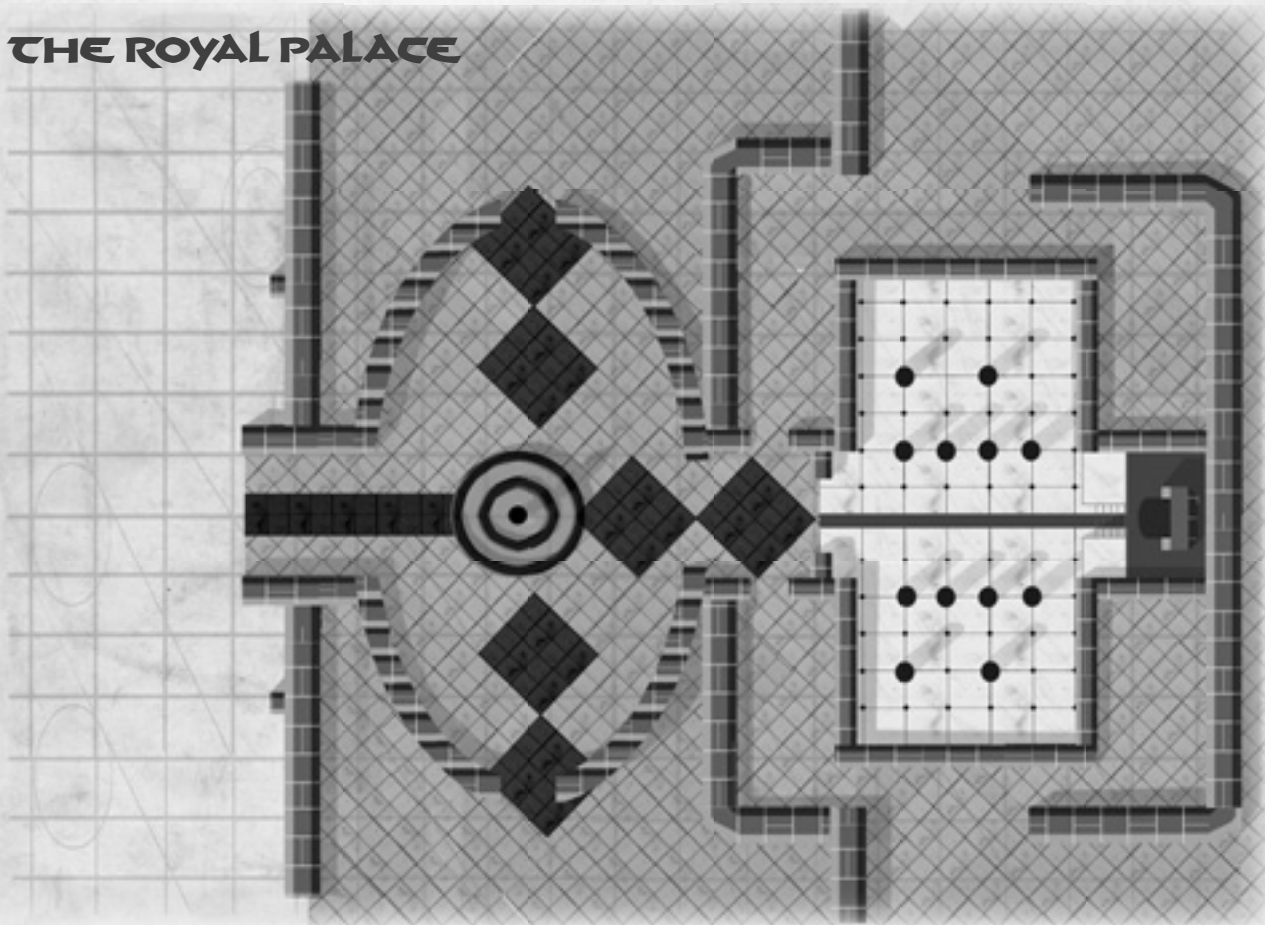
close to the meeting chamber where King Milo is holding this event. Captain Hannor will assign the characters to assist in screening those who come forth to see the king. All will seem to go well, but each character should be allowed one Sense Motive check (DC 15) to notice one particular woman, a common girl who calls herself Ryella and who hails from some southern barony. She bears no arms or armour, but a Search check (DC 15) will reveal a small silver-capped vial of black fluid hidden on her person. If asked, she will explain, **'It is a gift for the king. It is a holy relic of Mitra, venerated by my House for generations. My father asked that it be given to him before it died.'**

Players might be suspicious at this point, but their characters can make a Sense Motive roll (DC 20) to see if the story seems plausible. The woman will even be happy to uncork the silvered vial for them, if they request it, but says she would not want to pour the fluid out, since it is the blood of an ancient priest of Mitra, who founded the first temple in the south. She will become genuinely upset only if the contents are lost entirely, before trying to leave, angrily.

In fact, the woman is Zuthelia herself and she has every intention of passing through to see King Milo, where she will shatter the small vial before him, releasing the foul magical toxin within that contains the essence of the Blackblood Plague. Zuthelia herself has already been immunised to the plague by necromancies whispered in her ear from the spirit of Amenkuhn, so she fears not for her life. When she meets with Milo, she will ask only if she can sprinkle the sacred blood of Mitra, culled from a bull, upon his brow. If, and only if the king or his deafened guards react negatively to her will she simply try to break or splash the bottle before calling upon her magic to summon a demon to protect her.

If Zuthelia is detained outside and barred from entry, she will grow arrogant and then demand to know who it is would stop her from seeing the king. She will make a gesture, signalling her minions in the crowd to act, creating a distraction, and several dozen armed men will cast off peasant's clothing and strike out against the guards at the palace gate. Zuthelia will try to slip past the guards and into the palace in the fracas. About three dozen thieves and soldiers rush the characters and a half-dozen nearby members of the Royal Guard. Use the statistics for Assassins and Patrolmen in equal quantities for the Order members assaulting the Royal Guard. If Rolovincio survived his earlier encounter with the adventurers, then he will lead the charge. The characters will most likely want to pursue Zuthelia onto the palace grounds and intercept her before she reaches the king's chamber. If Antolio is around still, he will most likely have slipped back onto the grounds of the palace and be waiting to help Zuthelia confront Milo.

THE ROYAL PALACE



ROYAL GUARD

Male Argossean soldier 6; **HD:** 6d10+18 (61 hp); **Init:** +6; **Spd:** 25 ft.; **Dodge DV:** +5; **Parry DV:** +11; **DR:** 7; **BAB/Grp:** +6/+9; **Atk:** War sword +10 melee or heavy lance +9 melee or Bossonian longbow +8 ranged; **Full Atk:** War sword +10/+5 melee or heavy lance +9/+4 melee or Bossonian longbow +8/+3 ranged; **Dmg:** War sword 1d12+3 19-20/x2 AP 6 melee or heavy lance 1d10+3 x3 AP 6 melee or Bossonian longbow 1d12+3 x3 AP 5 ranged; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square); **SA:** —; **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Formation Combat (*heavy cavalry*), Formation Combat (*heavy infantry*); **SV:** Fort +8, Ref +4, Will +4; Str 16, Dex 14, Con 16, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 15

Skills & Feats: Balance +4, Gather Information +4, Intimidate +10, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +6, Knowledge (nobility) +6, Profession (sailor) +4, Ride +10, Search +6, Spot +10, Use Rope +4; Cleave, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Bossonian longbow), Mounted Combat, Spirited Charge, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (war sword)

Possessions: Mail hauberk, breastplate, steel cap, livery of the Royal Guard, war sword, large shield, Bossonian longbow, 20 arrows, aid whistle. During wartime this kit is also supplemented by a Hyborian warhorse and a heavy lance

Ultimately, it is likely that Milo will live another day and Zuthelia will fail to infect him with the Blackblood virus, though any release of the liquid on human skin will expose them to the plague and turn them into carriers. The plague is a virulent, lethal strain of sorcerous origin and if it touches a man's skin his only hope is to make a Fortitude save at DC 24 or become infected. Those infected will become carriers and will die in 1-2 weeks from a horrible rotting disease, with black, bloody welts that weep foul fluids. Only magic can save those infected. The virus, once in a person's body, spreads like the flu. Those who are in close proximity to the victim will fall victim in a similar manner after 2d4 weeks, though the Fortitude save to resist this airborne strain is only DC 20.

It is possible that the characters never alerted King Milo or his men to the assassination threat. If so, then the scenario will play out much as described above, but it is possible that the attempt is still thwarted or botched, perhaps by Mio's own guards, at the Games Master's discretion.

In any case, should Zuthelia be caught or killed, then the immediate threat of her magic is over and the Order of the Golden Skull will have been thwarted. Characters can then find her hidden fortress, to mop up her minions in their own time.

FINALE OPTION B: THE HIDDEN FORTRESS

Zuthelia's base of operations lies within an abandoned stone keep, located some 10 miles from the heart of Messantia in a small range of grassy hills along the southern banks of the Khorotas River. A baron who died some 50 years ago once held the keep. The place was said to be haunted and though guardians of the border took up residence and maintained the keep as a barracks, it was eventually abandoned again, and to date, not even squatters have found the keep comfortable.

The aura of tension and fear that emanates from the keep is a strange side effect of the dark necromancy which was once performed on this site, for long ago the sorcerer Amenkuhn took up residence on this site, and worked his plan of destruction against Messantia. When at last he was found and slain, members of the Order of Engineers were sent by the king at that time to take his villa apart, piece-by-piece. The priests of Mitra consecrated the grounds with the blood of 100 bulls and occupation of the land was forbidden for a century.

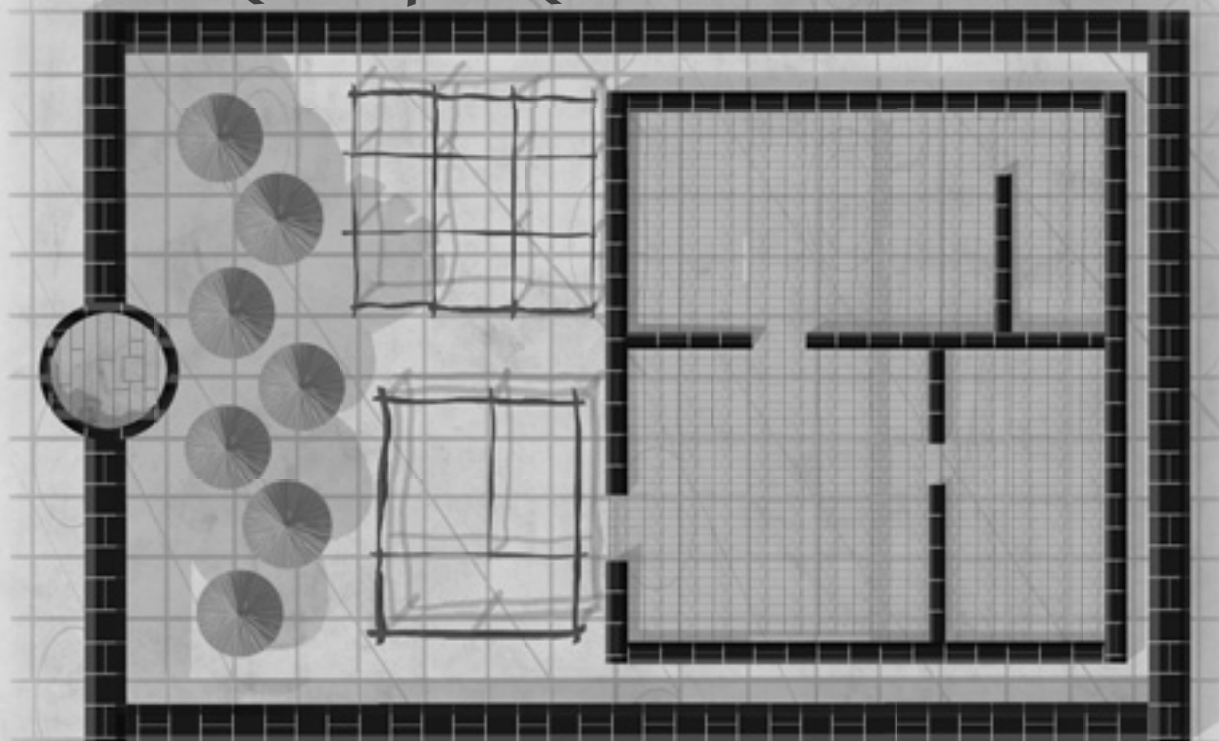
About 150 years ago, a lesser baron sought a new keep from which to rule his plot of land, and so the Voporos family

came to take residence. The edict forbidding construction had passed, and the memory of what had happened here had faded. For a time, the family lived well, but gradually, each member of the baron's household began to go mad. Some became homicidal; others took their own life. Voporos' son was the last to dwell there, outliving all other members of the family. When he died, it was left fallow until the border guardians came along and tried to make it a barracks for operations, though after a series of 'incidents', the operation moved on.

The keep remained unoccupied until a few years ago, when Zuthelia discovered it. Amenkuhn's spirit told her of his old lair and so she visited the place, deciding to make the keep that stood on the ruins of his demesne her own. As she developed the Order of the Golden Skull, she established a garrison and neither she nor the men of her command suffered from madness, for those of ill will seemed immune to the dark energy pervading the place.

Depending upon what time of day the characters come to the keep, Zuthelia may or may not be present. Likewise, her allies, Antolio and Rolovincio, may be present depending on whether or not they have survived previous encounters with the Player Characters. To summarise, Zuthelia will be present if it is any time prior to the day of King's Ear.

KEEP: GROUND FLOOR



ZUTHELIA

Otherwise, she will be engaging in the assassination. If the characters arrive during the time of the assassination, then Zuthelia, Antolio and Rolovincio will not be present. Once the assassination is past, any of the trio that survived the event to escape will return here to regroup.

Under optimal conditions, the characters may have discovered the whereabouts of the keep with enough time to attack before the assassination, perhaps even catching Zuthelia off-guard if Rolovincio did not escape to warn her. If they even had time to go to Captain Hannor and Prince Cassio with news of their discovery, then they could be in the company of a large force of soldiers riding under command of the Prince, ready to lay siege to the keep while awaiting proper reinforcements. Such an epic conclusion to the tale will require some advance planning by the Games Master to resolve the conflict. Narrative rules for such large scale combat can be found in *Conan: The Free Companies*, while mass combat mechanics are available from the Mongoose Publishing website, if a narrative approach is not desired.

It is also very likely that the characters are not working with the authority of the king, or that they are highly confident of their own abilities to resolve this matter and have decided to sneak into the keep or lay siege to it without help. In such matters, the Games Master should proceed as normal, letting the Players give it their best shot.

The Keep

The Keep is a squat, three-storey edifice that rests in the base of a low valley among the hills. It can only be seen from the north side of the Khorotas River,

otherwise it remains invisible from a distance until riders are almost on top of it. A wall that is 20-feet in height, with one main entrance through a lean entry tower, surrounds the keep. Inside the grounds are wooden barracks and stables.

120 devious mercenaries, consisting of criminals, expatriates and loyalists to Rolovincio, man the keep. There are 40 soldiers (use Patrol statistics), 30 scouts (use Assassin statistics), 20 elite soldiers (use Royal Guard statistics), 30 guerrillas (use Thug statistics) and a garrison commander named Callodor. There are horses for 60 men to ride.



CALLODOR

Zingaran male soldier 5;

HD: 5d10 (27 hp); **Init:**

+1; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge**

DV: 12; **Parry DV:**

13; **DR:** 7*; **BAB/Grp:**

+5/+9; **Atk:** Broadsword

+5 melee; **Full Atk:** Arming

sword +10 melee or hunting

bow +5 ranged; **Dmg:** Arming

sword 1d10+4/AP 2 or hunting

bow 1d8/AP 1; **Space/Reach:**

5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SQ:** Zingaran

Traits; **SV:** Fort +4, Ref +1, Will

+1; Str 19, Dex 10, Con 11, Int

9, Wis 10, Cha 14

Skills & Feats: Balance +1, Climb

+6, Diplomacy +1, Intimidate

+6, Listen +2, Profession (sailor)

+0, Ride +2, Sense Motive +1,

Spot +2, Use Rope +1; Alertness,

Formation Combat (*heavy*

infantry), Mounted Combat,

Power Attack, Shield Proficiency,

Weapon Focus (arming sword).

Possessions: Arming sword,

buckler, hunting bow, quiver

with 30 arrows, dagger, mail

shirt, large shield, heavy

boots, warhorse, purse with

28 silver pieces

* Includes +2 shield

bonus

Callodor is a man of many basic talents, serving to drill the infantry of his mercenary crew in

formation tactics as well as basic manoeuvres in mounted combat. While efficient, Callodor is not particularly formidable or feared, for he drinks too much and has an immense gut, which slows him down a great deal. His indulgent nature spills over on to his men, who are often allowed to get a bit too rowdy when Zuthelia and her agents are not about.

In the heart of the keep, on the third storey, something large and murderous lumbers about, making a terrible wailing noise that sounds like dozens of men crying out in agony all at once. Whatever it is, the beast is so terrifying that the mercenaries will not even enter that floor. As a result, there is no meaningful defence of the main keep. The garrison holds to the lower two levels, the outer wall and the barracks.

C1. The Outer Walls: Standing 20-feet high, these stone and mortar walls make a serviceable defence against sieges. At least 20 men stand guard at all times along the length of the outer walls. The walls can be scaled with a Climb check (DC 15). On the south side of the walls is a wide guard tower under which the main entrance is located. The tower includes a guardhouse and large crank to raise and lower the portcullis. Four soldiers are on duty here at all times.

C2. The Barracks: At least 30 men will be resting in the barracks at any given time. The barracks were constructed by Zuthelia's men and are little more than flimsy wooden shacks.

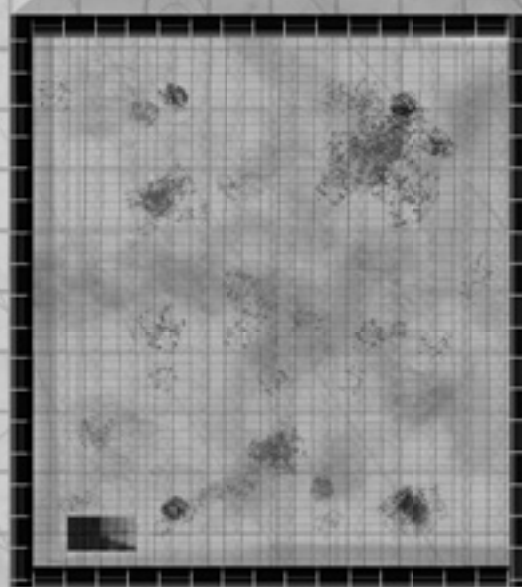
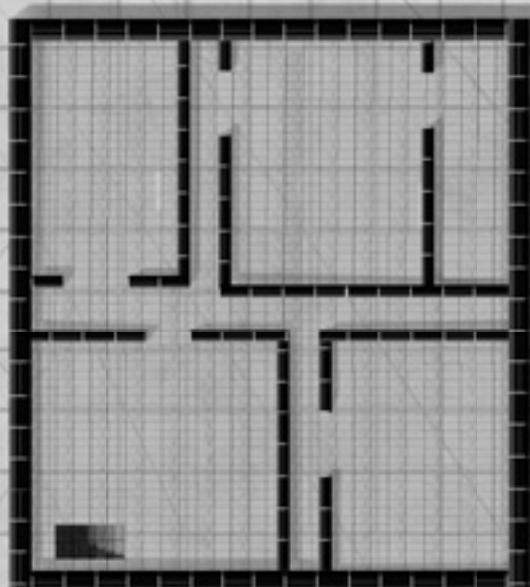
C3. The Stables and Pens: Outside the eastern wall is the main stable for the horses, along with a number of pig and sheep pens. Inside, a smaller pen holds livestock and private stables for some 30 horses hold the steeds of the senior officers. There are a handful of young stable hands to care for the animals.

The Ground Floor

C4. The Mess: This lengthy hall contains three long tables at which the men sit for their daily meals. The mess is occupied during the morning and evening meals. During this time, the number of troops in all other locations is half that listed.

C5. Main Hall: Here the men gather to relax and entertain themselves. There are usually a number of dancing women and prostitutes smuggled in from Messantia to keep the men happy. They are brought in by coach, blindfolded.

KEEP: UPPER FLOORS



ZUTHELIA

C6. Kitchens: The kitchens usually have at least one worker in here around the clock, and four or five during meals.

C7. Pantry: The pantry is well stocked with a variety of goods, most of it stolen from merchants in Messantia or taken from villages in raids.

The Second Floor

D8. Officer's Quarters: These chambers provide quarters for the senior staff of the mercenary garrison. There will usually be two to four officers here off duty at any given time.

D9. Rolovincio's Chamber: This spartan chamber is where Rolovincio dwells when not operating from his hideout in Redboots. If he fled to the keep and met Zuthelia, he will probably be resting here during the evening.

D10. Antolio's Chamber: Antolio keeps his quarters here, though he has a house within Messantia that he prefers. He keeps a great deal of incriminating evidence lying about, in the form of plans, maps, journals and other records that provide a detailed paper trail of the Order's activities.

ANTOLIO

Argossean male, noble 4/scholar 1; HD: 4d8+1d6-5 (16 hp); **Init:** +1; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 11; **Parry DV:** 12; **DR:** 0; **BAB/Grp:** +3/+2; **Atk:** Staff +2 melee; **Full Atk:** Staff +2 melee; **Dmg:** Staff 2d4-1/AP 1; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Spells; **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **MAB:** +1; **PP:** 6; **SV:** Fort +0, Ref +1, Will +8; Str 8, Dex 10, Con 8, Int 16, Wis 15, Cha 16

Skills & Feats: Appraise +7, Balance +2, Bluff +11, Diplomacy +11, Disguise +2, Gather Information +8, Intimidate +7, Knowledge (arcana) +6, Knowledge (history) +7, Knowledge (local) +7, Knowledge (nobility) +7, Listen +5, Profession (sailor) +5, Ride +5, Sense Motive +7, Spot +8, Use Rope +2; Background (acolyte), Deceitful, Dodge, Leadership, Rank Hath It's Privileges, Scholar, Special Regional Feature, Title (seneschal).

Sorcery Styles: Hypnotism; **Spells:** *Entrance*

Possessions: Staff, knife, cloak, sandals, purse with 30 gold luna, folio of important documents, personal journal (incomplete)

D11. Zuthelia's Bedchamber: Zuthelia, should the Player Characters manage to catch her off guard, will likely be resting here if it is late at night. She will otherwise be found practicing her sorcery in the summoning chamber or enjoying the evening's entertainment in the main hall. This chamber is filled with rich and opulent silks from Khitai, luscious Vendhyan rugs, a huge bed crafted by the finest Aquilonian carpenters and a number of strange and menacing statues imported from Stygia and Kush to the south.



D12. Summoning Chamber: This dark chamber is accessible only through Zuthelia's bedchamber. In the centre of the room is etched a web of intricate Stygian glyphs. Black tallow candles line the perimeter of the arcane markings, and an altar big enough for a person rests against the far wall, stained in blood. A nearby table holds a variety of sorcerous instruments, including a sacrificial dagger, a human hand cast in wax and a number of small black idols of strange, inhuman entities. An ebony box contains a black, withered heart that beats with an alien rhythm. Zuthelia can use this to summon a spawn of the black heart to her aid if need be. If Zuthelia is caught unaware, she might be in here performing divinations. If she is expecting trouble, then she will be summoning terrible things to her defence.

ZUTHELIA

Argossean female, noble 2/scholar 7; HD: 2d8+7d6 (33 hp); **Init:** +9; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 15; **Parry DV:** 16; **DR:** 0; **BAB/Grp:** +6/+6; **Atk:** Dagger +6 melee; **Full Atk:** Dagger +6 melee; **Dmg:** Dagger 1d4/AP 1; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Spells; **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **MAB:** +7;

PP: 10; **SV:** Fort +2, Ref +5, Will +14; Str 10, Dex 17, Con 10, Int 18, Wis 18, Cha 15

Skills & Feats: Appraise +9, Balance +2, Bluff +15, Craft (alchemy) +14, Decipher Script +14, Diplomacy +13, Disguise +8, Forgery +10, Gather Information +12, Hide +8, Intimidate +7, Knowledge (arcana) +14, Knowledge (history) +10, Knowledge (nobility) +12, Knowledge (religion) 10, Listen +8, Profession (sailor) +6, Sense Motive +9, Spot +10, Use Rope +2; Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Opportunistic Sacrifice, Rank Hath It's Privileges, Special Regional Feature, Ritual Sacrifice, Summoner, Title (lesser noble)

Sorcery Styles: Summonings, Necromancy, Hypnotism; **Spells:** *Amenkuhn's golem**, *demonic pact*, *domination*, *entrance*, *fangs of the night**, *hypnotic suggestion*, *lesser possession**, *raise corpse*, *summon demon*, *spawn of the black heart**

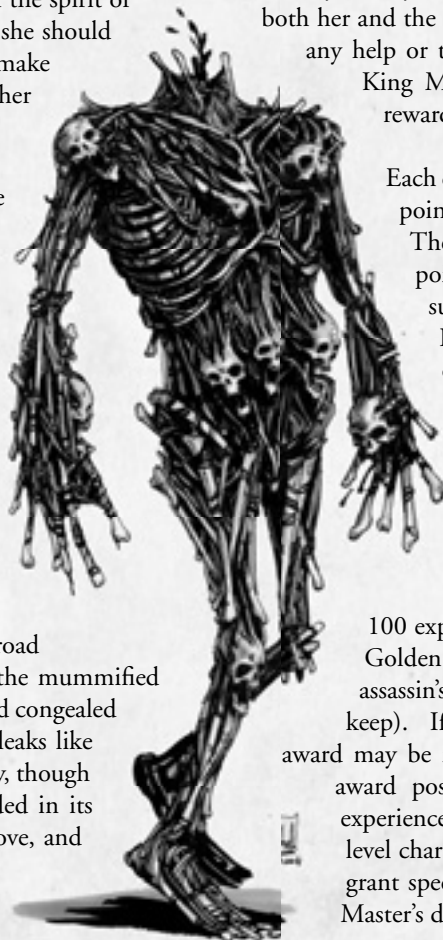
Possessions: Sacrificial dagger, gown, sandals, golden necklace, bracelets, small obsidian box containing a black heart for *spawn of the black heart* spell.

* New spells detailed in *Book II: Secrets of the Streets*

Zuthelia is a young woman, who has kept her appearance well. She is vain and uses makeup to enhance her appearance, but she is also resentful of the men around her and is very careful when giving out her trust and confidences. Zuthelia acts as if distracted to those she speaks with, for she is constantly privy to the dark whispers of the spirit of Amenkuhn, telling her what he thinks she should do. She always feels as if she can just make out his ghostly form at the edge of her vision.

The Third Floor

D13. Lair of the Bone Demon: The entire third floor is unoccupied. Instead, Zuthelia has been working at the behest of Amenkuhn's spirit, which has whispered terrible spells it learned in the afterlife to begin the creation of a new, more horrifying body for himself. Shambling about this level is a terrible monstrosity, a golem of mummified bone, sinew, and flesh that has been forged from the bodies of the ancient plague victims Zuthelia had excavated and brought to the keep. The golem is close to 10-feet tall and very broad in shoulder. Its mass is composed of the mummified remains of the host subjects, crushed and congealed together with a black, vicious tar that leaks like blood. The golem has no head, precisely, though a number of human skulls are imbedded in its mass. These mummified skulls can move, and let out low, terrifying wailing noises. Some of them cough up the black tar on occasion, protruding leathery



tongues as they do. Where the head should be rests only a thick stump, as if the creature awaits a proper skull. In fact, it is Zuthelia's intention to reclaim Amenkuhn's head from the golden cage in which it has been locked, deep in the bowels of Messantia's palace. Amenkuhn will then, in theory, be able to take control of the twisted body, to walk again. Full details for bone golems can be found in *Book II: Secrets of the Streets*.

BONE GOLEM

HD: 12d10 (66 hp); **Init:** +4; **Spd:** 20 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 19; **DR:** 4; **BAB/Grp:** +9/+20; **Atk:** Slam +17 melee; **Full Atk:** Two slams +17 melee; **Dmg:** Slam 1d8+7; **Space/Reach:** 10 ft. (2)/15 ft. (3); **SA:** Absorbing Attack; **SQ:** -; **SV:** Fort +8, Ref +8, Will +4; Str 24, Dex 10, Con -, Int 3, Wis 10, Cha 1

Skills & Feats: Listen +6, Spot +6; Greater Cleave, Multiattack, Power Attack

Possessions: None

FINALE

The characters will at last find the means to defeat Zuthelia. Perhaps they stopped her in the middle of the assassination or maybe they surprised her at the hidden keep and slew both her and the golem. They may have done this without any help or they may have been working as agents of King Milo. The characters definitely deserve a reward for their effort.

Each character should receive a 1,000 experience point award for completing the adventure. They should get an additional 500 experience points for each of the major villains and supernatural threats they defeated (Zuthelia, Rolovincio, Antolio, the ghouls, spawn of the black heart, Amenkuhn's golem, the water dragon, grey demon and so forth). They should get an additional 500 experience points for averting King Milo's infection by the plague, but a harsh Games Master might reduce their overall experience if they failed to protect the king. An additional 100 experience points should be granted for each Golden Skull hideout that was compromised (the assassin's training villa, the sewer hideout and the keep). If the keep was taken in a siege, an extra award may be in order, as well. The largest total story award possible by this formula would be 5,800 experience points, enough to advance a 3rd to 5th level character one level. In addition, the king may grant special favours, titles or wealth at the Games Master's discretion.

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ZUTHELIA

Argossean female, noble 2/scholar 7; HD: 2d8+7d6 (33 hp); **Init:** +9; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 15; **Parry DV:** 16; **DR:** 0; **BAB/Grp:** +6/+6; **Atk:** Dagger +6 melee; **Full Atk:** Dagger +6 melee; **Dmg:** Dagger 1d4/AP 1; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Spells; **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **MAB:** +7; **PP:** 10; **SV:** Fort +2, Ref +5, Will +14; Str 10, Dex 17, Con 10, Int 18, Wis 18, Cha 15

Skills & Feats: Appraise +9, Balance +2, Bluff +15, Craft (alchemy) +14, Decipher Script +14, Diplomacy +13, Disguise +8, Forgery +10, Gather Information +12, Hide +8, Intimidate +7, Knowledge (arcana) +14, Knowledge (history) +10, Knowledge (nobility) +12, Knowledge (religion) 10, Listen +8, Profession (sailor) +6, Sense Motive +9, Spot +10, Use Rope +2; Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Opportunistic Sacrifice, Rank Hath It's Privileges, Special Regional Feature, Ritual Sacrifice, Summoner, Title (lesser noble)

Sorcery Styles: Summonings, Necromancy, Hypnotism; **Spells:** *Amenkubn's golem**, *demonic pact*, *domination*, *entrance*, *fangs of the night**, *hypnotic suggestion*, *lesser possession**, *raise corpse*, *summon demon*, *spawn of the black heart**

Possessions: Sacrificial dagger, gown, sandals, golden necklace, bracelets, small obsidian box containing a black heart for *spawn of the black heart* spell.

* New spells detailed in *Book II: Secrets of the Streets*

BONE GOLEM

HD: 12d10 (66 hit points); **Init:** +4; **Spd:** 20 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 19; **DR:** 4; **BAB/Grp:** +9/+20; **Atk:** Slam +17 melee; **Full Atk:** Two slams +17 melee; **Dmg:** Slam 1d8+7; **Space/Reach:** 10 ft. (2)/15 ft. (3); **SA:** Absorbing Attack; **SQ:** -; **SV:** Fort +8, Ref +8, Will +4; Str 24, Dex 10, Con -, Int 3, Wis 10, Cha 1

Skills & Feats: Listen +6, Spot +6; Greater Cleave, Multiattack, Power Attack

Possessions: None

CALLODOR

Zingaran male soldier 5; HD: 5d10 (27 hit points); **Init:** +1; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 12; **Parry DV:** 13; **DR:** 7*; **BAB/Grp:** +5/+9; **Atk:** Broadsword +5 melee; **Full Atk:** Arming sword +10 melee or hunting bow +5 ranged; **Dmg:** Arming sword 1d10+4/AP 2 or hunting bow 1d8/AP 1; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SQ:** Zingaran Traits; **SV:** Fort +4, Ref +1, Will +1; Str 19, Dex 10, Con 11, Int 9, Wis 10, Cha 14

Skills & Feats: Balance +1, Climb +6, Diplomacy +1, Intimidate +6, Listen +2, Profession (sailor) +0, Ride +2, Sense Motive +1, Spot +2, Use Rope +1; Alertness, Formation Combat (*heavy infantry*), Mounted Combat, Power Attack, Shield Proficiency, Weapon Focus (arming sword).

Possessions: Arming sword, buckler, hunting bow, quiver with 30 arrows, dagger, mail shirt, large shield, heavy boots, warhorse, purse with 28 silver pieces

* Includes +2 shield bonus

ROLOVINCIO

Argossean male, Noble 3/Soldier 5; HD: 3d8+5d10+24 (21 hit points); **Init:** +3; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 14; **Parry DV:** 15; **DR:** 10*; **BAB/Grp:** +7/+11; **Atk:** Broadsword +9 melee; **Full Atk:** Broadsword +9/+4 melee; **Dmg:** Broadsword 1d10+4/AP 3; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **SV:** Fort +8, Ref +3, Will +4; Str 18, Dex 13, Con 17, Int 15, Wis 11, Cha 17

Skills & Feats: Appraise +6, Balance +3, Bluff +8, Climb +8, Diplomacy +10, Disguise +5, Gather Information +7, Intimidate +9, Knowledge (history) +6, Knowledge (nobility) +6, Listen +6, Profession (sailor) +4, Sense Motive +4, Spot +2, Use Rope +3; Combat Reflexes, Formation Combat (*skirmisher*), Leadership, Power Attack, Rank Hath It's Privileges, Shield Proficiency, Social Ability (*refuge*), Special Regional Feature, Title (baron), Weapon Specialisation (broadsword).

Possessions: Broadsword, scabbard, breastplate, large shield, heavy boots, warhorse, purse with 10 gold lunas and 30 silver pieces

* Includes +4 shield bonus

DULCETIA

HD: 3d4 (9 hp); **Init:** +2; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 12; **Parry DV:** 12; **DR:** 0; **BAB/Grp:** +1/+1; **Atk:** Knife +1 melee; **Full Atk:** Knife +1 melee; **Dmg:** Knife 1d4/AP 0; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** -; **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Literacy (purchased); **SV:** Fort +1, Ref +2, Will +1; Str 10, Dex 12, Con 11, Int 13, Wis 11, Cha 17

Skills & Feats: Craft (seamstress) +4, Gather Information +4, Knowledge (local) +4, Perform (singing) +9, Profession (musician) +4, Spot +2; Skill Focus (Knowledge (local)), Skill Focus (Perform (singing))

Possessions: Long dress, soft leather boots, knife and hip scabbard

OLIDARO

Argossean noble 5; HD: 5d8+10 (32 hp); **Init:** +3; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 13; **Parry DV:** 14; **DR:** 4; **BAB/Grp:** +3/+5; **Atk:** Broadsword +5 melee; **Full Atk:** Broadsword +5 melee; **Dmg:** Broadsword 1d10+2/AP 3; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** -; **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **SV:** Fort +3, Ref +3, Will +5; Str 14, Dex 15, Con 14, Int 12, Wis 13, Cha 9

Skills & Feats: Appraise +6, Balance +4, Bluff +4, Diplomacy +5, Gather Information +6, Knowledge (local) +5, Knowledge (arcana) +6, Knowledge (history) +7, Knowledge (local) +7, Knowledge (nobility) +7, Listen +5, Profession (sailor) +5, Ride +5, Spot +9, Use Rope +4; Rank Hath Its Privileges, Sleep Mastery, Social Ability (family ties), Special Regional Feature, Title, Venomous Tongue*

Possessions: Broadsword, scabbard, leather jerkin, light boots, cloak, purse with 60 silver pieces

* New feat detailed in *Book II: Secrets of the Streets*

ANTOLIO

Argossean male, noble 4/scholar 1; HD: 4d8+1d6-5 (16 hp); **Init:** +1; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 11; **Parry DV:** 12; **DR:** 0; **BAB/Grp:** +3/+2; **Atk:** Staff +2 melee; **Full Atk:** Staff +2 melee; **Dmg:** Staff 2d4-1/AP 1; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Spells; **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **MAB:** +1; **PP:** 6; **SV:** Fort +0, Ref +1, Will +8; Str 8, Dex 10, Con 8, Int 16, Wis 15, Cha 16

Skills & Feats: Appraise +7, Balance +2, Bluff +11, Diplomacy +11, Disguise +2, Gather Information +8, Intimidate +7, Knowledge (arcana) +6, Knowledge (history) +7, Knowledge (local) +7, Knowledge (nobility) +7, Listen +5, Profession (sailor) +5, Ride +5, Sense Motive +7, Spot +8, Use Rope +2; Background (acolyte), Deceitful, Dodge, Leadership, Rank Hath It's Privileges, Scholar, Special Regional Feature, Title (seneschal).

Sorcery Styles: Hypnotism; **Spells:** *Entrance* **Possessions:** Staff, knife, cloak, sandals, purse with 30 gold luna, folio of important documents, personal journal (incomplete)

CHAROMIS

Argossean male, thief 5/soldier 2; HD: 5d8+2d10+7 (40 hit points); **Init:** +8; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 17; **Parry DV:** 17; **DR:** 3; **BAB/Grp:** +5/+8; **Atk:** Scimitar +6 melee; **Full Atk:** Scimitar +6 melee; **Dmg:** Scimitar 1d8+4*/AP 2; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Sneak Attack +3d6/3d8, Sneak Attack Style (scimitar), Sneak Attack Style (dagger); **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Trap Disarming, Trap Sense +1; **SV:** Fort +5, Ref +8, Will +2; Str 16, Dex 18, Con 12, Int 13, Wis 13, Cha 12 **Skills & Feats:** Appraise +7, Balance +10, Bluff +10, Climb +10, Disable Device +12, Disguise +12, Gather Information +6, Hide +11, Intimidate +6, Jump +9, Listen +5, Move Silently +10, Open Locks +9, Profession (sailor) +3, Sleight of Hand +8, Spot +5, Use Rope +8; Deceitful, Dodge, Eyes of the Cat^{bonus}, Light-footed^{bonus}, Mobility, Point-Blank Shot, Weapon Focus (scimitar)

Possessions: Quilted jerkin, two daggers, scimitar, sash, leather sandals, cloak, purse with ground pepper (ranged touch attack, range 10-feet; DC 12 Fort save or stunned for one round)



GREY DEVIL

HD: 10d8+20 (65 hit points); **Init:** +7; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 18; **DR:** 7; **BAB/Grp:** +10/+21; **Atk:** Slam +17 melee; **Full Atk:** 2 Slams +17 melee; **Dmg:** Slam 2d6+7; **Space/Reach:** 10 ft. (2)/10 ft. (2); **SA:** Improved Grab, Trip, Crush (4d6+10); **SQ:** Darkvision 60 ft.; **SV:** Fort +9, Ref +8, Will +5; Str 25, Dex 13, Con 15, Int 8, Wis 14, Cha 7

Skills & Feats: Hide -2, Listen +4, Move Silently +14, Spot +4; Cleave, Dodge, Improved Bull Rush, Power Attack

Possessions: None

SPAWN OF THE BLACK HEART

HD: 3d8+12 (25 hp), **Init:** +11; **Spd:** 30 ft., fly 60 ft.; **DV:** 16; **DR:** 3; **BAB/Grp:** +3/+10; **Atk:** Slam +4 melee; **Full Atk:** Slam +4 melee; **Dmg:** Slam 1d8+1; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Smothering Strike; **SQ:** Banished by Sunlight, Darkvision 120 ft., Malleable Form; **SV:** Fort +7, Ref +7, Will +2; Str 13, Dex 18, Con 18, Int 10, Wis 13, Cha 3

Skills & Feats: Hide +22, Listen +13, Move Silently +9, Spot +6; Improved Initiative, Weapon Focus (slam)

Possessions: None

ASSASSIN

Argossean thief 1; **HD:** 1d8+2 (10 hp); **Init:** +8; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 12 (15); **Parry DV:** 10 (13); **DR:** - (6); **Atk:** Dagger +2 melee finesse or Short Sword +2 melee finesse; **Full Atk:** Dagger +2 melee finesse or short sword +2 melee finesse; **Dmg:** Dagger 1d4 19-20/x2 AP 1 or short sword 1d8 19-20/x2 AP 1; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Sneak Attack 1d6/1d8; **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Sneak Attack Style (dagger), Trap Disarming; **SV:** Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +1; Str 11, Dex 15, Con 14, Int, 12, Wis 13, Cha 10

Skills & Feats: Balance +6, Bluff +2, Climb +2, Disable Device +6, Disguise +4, Escape Artist +6, Gather Information +6, Hide +7, Jump +4, Knowledge (local) +5, Listen +4, Move Silently +7, Open Lock +2, Profession (sailor) +4, Sleight of Hand +2, Spot +5, Tumble +6, Use Rope +4; Improved Initiative, Stealthy

Possessions: Dagger or short sword, toga (*Encounter Six Only:* Short sword, targe, mail shirt, steel cap)

ROYAL GUARD

Male Argossean soldier 6; **HD:** 6d10+18 (61 hp); **Init:** +6; **Spd:** 25 ft.; **Dodge DV:** +5; **Parry DV:** +11; **DR:** 7; **BAB/Grp:** +6/+9; **Atk:** War sword +10 melee or heavy lance +9 melee or Bossonian longbow +8 ranged; **Full Atk:** War sword +10/+5 melee or heavy lance +9/+4 melee or Bossonian longbow +8/+3 ranged; **Dmg:** War sword 1d12+3 19-20/x2 AP 6 melee or heavy lance 1d10+3 x3 AP 6 melee or Bossonian longbow 1d12+3 x3 AP 5 ranged; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square); **SA:** -; **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Formation Combat (*heavy cavalry*), Formation Combat (*heavy infantry*); **SV:** Fort +8, Ref +4, Will +4; Str 16, Dex 14, Con 16, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 15

Skills & Feats: Balance +4, Gather Information +4, Intimidate +10, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +6, Knowledge (nobility) +6, Profession (sailor) +4, Ride +10, Search +6, Spot +10, Use Rope +4; Cleave, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Bossonian longbow), Mounted Combat, Spirited Charge, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (war sword)

Possessions: Mail hauberk, breastplate, steel cap, livery of the Royal Guard, war sword, large shield, Bossonian longbow, 20 arrows, aid whistle. During wartime this kit is also supplemented by a Hyborean warhorse and a heavy lance

WATER DRAGON

HD: 8d8+32 (68 hp); **Init:** +6; **Spd:** 15 ft., swim 30 ft.; **DV:** 16; **DR:** 4/underbelly 1; **BAB/Grp:** +8/+25; **Atk:** Bite +17 melee; **Full Atk:** Bite +17 melee; **Dmg:** Bite 1d10+9; **Space/Reach:** 15 ft. (3)/10 ft. (2); **SA:** Constricting Grapple; **SQ:** Darkvision 60 ft., Scent; **SV:** Fort +10, Ref +6, Will +4; Str 28, Dex 11, Con 19, Int 10, Wis 15, Cha 7

Skills & Feats: Hide +6, Listen +10, Spot +10, Swim +19; Cleave, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (slam)

Possessions: None

GHOUL

HD: 6d8+12 (39 hit points); **Init:** +7; **Spd:** 40 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 16; **DR:** 2; **BAB/Grp:** +6/+9; **Atk:** Claw +9 melee; **Full Atk:** Two claws +9 melee, bite +7 melee; **Dmg:** Claw 1d4+3, bite 1d8+1, AP 4; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Improved Grab, Relentless Jaws; **SV:** Fort +6, Ref +7, Will +2; Str 16, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 1

Skills & Feats: Hide +13, Listen +5, Move Silently +13, Spot +5; Multiattack, Power Attack, Toughness

Possessions: None

THUG

Male Argossean thief 3; **HD:** 3d8+6 (21 hp); **Init:** +6; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** 14; **Parry DV:** 12; **DR:** - (6); **BAB/Grp:** +2/+5; **Atk:** Unarmed +5 melee finesse or club +3 melee (Cutlass +3 melee or Shemite bow +5 ranged); **Full Atk:** Unarmed +5 melee finesse or club +3 melee (Cutlass +3 melee or Shemite bow +5 ranged); **Dmg:** Unarmed 1d6+1 x2 or club 1d8+1 x2 AP 2 (Cutlass 1d10+1 19-20/x2 AP 3 or Shemite bow +5 1d10 x3 AP 4); **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1)/5 ft. (1); **SA:** Sneak Attack 2d6/2d8; **SQ:** Argossean Traits, Sneak Attack Style (unarmed), Trap Disarming, Trap Sense +1; **SV:** Fort +2, Ref +6, Will -1; Str 12, Dex 17, Con 15, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 12

Skills & Feats: Balance +7, Gather Information +5, Hide +9, Intimidate +7, Jump +7, Knowledge (local) +6, Listen +5, Profession (sailor) +3, Sleight of Hand +9, Spot +5, Tumble +9, Use Rope +7

Possessions: Club, 1d10 silver pieces each (*Encounter Six Only:* Mail hauberk cutlass, Shemite bow, 20 arrows)

PATROLMAN

Male Argossean soldier 2; **HD:** 2d10 (14 hp); **Init:** +0; **Spd:** 30 ft.; **Dodge DV:** +1; **Parry DV:** +3; **DR:** 4; **BAB/Grp:** +4/+6; **Atk:** Broadsword +5 melee or poniard +4 melee; **Full Atk:** Broadsword +5 melee or poniard +4 melee; **Dmg:** Broadsword 1d10+2, 19-20/x2 or poniard 1d6+2, 19-20/x2; **Space/Reach:** 5 ft. (1 square)/5 ft. (1 square); **SA:** -; **SQ:** Argossean Traits; **SV:** Fort +4, Ref +0, Will +0; Str 14, Dex 10, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 9

Skills & Feats: Balance +2, Gather Information +1, Intimidate +2, Knowledge (local (Messantia)) +3, Profession (sailor) +2, Use Rope +2; Cleave, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (broadsword)

Possessions: Patrolman uniform, leather jerkin, leather cap, broadsword, poniard, manacles, aid whistle



**GREY
DEVIL**

GHOUL

PATROL

**ROYAL
GUARD**

ASSASSIN

ASSASSIN

ZUTHELIA

**FEMALE
PIRATE**

**FEMALE
BARBARIAN**

GHOUL

PATROL

**ROYAL
GUARD**

ASSASSIN

ASSASSIN

DULCETIA

**MALE
PIRATE**

**MALE
BARBARIAN**

**BONE
GOLEM**

PATROL

**ROYAL
GUARD**

ASSASSIN

THUG

ANTOLIO

**FEMALE
SCHOLAR**

**FEMALE
BORDERER**

GHOUL

**ROYAL
GUARD**

ASSASSIN

THUG

CALODOR

**MALE
SCHOLAR**

**MALE
BORDERER**

GHOUL

PATROL

ASSASSIN

THUG

CHAROMIS

**FEMALE
SOLDIER**

**FEMALE
NOBLE**

GHOUL

PATROL

**ROYAL
GUARD**

THUG

OLIDARO

**MALE
SOLDIER**

**MALE
NOBLE**

**WATER
DRAGON**

GHOUL

PATROL

**ROYAL
GUARD**

THUG

ROLOVICIO

**FEMALE
THIEF**

**FEMALE
NOMAD**

GHOUL

PATROL

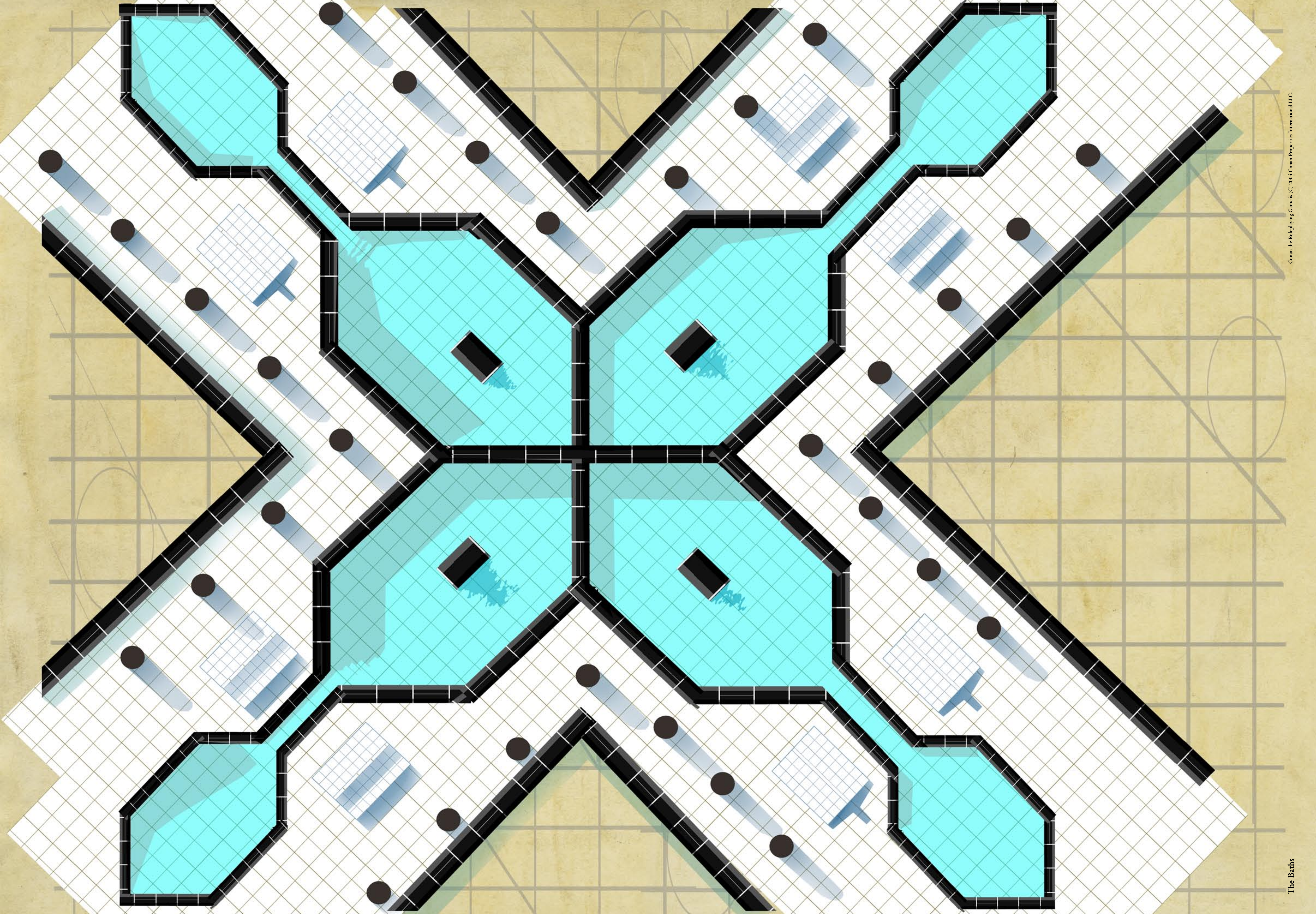
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GUARD**

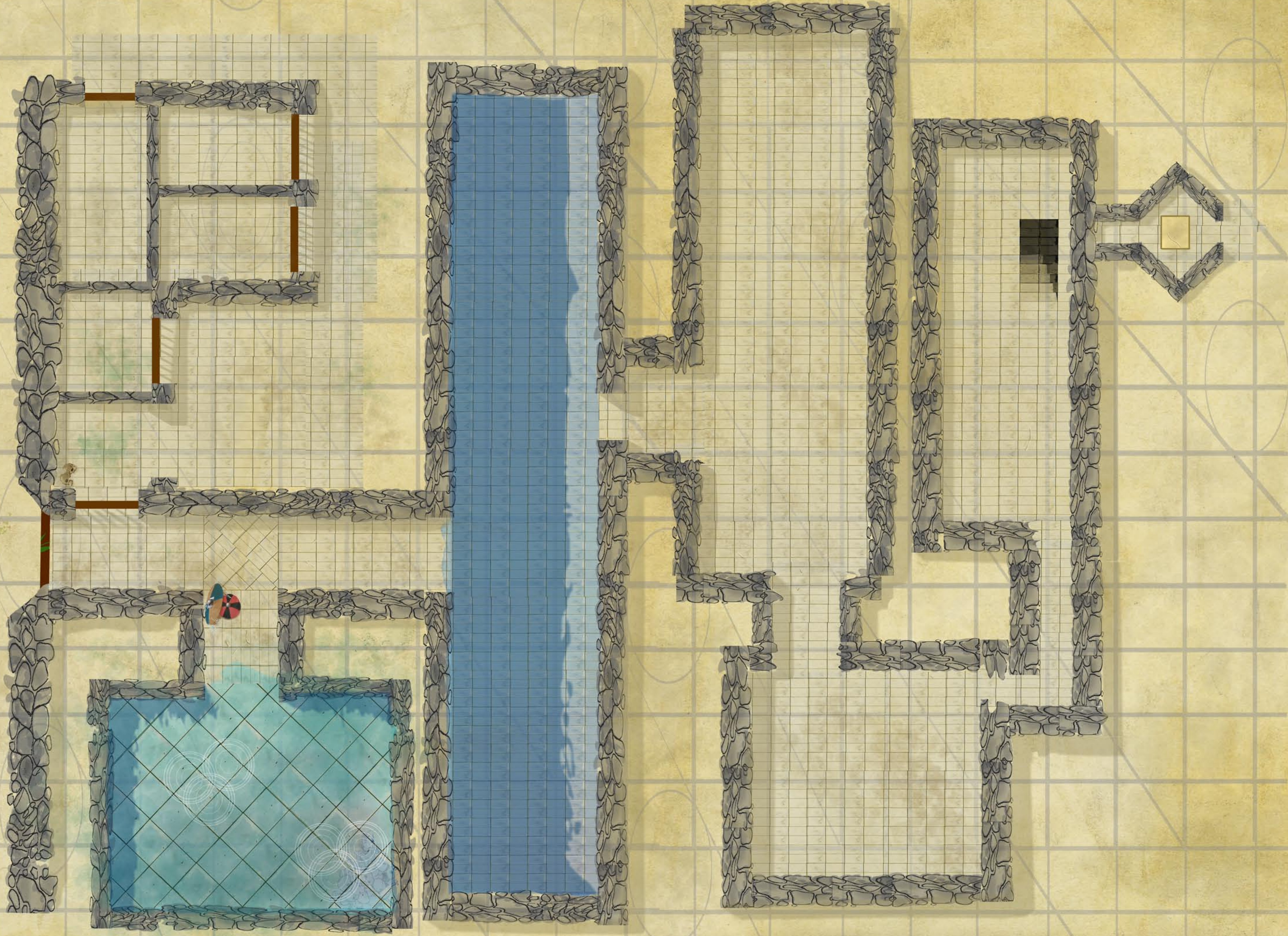
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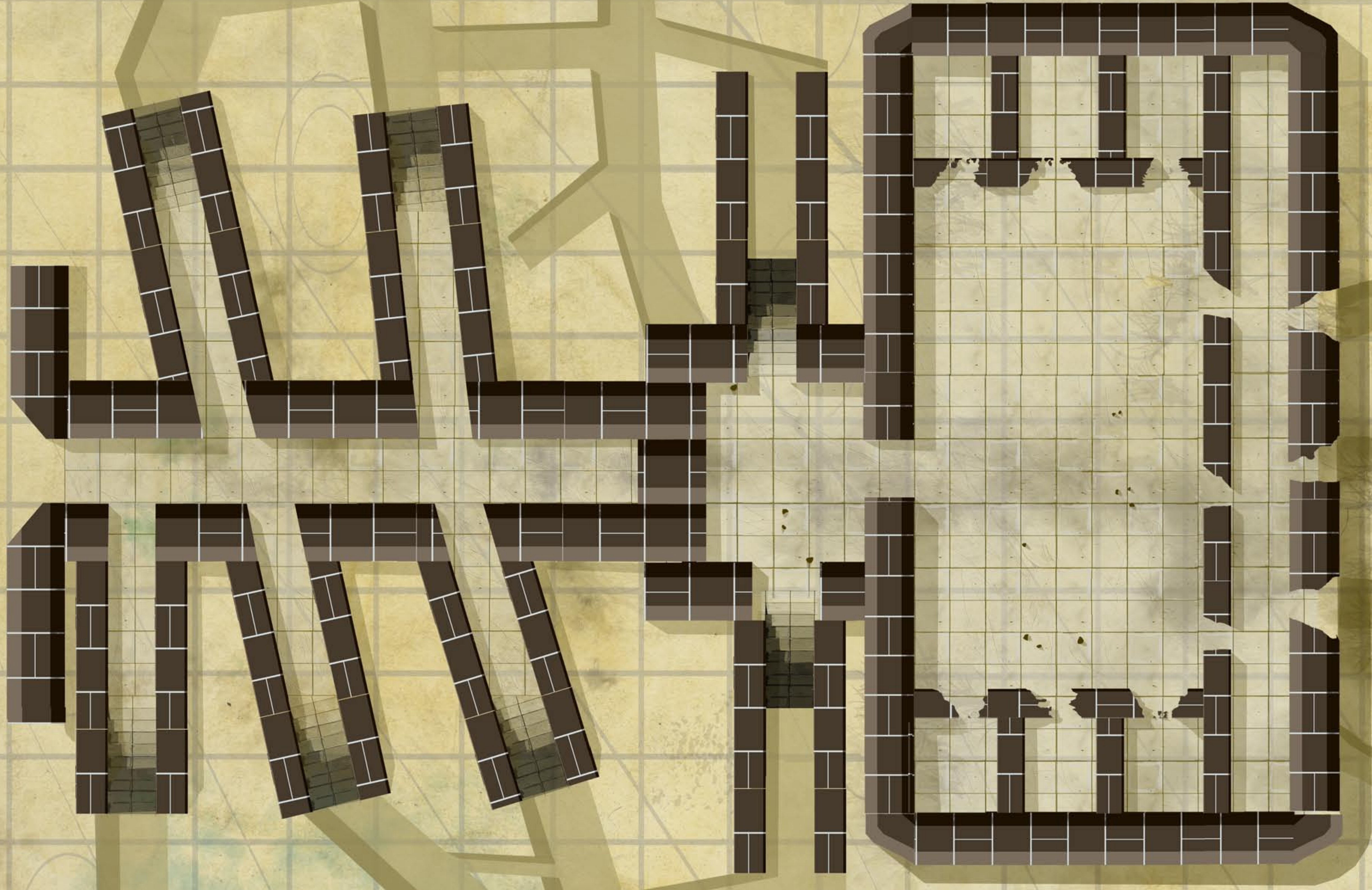
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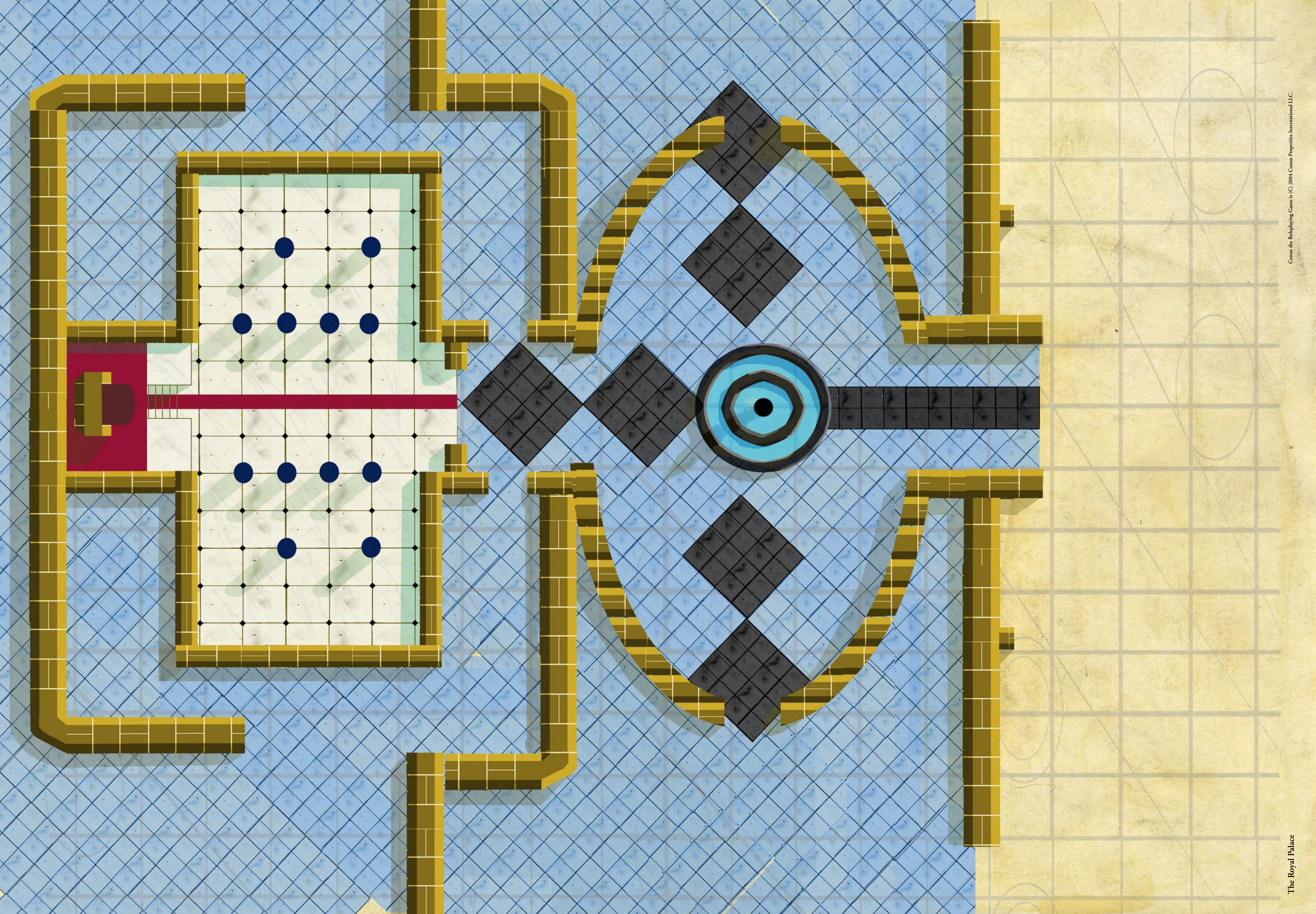
**MALE
THIEF**

**MALE
NOMAD**



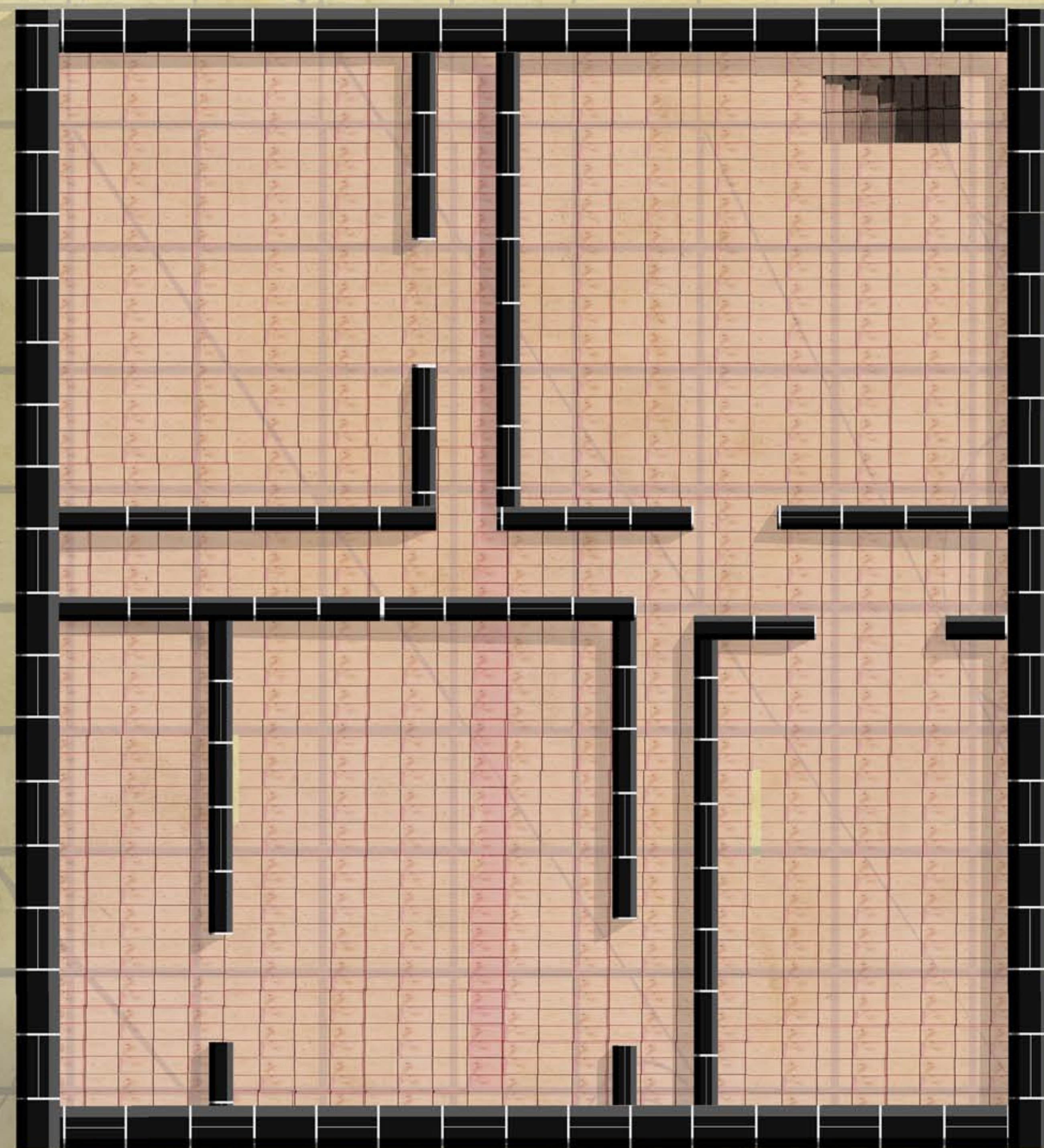




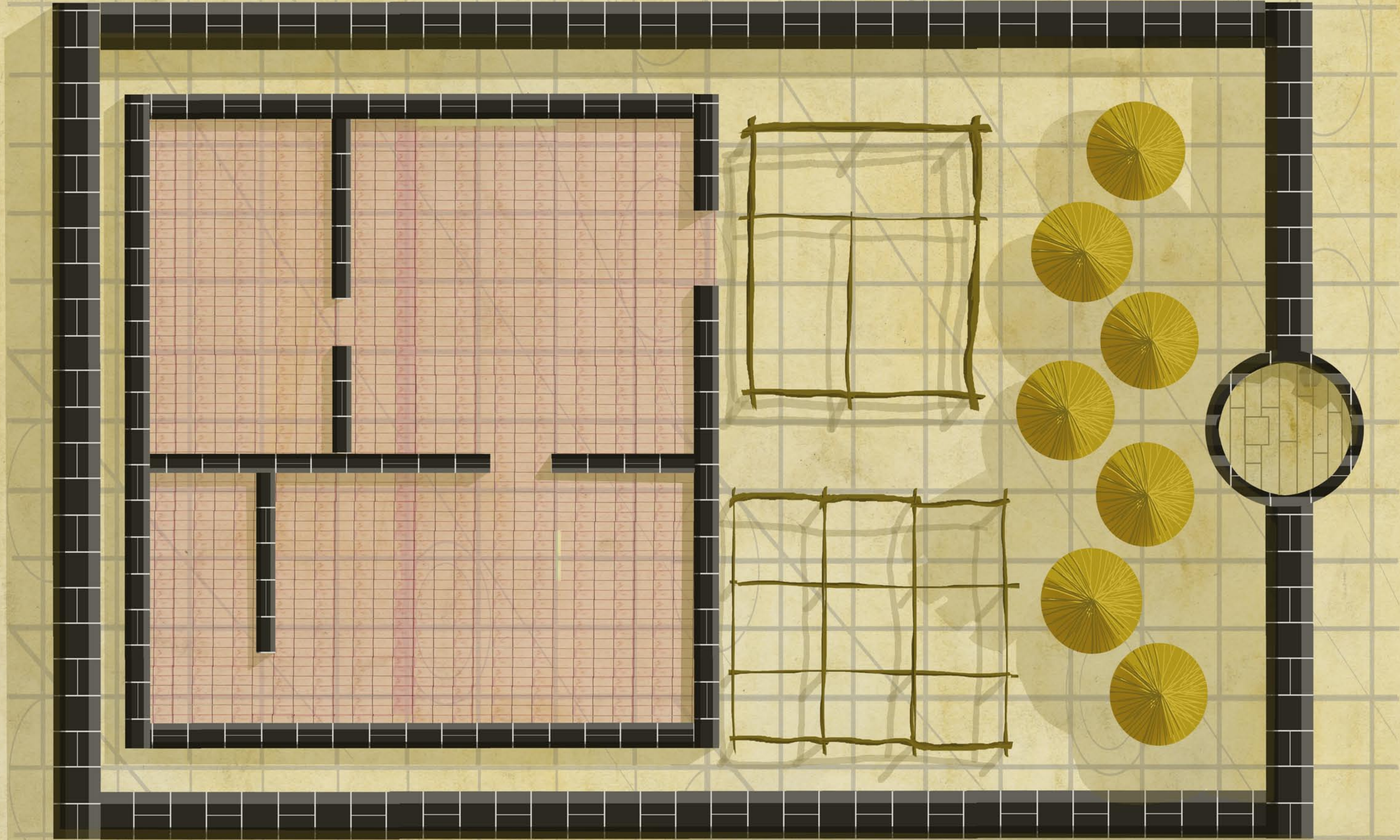




The Keep (Third Floor)



The Keep (Second Floors)



THE ARGOSSEAN CITY OF MESSANTIA

