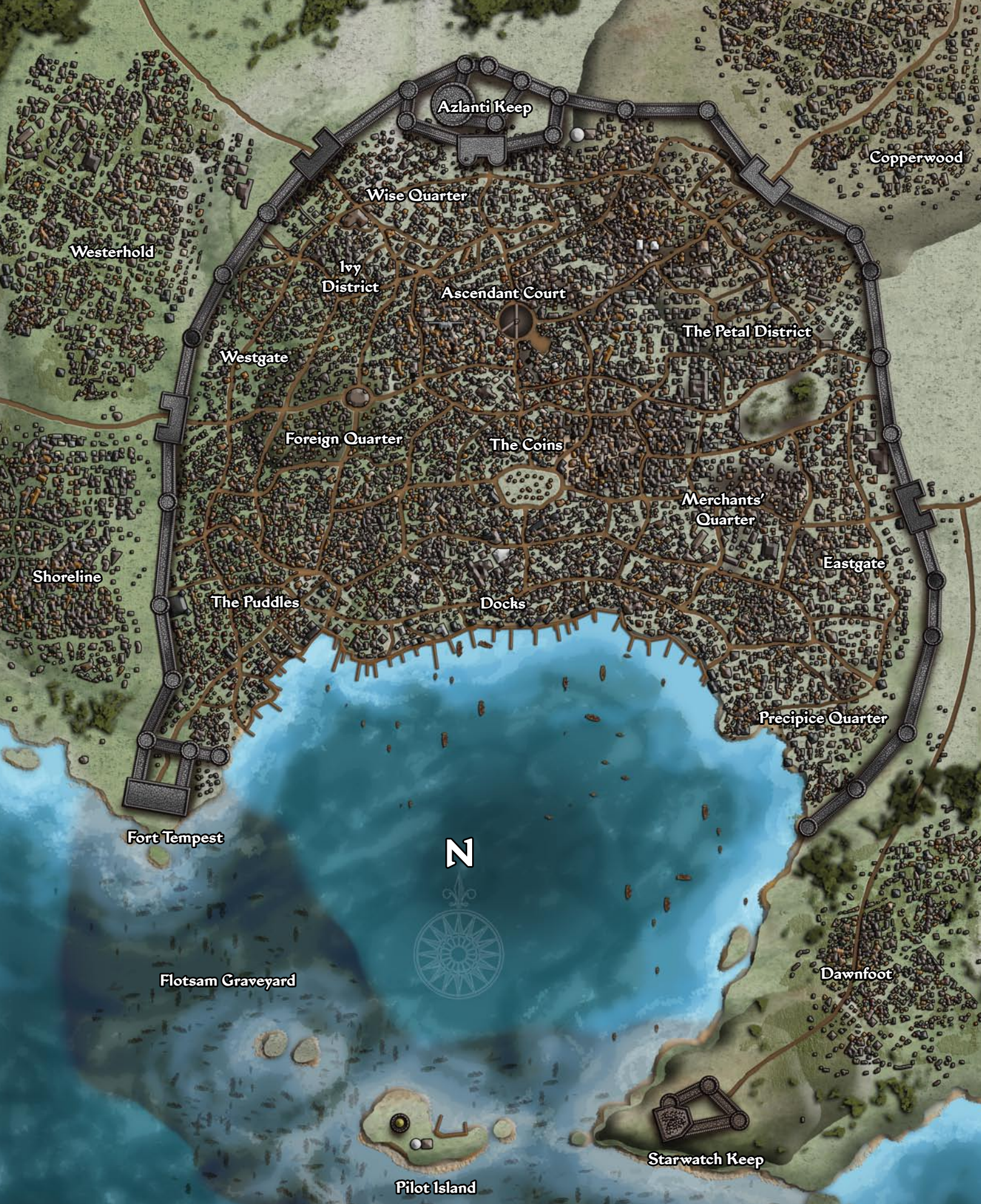


D&D FINDER CHRONICLES™



GUIDE TO ABSALOM

By Owen K.C. Stephens



Azlanti Keep

Copperwood

Wise Quarter

Westerhold

Ivy District

Ascendant Court

The Petal District

Westgate

Foreign Quarter

The Coins

Merchants' Quarter

Shoreline

The Puddles

Docks

Eastgate

Precipice Quarter

Fort Tempest

N

Flotsam Graveyard

Dawnfoot

Pilot Island

Starwatch Keep

Absalom

0 feet 4600



GUIDE TO ABSALOM

A *Pathfinder Chronicles*™ Supplement

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Introduction

Ha! By your slack-jawed gaze I can tell you're new to the City at the Center of the World. Well, fear not, foreigner! I, Donnica Mycelene Ia-Tep, can see you safely through its wonders and dangers. For just a few coins a day, my knowledge is here for your questions, and my blade is here for your protection. Welcome to Absalom!

—Donnica Mycelene Ia-Tep,
native hotspur and sometimes guide

HOW TO USE THIS CITY GUIDE

Each chapter in this book covers a specific topic. Overlap exists, of course, because within a city all things are connected, but for the most part, information on a single topic exists solely within its main entry. The chief exception is in Chapter 5: Secrets, which expands on the information presented in earlier chapters.

Many pages also contain sidebars that touch on topics only tangentially related to the surrounding text, if at all. These sidebars give an in-depth look at aspects of the city that don't fit in anywhere else. Especially in Chapters 2 and 3, footnotes at the bottoms of many pages point to where you can find additional information on mentioned topics.

Chapter 1: This chapter provides a brief look at the city and touches on subjects not covered in detail later in the book.

Chapter 2: The largest chapter of the book, this atlas of Absalom examines points of interest throughout the city. The chapter also provides a short overview of the geography of the Isle of Kortos, its surroundings, and its holdings.



Chapter 3: This chapter deals with the major powers and factions of Absalom, including individuals powerful enough to make their will felt throughout the massive metropolis.

Chapter 4: A very brief primer on the more than 4,000 years of Absalom's history, including a description of every siege that current historians recall.

Chapter 5: A behind-the-scenes glimpse of the secrets of Absalom, be they political, religious, or mercantile.

Appendix: A bit more information on some of the movers and shakers of the city, as well as fighting and exploring techniques taught within its many academies.

CITY BASICS

Absalom is a massive metropolis, so vast that it is administered as several cities (districts) that happen to be adjacent to one another. The population was at its peak (351,000) just before a series of quakes struck 10 years ago, and is rapidly rising to meet and surpass that number. While large areas of the city are still in ruins, other sections continue to grow and have begun to face overcrowding. Even with its vast network of trade and magical means of support, Absalom was facing a supply crisis just before the quakes, as common items ran short in low-trade months. The quakes reduced the population enough to stave off that threat, but recently there have once more been signs of potential shortages. As a result, the idea of limiting immigration into the city has begun to be discussed in some mead halls and family lodges, though it is not yet a common concern.

ABSALOM

Major Metropolis conventional (Grand Council); **AL N**

GP Limit 250,000 gp; **Assets** 3,798,750,000 gp

DEMOGRAPHICS

Population 303,900

Type integrated (64% human, 11% halfling, 8% half-elf, 7% gnome, 5% dwarf, 2% elf, 1% half-orc, 2% other races)

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Lord Gyr of House Gixx, Primarch of Absalom, Protector of Kortos, First Spell Lord; **Lady Neferpatra of House Ahnkamen**, Grand Councilwoman, Envoy for the Dead, First Lady of Laws; **Goodman Hugen of House Candren**, Grand Councilman, owner of the Sea King Shipyards, First Harbormaster; **Lady Darchana of House Madinani**, Senior Lesser Councilwoman, Archdean of the Arcanamirium, Second Spell Lord

SYMBOLS

Symbols are important in Absalom, as they can show allegiance both to the city itself and to the long and rich traditions brought to the city by its many waves of settlers. Though guilds, holy orders, knightships, political factions, and familial lineages use a dizzying

array of symbols, some of the most common elements are presented below.

Colors: The colors of Absalom are golden yellow (to represent the *Starstone*) and rich green (for the sea, as well as the tall, thick grasses common to the Isle of Kortos). In addition to those, individual families and factions often add a third color such as red (for Chelaxians) or black (for Nexians).

Mascot: There are two common mascots for Absalom, the hippocampus and the mother-sphinx. The hippocampus (or "sea-horse") is a symbol of Absalom's sea power, and a tribute to its Sea Cavalry. Most military seals use a hippocampus somewhere, or at least an iron fin (a reference to a "hippocampus horseshoe," which of course don't really exist).

The mother-sphinx is an older symbol, clearly brought by families coming from Osirion in Absalom's early years. She is normally portrayed as a lion body with a human female head and torso. She always has wings, and often has hands that are human enough to hold a scale and a scepter. More rarely, she is shown pregnant, holding a scroll, or sitting atop a wave. The mother-sphinx represents the hybrid nature of Absalom, drawn from many traditions into one wise, powerful whole. She is also popular as a symbol of knowledge and arcane power.

Motto: The official motto of Absalom (found on all the official seals) is "Ex Prothex," which is supposedly Old Azlanti for "From the First," though scholars often disagree about the exact translation. Most locals prefer the motto "First Among Equals," which is used both to describe Absalom as the greatest capital city in the world and to promote specific families or business within Absalom as better than their (respected) rivals. Being first, either as the original or the best, is important to groups in Absalom, and guild and family mottos often draw on this symbolism.

Merchants who are frequent visitors to Absalom often call it the Patchwork City, or the Port of Buried Treasures. Locals once saw these as insults, but in the past few generations they have become more accepted, and some businesses use the names with pride.

RESIDENCES

Most of Absalom's residents own their homes, though there are rent-spaces in plenty for visitors, merchants, sailors, and those who don't want to be bothered with maintaining their living spaces. Students enrolled in Absalom's many schools often lease homes for a number of years, requiring them to pay to maintain their living spaces but frequently giving them the option to buy the spaces outright at the end of the leases, sometimes using rent paid in the interim as downpayments. It's very common for workers to live within their employer's stores or homes.

The expense of buying or renting a living space depends on its location and style. While buildings and lifestyles vary

DESIGNER'S NOTE: EXPANDING ABSALOM

This book is designed to give you the framework of Absalom, the greatest (or at least largest) city yet to be detailed in the *Pathfinder Chronicles* campaign setting. It can't possibly describe everything in the city, as it would take a book 10 times this size to cover every street, law, shop, plot, hotspur, opportunity, and threat swirling around the many districts of Aroden's City. The most notable and influential elements are touched on here, but for each thing described, a dozen wonders are left unmentioned.

While this means no guidebook to Absalom can ever be complete, it also means you as a player or GM will never run out of places to put things within the city. No matter how many adventures or supplements are set in Absalom or on the Isle of Kortos, there will always be areas left for you to do whatever you like. Absalom can be expanded as often as you wish, and in as many ways as will enhance your campaign.

To keep with the intended flavor of the city (if that suits your needs), there are a few things you should keep in mind. Absalom is a human-dominated, ancient, huge, undefeated nation rife with wealth, political intrigue, travelers, religious conflicts, and danger. As such, there is always room for one more NPC or abandoned building. And finally, Absalom is a place where very little sticks out. The people are used to seeing so many unusual things that even a unique creature or mode of dress is out-of-place only if it calls attention to itself. While humans are in charge, dozens of races can be found walking the streets and swimming the nearby seas.

by district, most residences fall into one of the categories outlined below.

Keep: A keep is a fortified building or set of buildings connected by a wall. The most powerful families, merchants, and organizations are often based in keeps within the city, forming a second line of defense should any attacker ever breach the outer wall of Absalom. Keeps normally reach at least four stories tall (at least in the main hall, though many are just a single four- or five-story tower with a thick outer wall). A few have their own stables, smithies, and even gardens, but most are significantly less self-sufficient. In a true battle, a typical keep would last a few days at most. Thankfully, no enemy has breached the walls of Absalom in centuries, and the city has never fallen.

Keeps are never for sale—those that exist each have a license for their military nature approved by a past primarch, and Lord Gyr is unlikely to approve any new strongholds from which his foes could plot against him. However, a few families that have fallen on hard times do rent out their keeps to fantastically wealthy visitors, sometimes for years at a time.

Palace: The heads of the most important groups within Absalom stay in palaces, luxury buildings with small fields or outbuildings of their own and occasionally private ponds or parks. Palaces are generally larger and more well-appointed than keeps, but cost less because they don't require special permission from the primarch to exist. A typical palace is one three-story building, with two to five one-story buildings supporting it (stables, kitchens, barracks, and private gardens are most common). Palaces are never for rent (there are easier ways to make money), but when fortunes rise and fall one is occasionally for sale.

Manor: Far more common than keeps or palaces are manors, large and comfortable buildings that are far cheaper (and more practical) than larger structures. Manors typically rise to at least two stories and contain no fewer than five bedrooms or studies, two privies, a bath, a large kitchen and pantry, and a cellar. Most have "great halls" that can be used as family rooms, feast halls, or grand reception rooms (depending on the occasion). Most manors are built around a central courtyard that contains well-manicured yards and a few gardens or walking paths. Very few manors are for rent, but a visiting king or major dignitary might be offered the use of one by a wealthy family looking to curry favor.

Villa: One of the more common types of dwellings, villas look like small manors, with one or two floors holding up to four rooms, a privy or two, a bath, a kitchen and pantry, and usually a cellar. Most villas do not have a great hall, instead employing smaller, function-specific rooms (such as a den or family room). Villas have their own yards, usually consisting of narrow strips of hardy plants. Moderately successful families and heads of powerful guilds often live in villas.

Townhouse: Most business owners and relatively successful families in Absalom reside in townhouses. A townhouse is a narrow dwelling that abuts another building on at least one side. Most townhouses begin on the second floor of a building, rising above a shop or other business of some kind. Townhouses otherwise resemble small villas. Most townhouses are owned by their residents (and this ownership usually extends to the ground-floor business space), but a few are always available for rent by newcomers thinking to set up a new business in the City at the Center of the World. A townhouse that has a meeting space on the lower floor, and is owned by an organization or guild, is referred to as a lodge.

Flathouse: Some buildings, especially near major markets, schools, and docks, contain nothing but living spaces. The largest and nicest of these buildings contain flathouses, one-story dwellings with one or two bedrooms and all the amenities of townhouses. Normally multiple flathouses are built on the same level, with each having a door accessing an outer balcony that wraps around the building. Flathouses can be purchased or rented.



Flop: Flops are single-room dwellings that share communal privies, baths, and kitchens. Flops are smaller than flathouses, with as many as four flops taking up the space of one flathouse. Two to four flops might be built together around a single set of communal rooms, or they might be part of a multistory flophouse cramming up to 40 flops in a single building. A flop has just enough room for a bed, chest, chair, and desk, and is a common dwelling for visitors to the city (who don't plan to spend much time in their room anyway), students, and the poor. Flops are rarely well-kept, as most are rented, but small flops owned by their residents can be quite nice.

Bunk: With a name taken from the simple hammock or cot common to low-rank sailors on ships, a bunk is the simplest accommodation in Absalom short of homelessness. It consists of little more than a bed and a few places to store possessions. Bunkhouses provide a cheap place for short-term visitors (and those unable to afford better) to at least sleep out of the rain. Most provide just a curtain for privacy, with two locked drawers for securing possessions. It's also possible to find bunks in the kitchens and stables of higher-class establishments, to allow menials to sleep near their workplace. Less common are free-standing bunks, but a few tiny buildings (sometimes as little as 20 square feet) exist that are bunks for one or two owners.

LIFE IN ABSALOM

Absalom natives take pride in the fact that their city was founded by a god, hosts the *Starstone* that has created more gods, and is an open port that welcomes all who come in peace. Locals pride themselves on being a diverse lot, and would be genuinely offended at the idea they all had any common traits. However, the very fact they *all* would be offended shows that there are some qualities common to those who make Absalom their home.

Absalom Mindset

The people of Absalom have a strong respect for dedication and devotion, even devotion to ideals they find personally abhorrent. The very act of being loyal to an ideal is a virtue in their eyes, and as a result they often tolerate ideas and cultures that are strictly banned elsewhere. They are slow to judge, preferring to give people, cultures, and even ideas a fair consideration before forming a firm opinion, and they often reconsider their opinions in the face of new information. While outsiders might see this as being indecisive and mercurial, the people of Absalom believe their open-mindedness allows them to accept new ideas and build strength from diversity.

Most locals love diversity and surprises. They yearn to enjoy new experiences, and some go so far as to seek out new unpleasant experiences as well. Anything that hasn't been

seen before is sure to garner extensive interest, and new fads in fashion, dining, entertainment, and even speech can tear through Absalom in a matter of days. Most such ideas enjoy their popularity only until the next "new" craze comes along, but some prove to have staying power (at least within Absalom). By the same token, the people and laws of Absalom are fairly forgiving of strange customs and actions. Even when something is outlawed as unacceptable (such as slavery in the upper-class sections of the city), enforcement of such laws is often restricted to flagrant violations. If someone is breaking the law, but not causing trouble for the city or the Grand Council in the process, their "crimes" may be entirely ignored.

Of paramount importance to those who control the city is trade. Anything that encourages trade is seen as good for the city, while laws and activities that reduce the presence of foreign merchants are quickly struck down. Of course, since the city is controlled by an ever-changing Grand Council, and even the primarch can't declare an heir to succeed him, exactly what's considered good for trade can change quite suddenly. While the people of Absalom are used to laws and their enforcement shifting frequently, the lack of a defined set of consistent laws often confuses or angers foreigners. As a general rule, if an action doesn't upset a member of the Grand Council or put commerce at risk, there's a good chance it'll be allowed (or at least ignored) by the government.

Taxes

Taxes in Absalom are very light, especially compared to those of cities that come close to its massive size. The main reason for this is that Absalom, as a city, is extremely wealthy. A constant influx of money from foreign merchants and adventurers allows the Grand Council to tax foreign concerns a modest rate, and still have plenty of money to see to the city's needs. When the city is under siege, a series of Siege Taxes are put in place that go far beyond the tariffs mentioned here.

It is illegal for a ship that carries more than six people or 500 pounds of cargo to sail through the Ship's Graveyard with its own pilot or captain at the helm. Instead, a ship must signal for a trained pilot from the Harbormaster's Grange to be rowed out and to command the ship through the maze of wrecks and shifting masts. In part this is a practical matter, as the graveyard is an ever-changing hazard, and only local pilots are constantly updated on what dangers have sunk just below the waves and which ones are no more than a loose bit of rope. However, it also serves as an opportunity to tax ships twice—once for the use of a pilot, and once for actually docking in the harbor. Since any ship that wrecks in the graveyard is forfeit (along with all its cargo) to the primarch, few vessels risk flaunting this law despite the expense.

Property tax in Absalom is nonexistent, as the idea of being charged for something you already own is abhorrent to the independent natives. However, the city government does charge for access to roads, waterways, and sanitation. A residence or shop can avoid these fees by ensuring no entryway accesses a road (leading to a few mazes of close-together buildings with gravel pathways between them), carrying water from public wells, and carting off waste (it's illegal to just dump it outside, since that avoids the tax). For most residents, however, it's easier just to pay the modest fees for the city to take care of such matters. Newcomers looking to rent a place to stay in Absalom are advised to ensure their landlord is paying these taxes, rather than allowing renters to suffer the inconvenience.

Business

Business in Absalom is broken into three main types—craft, trade, and labor. Craft includes all manufacturing business, trade the buying and selling of physical goods, and labor anything service-related. Most craft and labor is regulated by a series of guilds, which determine who is allowed to operate those businesses and where and how they can sell their goods. Even illegal activities are often organized by guilds, and anyone caught breaking these laws is guilty of two crimes if they are not also a member of the appropriate guild. Guilds frequently overlap areas of control, which leads to both healthy competition and political backstabbing.

Trade is handled by a different set of laws that specifically forbids guilds and collusion among traders, designed to ensure price-fixing does not occur. In the ancient past of the city, a few major coalitions of investors managed to briefly choke Absalom with exorbitant prices on basic commodities. As a result, a single person must be the legal owner of any goods offered for trade, and no person may own more than one outlet for the sale of such goods. Of course, as with any law, there are ways around the trade restrictions (usually involving investors who never officially own any of the items for sale), but anyone suspected of price fixing draws the ire of the Grand Council very quickly.

Within Absalom, trade is considered the most civilized and respectable business, with crafting second and labor last. A common shopkeep often holds himself higher than a master swordsmith, who in turn looks down on a world-famous performer. As with all such social judgments, money and power often compensate for cultural biases.



Numismatics

As a city of trade and business, Absalom is awash with coins from a dozen kingdoms. Most are accepted at face value, as they tend to be close to the same size and weight of official Absalom coins. Indeed, the threat of Absalom not accepting a given kingdom's coins at face value has forced more than one country to refine its coins' weight and purity. If a kingdom does have a devalued coin, its value in relation to Absalom mintage is posted in most markets of the city.

Monies gathered by the government of Absalom are usually smelted, carefully weighed, and pressed into local currency by the Absalom Mint. These highly-trusted coins are common throughout the Inner Sea, and not unknown even in far-off Tian Xia and Vudra.

Copper Penny: Nearly any copper piece may be called a penny, and Absalom only mints a few of these itself. Since they are rarely used for major transactions (such as those members of the Grand Council are most concerned with), copper pieces of all types are mostly ignored by the local mint and moneychangers. Sometimes a special event may be commemorated by a run of a few thousand copper pennies at the mint, including such things as the success of a band of adventurers or the knighting of a popular hero.



Silver Weight: Always called a silver weight, never just "a weight." Prices are often given in this coin, even for large purchases (a masterwork longsword might be priced at "3,150 silver weight"). For very large purchases made in foreign silver, the metal is often melted down and weighed against Absalom silver weight. Such smelted silver is generally then minted into new silver weight coins.

Electrum Crest: Often just called "crests," electrum coins are no longer minted in Absalom. During one of its ancient sieges, however, metal coinage grew rare, and a series of small coins of mixed silver, gold, and a bit of copper were minted. Each has the same value as a silver weight. Crests are still accepted in Absalom, though not anywhere else.

Gold Measure: Originally just a simple slug of metal that had a "full measure of gold," the gold measure of Absalom is the standard by which all other gold coins are compared throughout the Inner Sea. Usually just referred to as a "measure."

Platinum Sphinx: Also called a "lion-coin," these coins are most often used in exchanges between major trading houses. They depict the mother-sphinx on one

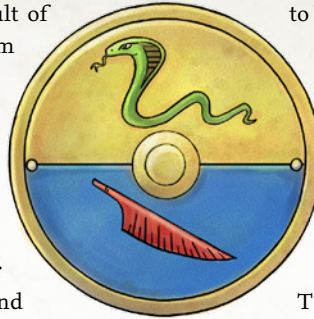
side, and a tower of Azlant Keep on the other. Crates of these coins sometimes simply move from one room in the mint to another, to indicate which family or merchant owns them.

Houses

The vast size of Absalom creates unusual familial and political links. Cousins may live only a mile apart but spend a lifetime without ever meeting. Further, two women who are at best distantly related may discover they have interests in common at least partly as a result of their common heritage. As a result, Absalom has developed a system of houses. Each house is a political entity similar to a clan, with most maintaining strong connections to their original homelands. Houses have a set number of minor titles (granting their holders the right to be called lord or lady), which are bought from the Grand Council or other houses. Each house also has a Scion, a senior and respected lord of the house who decides who within the house is granted each title. The children and grandchildren of anyone with a title are automatically enrolled in the house (though they do not automatically inherit the title), while the Scion of the house may add others. Such enrollments are normally offered to a family member too distant to be automatically included; some houses grant enrollment to heroes who aid them, while others sell them when short on coin.

There are hundreds of houses within Absalom, most of which lack the power to be immediately recognized by common citizens. Further, many powerful individuals either claim no house or are from a house that does not itself have great influence (indeed, Lord Gyr is the most powerful man in Absalom, but House Gixx remains a small house with no particular influence). The rise and fall of a given house often corresponds with the rise of the concerns of their homeland, though some houses are loyal only to their internal needs. Some houses are so powerful that use of their name immediately grants a level of recognition, privilege, and (if encountered by rivals) danger.

In most cases a person's house takes the place of a surname. Those without a house may select to add their nation or district of birth, a nickname given by family or friends, or the appellation "of Gyr," to indicate a loyalty to the primarch himself. Most houses claim a very strong cultural link to the nation of their forefathers. In some houses this is nothing but an affectation of style and dress, but for many it is more than that. Most houses sympathize with the nations of their genealogy, and may still have blood-relations in those lands or be in contact with influential nobles in them. Though these houses



are dedicated to Absalom first, they aid their countrymen wherever they can without betraying Absalom. A few Absalom houses are actually more loyal to their old origin country than Absalom itself, while others have only internal loyalty and take the side of whoever seems most likely to grant them wealth and power.

Eight of the most powerful houses in Absalom, along with their scions and general loyalties, are outlined briefly below. While dozens of others have influence in specific districts or areas of trade, these houses are forces not to be trifled with throughout Absalom.

House Ahnkamen (Osirian heritage, Osirian sympathies): A noble House with strong links to Prince Khemet III of Osirion (and supposedly his distant cousins, through links to the ancient Azghaadi Dynasti), the Ahnkamen have been major players in matters regarding law and death in Absalom for 300 years. Their lineage is older, and better recorded, than most ruling kings of other nations.

Though they do not wear solely Osirian-inspired clothing, most (including Scion Lady Neferpatra of House Ahnkamen, Grand Councilwoman, Envoy for the Dead, First Lady of Laws) include a few traditional Osirian touches in their jewelry and weapons. Young nobles of this house often act as hotspurs, running about in snug leather pants with Osirian glyphs and engaging in khopesh-fencing.

House Avenstar (Kyonin heritage, internal loyalty): The most powerful elven house in Absalom, the fortunes of House Avenstar waned for centuries when it insisted on allowing only full-blood elves into its rolls. When the Age of Lost Omens dawned, Scion Lord Tylvan began enrolling adventurous, vibrant youths as long as they had some elven blood and showed an interest in advancing the house's position. The scion is quite elderly now, and will soon be replaced, likely by one of the halfbreeds he allowed into his clan.

House Candren (Taldan heritage, Andoran loyalty): Scion Hugen, Grand Councilman, owner of the Sea King Shipyards, First Harbormaster

House Damaq (Keleshite heritage, Qadiran loyalty): Scion Lord Kerkis, Lord Exchequer of the Absalom Mint

House Morilla (Taldan heritage, Taldan loyalty): Scion Lord Celedo, Guildmaster of Mysteries, Trademaster

House Ormuz (Thuvian heritage, Thuvian sympathies): Scion Lord Yamthar, the Eternal Envoy, Trademaster

House Shamyid (Keleshite heritage, Qadiran sympathies): Scion Lady Xerashir, Bey of Sarenae, Watcher of the *Starstone*

House Tevineg (Chelish heritage, Chelish loyalty): Scion Lady Xansippe, Beloved of Asmodeus



Places

Today we can see everything you want in the Coins. We should get you out of there before nightfall, so we can visit the Ascendant Court tonight. Then we retire for the night. If you want to see more, you'll need to hire me for another two days. And if you still want to go to the Precipice Quarter, you'll need to hire more guards and my fee is going to double. Trust me, I'm worth it.

—Donnica Mycelene la-Tep,
native hotspur and temporary guard captain

Absalom is not just a massive and wondrous city, it's also the center of a small (but powerful) country. Though it claims only three cities, the nation of Absalom exerts powerful pressure on all the countries of the Inner Sea. In addition to being the largest and best port for ships sailing the Inner Sea, it controls a small fleet of warships, an impressive collection of treaties and mutual support pacts, and lore about dangers of the region that no captain willingly forgoes. While Absalom can't physically impose embargoes on other cities, the threat of refusing harbor to ships of any nation that aids the enemies of Absalom carries tremendous weight with every country of the Inner Sea that relies on trade.

NEIGHBORS

Though the people of Absalom are intellectually aware that much of the world is made of nations that rule more than one major city, and that many of these cities have no access to the sea, they instinctively think in terms of ports and harbors. Rather than seeing a ship as Chelish, they refer to it as Ostenson, Egorian, or Westcrownish. The laws

of Absalom in regard to foreign ships are written with this odd attitude as well, and a ship flying a Westcrown flag may well be subject to different regulations than one from Ostenso. Of course, given that the state of Absalom laws can change every time the Grand Council meets, most trade ships are aware they'll have to ask what tariffs and restrictions they'll operate under upon arrival anyway.

While any city with access to a waterway can be considered a “neighbor” of Absalom, the following cities in the Inner Sea and Obari Ocean are the most likely ports to send ships to Absalom, and the most common destinations for ships flying an Absalom flag.

Almas

Capital of Andoran and center of banking for that nation, Almas is a major (if slightly reluctant) trade partner with Absalom. Situated on the mouth where the Andossan River empties into the Inner Sea, ships from Almas are well placed to carry goods picked up in the markets of Absalom (which may have originated anywhere in the world) deep into Andoran along its waterways. Though Absalom has economically bullied Almas periodically over the centuries (usually with trade tariffs or declarations that Almas coinage has been devalued), they have also sent naval vessels to help protect Almas's harbor and returned prisoners taken by pirate raids on Almas's ships.

Almas vessels and ships are welcome in Absalom, though better treated in establishments with Andoran ties than those with links to other nations. It's worth noting that the reverse is generally not true—Absalom ships that set in at Almas are often seen as bullies and self-important upstarts. However, it's easy enough for native traders to get Absalom goods on Andoran ships for sale in Almas, which avoids any such unpleasantness.

Cassomir

A major Taldan city, Cassomir is called the Crusaders' Port in Absalom, as many warriors who leave Absalom on their way to the Mendevian Crusades put in at this port city. It is also a significant source of trade, as most of what comes or goes to the River Kingdoms and the Verduran Woods flows through Cassomir. Last, it is home to several noteworthy shipyards, and a number of Escadar's naval vessels were custom-built in Cassomir.

Lord Gyr has a personal fondness for this city, having visited it many times in his youth. He owns a “summer manor” in Cassomir, but has never found the time to visit it. He does occasionally loan it out to allies for their use, and often sends his personal agents to the manor in order to learn the news of that city. Captains who sail from Cassomir to Absalom are also sometimes invited to dine with the primarch, and only a fool refuses such an opportunity to gain Lord Gyr's good favor.

Katheer

The capital of Qadira, Katheer is the westernmost stop for hundreds of trade caravans every year, bringing spices, silks, *silversheen* blades, and heatstones from lands east of the Inner Sea. From Katheer, Qadiran merchants carry these goods throughout the Inner Sea. Though many Qadiran ships bypass Absalom to trade directly at other ports, at least one new vessel from Katheer puts into the City at the Center of the World every day. As a result, goods that are seen as rare and wondrous elsewhere are nearly commonplace in Absalom, and sometimes cheaper here than in Katheer itself. However, much of what comes to Absalom from Katheer leaves again to be traded to farther-off markets, making the trade route between the two cities profitable for Qadirans even when they can't sell their goods to local shops.

One Katheer import always in demand in Absalom is scholars. Any time a large ship (rather than a smaller dhow) puts in from Katheer, representatives of numerous Absalom schools and a few major Houses are on hand to vie for the services of any Katheer-trained sage or healer. Even if such scholars don't take on permanent employment, they can be assured of invitations to social gatherings and lectures on various subjects for the first several weeks of their stay in Absalom.

Niswan

Very few trade ships leave Niswan, and most of those few that do carry Vudrani goods (or things made on the Isle of Jalmeray in Vudrani fashion) to the port of Absalom. As a result, any Niswani trade ship in Absalom finds a ready market for its cargo, coin to buy drinks and probe for hints about the next shipment, and invitations to the highest courts in the city. This makes Vudrani traders popular with the natives of Absalom, who often turn around and sell their cargoes for huge profits over the course of a year, but often draws the ire of Taldan and Chelish folk who make more regular trips but receive less beneficial treatment.

Okeno

The slave traders of Okeno often buy the dregs of the Absalom slave pits at fire-sale prices to ship off to their own flesh fairs. They rarely import slaves, though if a wealthy patron requests a special slave at one of Absalom's flesh peddlers, it might well be the traders of Okeno who actually fill the order. The yellow-sailed slave ships also act as an unofficial channel between Absalom and Katapesh. The bazaars of Katapesh are the only places in the Inner Sea with greater contacts than Absalom, and as a result Absalom harbor policy is to charge a hefty tariff on ships flying a Katapesh flag (a policy Katapesh does not return—Absalom ships are welcome in Katapesh). This

fee does not apply to the slave ships of Okeno, however, and as a result these ships often carry special orders from Katapesh to Absalom.

Oppara

Capital of Taldor, Oppara nonetheless does much less trade with Absalom than the ships of Cassomir. Ships flying an Opparan flag are viewed with distrust by many natives of Absalom, as they have a reputation for being arrogant and tight-fisted. Those crews or captains able to overcome such a reputation are welcomed with open arms as ancient cousins, but this usually takes several successful visits to the city.

Because the king of Taldor has some claim to authority in Absalom (through his title of primarch-in-waiting), the royal ship of Oppara is granted first passage through the graveyard of ships, and the cost for such passage is covered by Lord Gyr. However, unless the king of Taldor is himself on the ship (which has never happened), that is the last special treatment it receives. A few centuries ago this led to a ship being seized, as its captain lost too much money to be able to pay a pilot to guide his ship out of the harbor, and his dock fees eventually totaled the whole value of the ship. While Taldan nobles ranted at this “insult,” no action was ever taken officially.

Oregent

Ships from Oregent must prove they have glassware or silverware to sell, and no wooden goods. Failure to prove this is cause for a 100% tariff on all goods sold from the ship. These restrictions were put in place by Lord Gyr himself, and while Taldor has complained about this treatment many times, the Primarch has never budged on these points. As an unexpected side effect, a few small ships dealing exclusively in glassware have made a regular, and profitable, route from Oregent to Absalom and back.

Ostenso

The port of Ostenso, home to the Chelish navy, claims more regular contact with Absalom than any other Chelish holding. While Absalom doesn't charge ships from other Chelish ports any more serious tariffs, the House of Thrune seems itself to be trying to limit direct trade between Absalom and other Chelish cities. Whether this is to more tightly control the passing of information between Absalom and rebels in Cheliox or for some other reason is unknown.

Because of their homeland's military aspirations, ships flying an Ostenso flag are limited to having no more than 10 of their number in Absalom's harbor at a time. Although this rarely happens in any case, when it does the newest ships to arrive must either choose to put in at Escadar or Diobel or have their goods carried

by smaller boats into the harbor. While this drives up the price of such goods, if the demand for them is high enough Ostenson captains can find the additional arrangements well worth the effort.

Sothis

The newly restored political capital of Osirion, Sothis is a growing trade partner with Absalom. Natives of Absalom have found that having Osirion separate from Qadira is good for trade, as it forces the two groups to compete, and houses of Osirian descent welcome the return of their hereditary pride as their cultural homeland grows in power. While a few trademasters in Absalom warn of the possibility of Osirion wishing to make a military move to establish itself, possibly even against Absalom, such dire predictions are largely ignored by the Grand Council for now. Ships from Sothis offer new opportunities to expand trade, and are currently given a favored treatment in fees for docking to encourage strong ties between the two cities.

HOLDINGS

Absalom, as a nation, is smaller than its neighbors. It claims only two islands, and makes no effort to civilize either of them. Indeed, though Absalom retains all the rights and privileges of a major kingdom, it acts in many ways like the single city most people consider it to be. Even within the city itself, some citizens don't realize Absalom claims the wilderness around them. But though its extra-metropolitan holdings are generally an afterthought at best, any group making trouble in those regions or seizing them for powers outside Absalom will soon discover the Grand Council is more than willing to fight to preserve Absalom's absolute control of them.

Diobel

Diobel is the smaller of Absalom's two vassal-cities, and is located on the western coast of the Isle of Kortos. Diobel is primarily a fishing town, as the shallow waters that surround it make for excellent fishing and oyster-gathering. Indeed, the oysters of Diobel are so numerous that a small pearl-farming economy has sprung up in recent generations (with most of the pearls bought by the Arcanamirium in Absalom). The shallows also prevent large ships from getting close to shore, which is Diobel's primary defense against pirates and sea monsters.

For centuries, smugglers and food traders have preferred to bring goods in and out of Diobel using flat barges to get cargo off large ships and caravans to carry it to Absalom proper, mainly to avoid the larger city's harbor taxes. Seeing how Absalom protected its harbor with a series of wrecked ships and other debris, eventually Diobel augmented its own shallow waters with a similar defense (which led to many disparaging comments in

Absalom describing Diobelians as following the trends set by its more famous neighbor). Fortunately, these defenses had little effect on barge traffic, and as a result there are always a few caravans trekking between Diobel and Absalom. Many of these are perfectly innocent business ventures trying to avoid Absalom's harbor taxes and the criminal element common near the docks, but the route has also been used to smuggle slaves into collar-free zones in Absalom, transport drugs and spies forbidden by the primarch, or move stolen goods too hot to fence within Absalom out of the city. Diobel natives ignore such crimes as long as the smugglers make no trouble within Diobel, and the flow of goods is so minor compared to the docks that Absalom considers it beneath official notice.

Small, independent farms of the Isle of Kortos also trade with these caravans, selling even more food to take to Absalom. As a result, a large portion of Absalom's food supply comes from the overland caravans. Of course, much of Kortos is still wild, and such processions require guards to protect them. Diobel also exports some goods, mostly furs and timber from the island's interior. Many of the trapper families in Diobel are of Kellid descent, and Hallit is used as often as Common to communicate with them. Some trapper families avoid the cities as much as possible, and visit Diobel only a few times a year to trade. Such groups are called "inlanders," and are only slightly more trusted than the minotaurs or harpies native to the island.

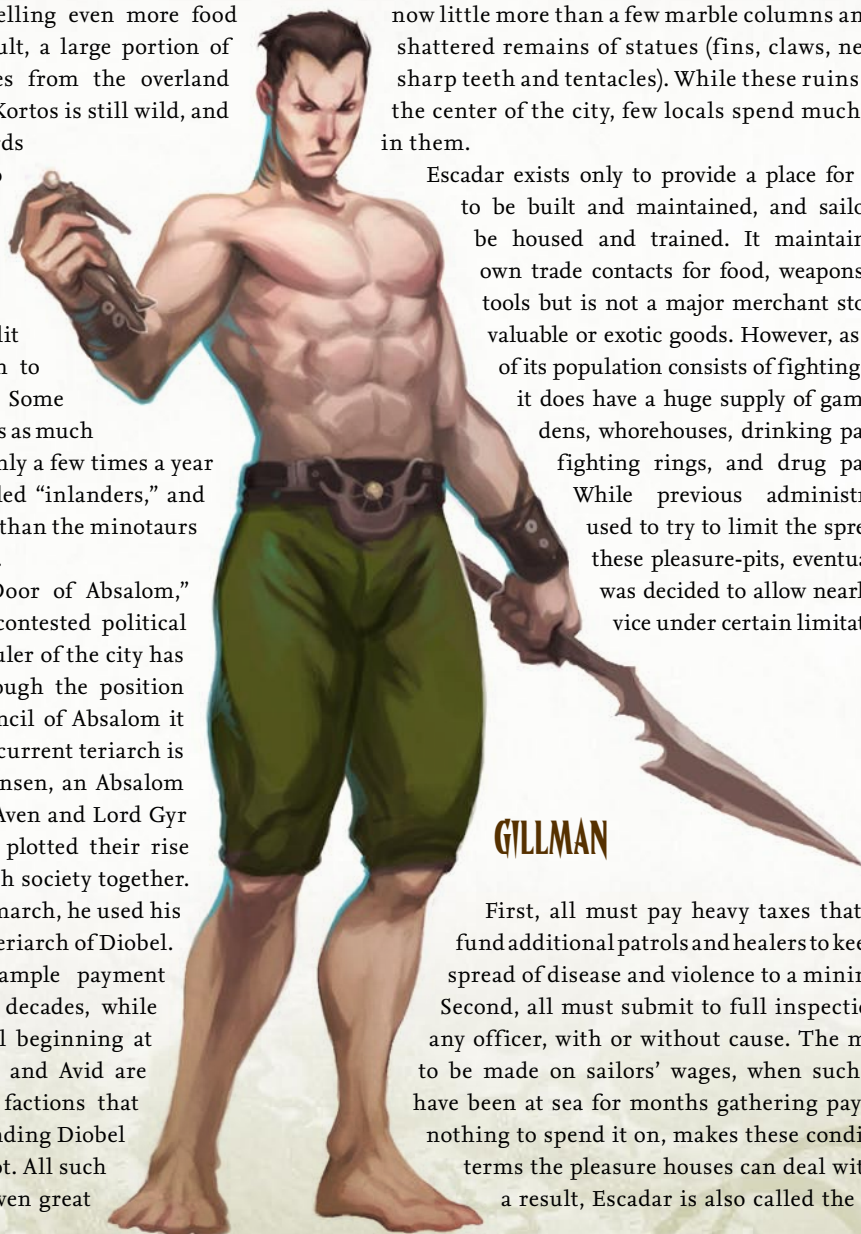
Because it is "the Back Door of Absalom," control of Diobel is a hotly contested political position. The unquestioned ruler of the city has the title of teriarch, and though the position is granted by the Grand Council of Absalom it cannot later be removed. The current teriarch is Scion Lord Aven of House Arnsen, an Absalom native of Taldan blood. Lord Aven and Lord Gyr were childhood friends, and plotted their rise into the ranks of Absalom high society together. When Lord Gyr was voted primarch, he used his influence to name Lord Avid teriarch of Diobel. Lord Gyr considered that ample payment for Lord Avid's aid over the decades, while the teriarch saw it as a small beginning at most. As a result, Lords Gyr and Avid are now political enemies, with factions that oppose the primarch often finding Diobel a safe haven from which to plot. All such groups promise Scion Lord Aven great

power in the new regime once they control Absalom, but the teriarch takes such promises with a healthy grain of salt. His main local opponent for control of the city is the Kortos Consortium, a guild of merchants that controls much of the trade going in and out of Diobel, and may have designs on extending its grasp to Absalom.

Escadar

The larger holding of Absalom is Escadar, located on the Isle of Erran. Escadar is the war port that houses most of Absalom's ships of battle. The fleet is kept here both to prevent it from being hemmed in by the Ship Graveyard around the harbor of Absalom and to force any attacker to besiege two locations at once. It was built in the best harbor on Erran, around old Azlanti ruins that are now little more than a few marble columns and the shattered remains of statues (fins, claws, needle-sharp teeth and tentacles). While these ruins form the center of the city, few locals spend much time in them.

Escadar exists only to provide a place for ships to be built and maintained, and sailors to be housed and trained. It maintains its own trade contacts for food, weapons, and tools but is not a major merchant stop for valuable or exotic goods. However, as most of its population consists of fighting men, it does have a huge supply of gambling dens, whorehouses, drinking parlors, fighting rings, and drug parlors. While previous administrators used to try to limit the spread of these pleasure-pits, eventually it was decided to allow nearly any vice under certain limitations.



GILLMAN

First, all must pay heavy taxes that help fund additional patrols and healers to keep the spread of disease and violence to a minimum. Second, all must submit to full inspection by any officer, with or without cause. The money to be made on sailors' wages, when such men have been at sea for months gathering pay with nothing to spend it on, makes these conditions terms the pleasure houses can deal with. As a result, Escadar is also called the "Vice

City,” and rumors persist that less wholesome pleasures can be found in its back alleys and basements, leading some visitors to come here just to experience its darker diversions. It is true that disappearances are common occurrences among the workers of Escadar’s sin-lodges, and that the local authorities don’t care much unless a sailor goes missing.

Escadar is also the only land-dwelling city to house an embassy of the Low Azlanti, the gillmen of the Inner Sea. Officially the building is the House of the Cresting Wave, but most locals refer to it as the Wet-House. Built in a semblance of Azlanti architecture, it contains numerous wide, flowing waterways and broad pools, ringed with steps and columns. Locals also believe its large central pool, too deep to see the bottom, has an underground river connecting it directly to the sea. Here the Low Azlanti have meetings with the Low Council and any councilmen from Absalom itself who wish to speak to them. They offer information from below the waves, often including uncannily accurate predictions of coming storms and the migrations of dangerous sea predators. They also teach the hippocampus trainers who, in turn, teach soldiers of the Sea Cavalry how to ride aquatic mounts.

It’s unclear what the Low Azlanti gain from this arrangement, though to be sure they are well paid for their expertise and knowledge. The gillmen appear to see Absalom as their natural ally, the only other remnant of the Azlanti culture. They also worship at the old ruins at the center of Escadar, venerating the broken statues of inhuman gods, which may explain their desire to maintain a presence nearby. It’s been suggested the Low Azlanti might simply enjoy the vice-ridden culture of Escadar, of which they are as likely to partake as any other people.

Cairnlands

The vast plain of broken weapons, stone barrows, and shallow graves surrounding Absalom is known as the Cairnlands. It is here that the thousands of soldiers who came to invade Absalom over the millennia are laid to rest, often without the proper religious rituals to keep their spirits quiet. Also found here are numerous siege castles—huge fortresses used in the many wars of conquest that have failed to take the great city. Notable siege castles include the treacherous El Raja Key and the Red Redoubt of Karamoss. The immense and weirdly beautiful Spire of Nex is located 10 miles north of Absalom, and remains a popular adventuring spot thousands of years after it was abandoned.

Kortos Mounts

A massive series of mountains in the center of the island, these are among the tallest, most jagged tors in the known world, with a treeline that ends well before the peaks of

their rocky reaches and tops eternally clad in caps of ice and snow. The tallest mountain on the Isle of Kortos is Arazlant Mox, which rises more than 5 miles from its base. The mountains have a few volcanic peaks, are crowded together so closely that passage through them is often impossible, and are full of twisting crevices and sharp ridges. The tops of the mountains are controlled by flocks of ice-demon-worshipping harpies, while minotaur tribes rule the mid-ranges. Around the base of the mountains exist several tribes of centaurs, who constantly fight with the minotaurs and see Absalom’s residents (and other humanoids in general) as interlopers who have stolen the island of the centaurs from its rightful inhabitants.

Dragons have taken root in the mountains many times over the centuries, though any who reach adulthood are eventually killed by heroes and treasure-hunters from Absalom. The last major dragon in the Kortos Mounts was Maejerex Steeleye, a tyrant of amethyst-colored scales who survived 500 years. A major expedition slew her in 4592 AR, just as she began unifying the minotaurs and harpies under her rule. Since her death, a few young blue and red dragons and similarly colored chimeras pop up every decade, but none have risen to be a major threat.

CITY OVERVIEW

The first thing newcomers need to understand is that Absalom is huge. If they thought it was a long walk from the Great Hall to the Kendall Amphitheater in Korvosa, that’s trivial compared to Absalom. The city stretches more than 7 miles from Azlant Keep to the Starwatch Tower, and just over 5 miles from Westgate to Eastgate. It’s population of more than 300,000 means it has more than triple the residents of Egorian (capital of Cheliox). Every district within Absalom is larger than most other cities, and in fact districts are run as sub-cities, with their own councils and guards.

District Rulership

Each district has its own local government, referred to as a provincial council, that sees that district-specific business is carried out. The head of each council is called the nomarch (except in the Petal District, where the title is “satrap”), and is also on the Low Council of Absalom. Other council members may be on the Low Council as well, but only the nomarch is guaranteed a spot. Each provincial council has its own name, rules, and procedures, often influenced by the homeland to which the majority of its population can trace its heritage. Any decision made by these local councils may be overturned (or forbidden) by the Grand Council, but the fact is that the day-to-day business of the provincial councils passes largely beneath the notice of the Grand Council. As long as a district pays its taxes, doesn’t ask for more than its allotted share of

the budget, and isn't having problems spilling into other sections of the city, the Grand Council is unlikely to even review provincial actions.

By law, the nomarch of each district is selected by the Low Council, and approved by the primarch. As written, the law doesn't give local residents any say in who heads their council. In practice, the primarch makes sure anyone he approves is at least popular enough to avoid assassination. The power of a nomarch is considerable, though it varies by district and never approaches that of a Grand Council member. In 1464 AR the nomarch of the Ascendant Court provincial council was Garev Halfhand, who was also a member of the Grand Council as well as First Harbormaster. This gave Garev enough power to threaten the Grand Council itself, which he did by encouraging the common folk of the city to overthrow their existing rulers and create a new nation in which they would be "reborn" as natives of the Isle of Kortos. The Reborn Rebellion lasted several weeks, and involved bloody fighting from street to street and door to door. Though eventually put down by the primarch's house guard, the insurrection came close enough to success for the Grand Council to decide no nomarch may ever sit on the Grand Council.

Ascendant Court

The Ascendant Court is a large district in central Absalom, and acts as an intersection for more districts than any other section of the city. It is the hub at the center of the city's great thoroughfares and the ultimate destination of the majority its visitors, making it one of the most traveled—and most crowded—areas. The vast preponderance of Absalom's churches are to be found in the Ascendant Court, with the largest and most powerful located close to the center of the district. The *Starstone* itself rests in a massive cathedral perched atop a pillar of rock in the very center of the Court, and every major road in the Ascendant Court leads there.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Sindoi of the Thousand Poems, Nomarch of the Chamber of Ecclestials, Envoy of Jalmeray; **Runewulf the Unbeliever**, Captain of the Graycloaks, cousin of Estrid the White; **Xerashir of House Shamyid**, Bey of Sarenae, Watcher of the Starstone; **Toiden of House Azari**, Faithful of Aroden, Keeper of the Books of Aroden; **Vroclaw of Brevoy**, High Priest of Abadar, Advisor to the Primarch; **Dyrianna of House Avenstar**, Head Hetaera of Calistria, Consul of the Courtesan's Guild

The provincial council is known as the Chamber of Ecclestials, and includes major priests of all the churches within the Ascendant Court. However, the nomarch of the

COST OF LIVING: ASCENDANT COURT

The following costs of living are averages for the Ascendant Court district:

BUILDING OWNERSHIP

Palace	500,000 gp and up
Manor	200,000 gp and up
Villa	120,000 gp
Townhouse	80,000 gp
Flathouse	20,000–75,000 gp
Flop	5,000–20,000 gp
Bunk	500–1,000 gp

BUILDING RENT (PER MONTH)

Keep	10,000 gp
Manor	2,500 gp
Villa	1,000 gp
Townhouse	600 gp
Flathouse	300 gp
Flop	50–200 gp
Bunk	5–10 gp

GENERAL EXPENSES

Food Costs	150% normal
Transportation Costs	200% normal
Goods Costs	125% normal

Chamber is very rarely a member of any local religion, and by tradition is usually a Vudrani wise man. The Chamber does less work than most councils regarding the day-to-day affairs of the district, leaving such matters to the low seats of the Grand Council (who grumble about being given orders by a provincial council, but see the work is done). This is because the Chamber of Ecclestials spends all of its time arranging for the holidays, weddings, funerals, protests, celebrations, and observances of 20 churches, some of which list the destruction of their religious neighbors among the tenets of their faith. Though small brawls are common, no major religious rioting has occurred since the Devil's Night a decade ago when displaced nobles of Cheliox tried to burn the temple of Asmodeus to the ground, and the devil-worshippers called on the Ascendant Court guard to protect them.

The current nomarch is Sindoi of the Thousand Poems, a Vudrani philosopher and artist of extremely advanced age who has held the position for 80 years. Sindoi has professed he worships all gods and none, believes legends are lies from which we learn the truth, and denies his own authority within the Chamber. Though his circular mode of speech and tendency to ask those who come to him with problems what they believe is the best solution to their

troubles frustrate other members of the Chamber, most of them also respect his honesty and apparently complete lack of personal ambition. Sindoi has never voted on a single issue within the Chamber, and only offers advice when directly asked, but he is regarded as one of the wisest and most powerful men in Absalom.

The district guard is known as the Graycloaks, a unit drawn exclusively from declared nonbelievers who reject the divine authority of any god. Though most Graycloaks admit gods exist and clearly have power, they do not accept that these beings are anything more than unusually powerful angels or genies or are in any way worthy of worship. Apart from their signature light-gray wool cloaks, the Graycloaks wear no symbols or markings of any kind, which is itself a mark of their lack of divine allegiance. Because they mistrust all religions equally, the Graycloaks have a history of dealing with members of all religions fairly—a critical element of any guard in the Ascendant Court.

The Seventh Church: The Seventh Church is the site where Iomedae called forth the Undenying Light, causing stars to shine through a terrible storm that was wracking Absalom. With torches and lanterns blown out, rain sleeting down in sheets, and waves cresting into the streets, on the night of that miracle a pack of sea-ghouls swarmed into the city. With the guard blinded in the darkness and communication by horn impossible, the ghouls ran roughshod through the city. Iomedae, still mortal, called for the *Starstone* to ask its brethren in the sky to light the city. The Cathedral of the *Starstone* glowed with blue fire, and the night stars shone rays of blue light through the clouds. The light pinpointed every ghoul in the city, and allowed Iomedae and other defenders to find and destroy them. This is the seventh of her 11 miraculous Acts, and the event is commemorated not only with the Temple, but with the Iomedaeenne, a 10-foot statue of the goddess carved from red limestone thinly banded with sapphire.

Though the Seventh Church is an important part of the worship of Iomedae, it is normally staffed with younger priests who are still in training, or very old priests who operate it as a form of retirement. The worship of Iomedae is widespread in Absalom, and numerous acolytes take vows in the Seventh Church every year, but each also swears to serve where the Sword of Iomedae places them. While training for 3 or 4 years in the Seventh Church is commonplace, most of those trained here are shipped from Absalom to posts around the world upon giving their final vows. It is also a common destination for those so maimed, cursed, or aged as to be no longer sharp blades in Iomedae's service, and who are fit mostly to train younger faithful.

The more vital of Iomedae's priests may visit here, but they soon head off to churches more in need of their

strong arms and bravery. Absalom is seen as a point of origin and recruitment by the church's hierarchy rather than a vital stronghold in need of attention or defense. While they would never abandon the site of one her miracles, her high priests believe the Seventh Church is in no danger, and its staff should be those unable to fight in her name elsewhere. The current head priest, Genedair the Faithful, is a human man in his early 90s. A hero of the Mendev Crusades, he now requires a staff and two young acolytes at his side to walk, though his mind remains as sharp as ever.

In truth, if any foe ever did threaten the Seventh Church, the priests there would have strong allies to call upon. Just across the main street from the Seventh Church is the Tempering Hall, a training ground for Paladins of Iomedae. Though the senior priests are rarely in the prime of health, the students are dozens of paladin trainees. While most are youths answering the call of the Inheritor early in their lives, there are always a few experienced fighters, priests, and rangers on hand who felt the call to become paladins. The Knight Lord of the Tempering House is Rochae Swiftblade, an experienced warrior who turned to Iomedae first as a cleric and only in the later years of his life as a paladin.

By long-standing tradition, the Tempering Hall also trains paladins called by Abadar, Irori, and Shelyn. Though rarely has any class had more than one cadet from another faith, in recent years the numbers have increased dramatically. Currently three young paladins of Abadar and one of Shelyn are being trained at the Tempering House. Such students often find their time here rougher than their fellows, as they cannot be given as specific religious instruction, but the ways of paladins are often inscrutable to their native churches.

Cayden's Hall: Ruled by High Priestess Saphira, the Lady of Intemperance (a Varisian priestess of Cayden Cailean), this "church" is the world's largest nonstop festival. Because the meadhall Cayden left just before becoming a god was made of wood, so too is his hall. Unfortunately, drunken revelry, huge religious bonfires, and wooden walls do not mix well. The current hall is the fifteenth to be built on this site, the other 14 having burned to the ground in years past, and it is known there were at least three other sites to house "Cayden's Hall" before the current location (near a major fountain) was found. The faithful of the Accidental God believe his spirit views this hall to be the same one he last drank at before achieving godhood—though they sometimes admit they suspect he wouldn't know the difference, or care if he did.

Though most natives see the hall as nothing but an excuse to get drunk, it also serves as a gathering place for freedom fighters and explorers worldwide. Those

known to Saphira are always given safe haven in the hall, and those she does not know need only to convince her of their good intent to earn similar treatment. Among the drinking tables and stained benches, expeditions to far-off and dangerous lands are planned, revolutions are plotted, and wrestling techniques are demonstrated (with varying levels of skill). Anyone willing to hoist a tankard to fighting evil is welcome, and those seeking to put together a group for a dangerous exploit often come looking here. A running joke in Absalom claims that all famous enterprises begin with strangers sitting at this tavern, and in truth more than one famous escapade can be traced back to a group that just happened to still be sober in the hall when someone showed up with a map and a proposition.

Pleasure Salon of Calistria: Though elves are far from uncommon in Absalom, they certainly aren't a majority. The City at the Center of the World holds too little appeal to natives of the elven kingdom of Kyonin for travel between the two to be common, and most Absalom elves are adventurers, outcasts, seekers of lost elven kingdoms, or the offspring of elves fitting those descriptions. In fact, there are more half-elves than full-blood elves in Absalom, and many of them worship Calistria. It's been said, only partly in jest, that the Pleasure Salon of Calistria is in fact the cause of the city's high half-elf population. It is certainly true that humans are only too happy to visit the temple prostitutes of the salon, most of whom have enough elven blood to pass as full elves (augmenting their looks with costumes or magic to help complete the illusion).

The salon is a bright, well-kept building constructed in the columned style of classic Azlanti temples. While this doesn't match any other temple of Calistria in Golarion, it does fit nicely with the general look of other upscale temples in Absalom. The sole hint at the nature of the salon's main form of worship is the extensive reliefs that wrap the upper levels of the salon's exteriors, depicting dozens of comely humanoids (mostly humans and elves, but with a smattering of other races mixed in) engaged in enthusiastic, acrobatic, and creative forms of promiscuity.

Within the salon, depictions of the same sort cover nearly every available surface, and many focus on Calistria herself. Rumor claims that many private rooms have statues illustrating Calistria immersed in carnal acts with the other gods. (If this is true, the statues are put away whenever Sindoi of the Thousand Poems comes to investigate a specific claim from outraged members of other churches.) The main hall is always staffed with both priests and prostitutes available for patrons or visitors.



The sacred prostitutes are all well educated, well spoken, and well dressed, though their services can be arranged for on a sliding scale. (Those willing to part with a large portion of their total wealth can always arrange for companionship for a day and a night, even if that total wealth is negligible). Many also develop special friends and contacts they see outside the salon, but such arrangements are always allowed only with the ranking prostitute's permission (they are workers of Calistria's will, after all, and their actions must always please the goddess). So accepted are these sex workers that powerful men and women throughout the city openly visit and hire them, and their advice is often sought on silken sheets for matters of state, trade, romance, and even magic.

The salon also offers two unusual services in addition to the normal labors available in a temple of Calistria. First, the salon has the greatest wasp hive in Absalom, and this rare breed of wasp is the only kind known to produce a variety of sweet, clear honey. The honey is highly prized by makers of metheglin (a mead-like alcoholic drink) throughout the Ascendant Court and the Ivy and Petal districts, and is sold monthly in an auction.

The salon has extensive public baths available at no charge. The baths are open to anyone willing to strip to their skin and behave themselves, and are thus a popular meeting place between factions that don't trust each other. (Patrons who don't wish to behave themselves can make arrangements to access the salon's private baths—for a fee).

Though the priests of Calistria have significant influence over the actions of the salon, it is actually run by the ranking sacred prostitute, Dyrianna of House Avenstar. A stunningly beautiful, slender half-elf who convinced one of the priests to buy her out of slavery at a sin pit in the Coins 20 years ago, Dyrianna has come from literally having nothing to being one of the great powers in the Ascendant Court. She has been adopted into the powerful Avenstar House of elves, taken control of the prostitutes and through them the whole salon, and recently bought controlling interest in the city's Courtesan's Guild (regulating paid companions who neither work on a stage nor walk the streets). She has the complete loyalty of all the salon's personnel, and as a result controls one of the best spy networks in Absalom. Though she never works directly against the Grand Council and insists any information she gains be used only in discreet ways, Dyrianna is otherwise willing to sell her knowledge and her temple's services to the highest bidder. In years past

NOTABLE HOPEFULS AND FAILURES

Notable folk memorialized at the Shrine of the Failed include:

- Demuren, god of sacrifice
- Gobru, god of fish and the bountiful sea
- Mellag, god of rot
- Oggo, god of the 16 poses
- Plokkis, god of spoiled food and wastefulness
- Silmor, god of blades
- Spuchasta, goddess of hallucinatory incense and herbs
- The Muted God, god of silence and serenity
- Yepyari, goddess of clouds and tornadoes
- Zimpar, god of the screaming fear

she accepted extensive contracts from Chelish houses, but has recently begun taking work more regularly from Qadiran houses and agents.

Temple of the Shining Star: Near the street circling the pit of the *Starstone* is the Temple of the Shining Star, the largest church of Sarenrae north of Katheer. Here Xerashir of House Shamyyid, Bey of Sarenrae, greets every morning by standing before the Mark (the largest sundial in the known world) and witnessing the first rays of the sun touching it. No one knows why this must be done, other than it was the command of the Dawnflower centuries ago, and not a day has passed that some priest of Sarenrae has not witnessed the event since that command.

The temple is also the only church of the Dawnflower in Absalom, though many homes have small shrines to her. Those in the city who worship her travel here no less than once a month, but their primary way of honoring her is to carry her guidance with them in their everyday lives. The church itself constantly strives to promote honesty, redemption, and healing throughout the city, running several small pavilions where younger priests offer guidance and healing arts to all the people of the city without cost. Xerashir sees her calling as a secular one, and is very involved in the politics of the Ascendant Court and to a lesser extent the city as a whole.

The temple is also a center of training for paladins of Sarenrae, especially those from Taldor. Many Taldan paladins travel to Absalom within the first few years of their calling and receive advanced training in scimitar-combat, healing arts, and enough Kelesh to read *The Birth of Light and Truth* in its native script. Those cadets who have not faced agents of Rovagug are also instructed in the ways of the Rough Beast's harsh priests and how to look for signs of their hidden shrines.

Shrine of the Failed: Though a few mortals have survived the Test of the *Starstone*, over the ages far, far more have failed it. The life of each "fallen supplicant"

is marked and honored in the dour Shrine of the Failed. Worshiping no god, and honoring no philosophy, this dark hall maintains a small monument to those who seek godhood and pay the ultimate price. Many visitors to Absalom come to see the edifice once, but few ever return. Lacking any sense of grandeur or wonder, it appears to be no more than a series of stone rooms marking failure, and its appeal is short-lived.

Though the structure is centuries old, no one knows who constructed the monument or why. Those who care for it wear black robes of mourning, but make no claim to a holy calling. Indeed, there are no texts, signs, or miracles laid claim by the caretakers, each of whom has come here for his own reasons. The shrines are as elaborate as they can arrange, though most offerings are little more than a few personal belongings and an item or two selected as icons of the fallen. The building has been expanded for centuries, with both its new construction and upkeep paid for by donations from families of the fallen and a few in Absalom who believe its existence is important, though none can say why. Some devout worshipers of missing hopefuls come to this place to worship, convinced their chosen god will someday appear despite years or decades of silence.

Avenue of the Hopeful: This winding street is packed with booths, carts, and blankets like a busy market, except what is "sold" here is faith. Those planning to someday take the Test of the *Starstone* often camp here to build a cult of personality about themselves, promising to reward their early devotees once they pass the Test. Some hopefuls have lived here for months or even years on the charity of others, and while there are scammers and pickpockets in the midst, an equal number truly believe they are worthy and will someday achieve divinity. This street is always busy, filled with hopefuls, charlatans, worshipers, and those trying to make money off of everyone else. Merchants sell holy symbols, holy water, relics (such as hair, fingernails, or drops of blood), faith papers (something like a ballot to determine which hopefuls are the most popular), and stranger things. One long-standing booth is owned by the cult of the Masked God of Secrets (presumably another hopeful), which is actually a front for an organization that collects information and secrets about patrons and sells these things to others.

Chelish Embassy: Once this was a grand temple to Aroden, connected by a bridge to the pillar of the *Starstone* Cathedral. With Aroden dead, the bridge destroyed in an earthquake a decade ago, and most of the god's faithful migrating to Iomedae, the Grand Council decided to rent out the abandoned temple, and the winning bidders were the representatives of Cheliox. It now serves as the Chelish embassy, and most residents have come to accept dozens of Chelish flags waving within sight of the *Starstone*.

God's Market: This broad street is where many of the established religions have set up shop to sell items of the faith (holy symbols, holy water, religious texts, clothing, and so on) and minor magic items (mainly potions and scrolls). Various expert craftsmen (jewelers in particular) sell their wares here, and several moneylenders conduct a thriving business, often licensed in the name of a local temple. The area also supports a small amount of illicit trade, such as black market holy symbols and vestments for evil deities, but the location and identity of the shop is not known to the public.

The Black Mask: To casual observation, the Black Mask is a high-end costume shop, offering ornate masks, double-sided cloaks, and unusual attire from common disguises to ornate parade costumes of bamboo and silk that allow a dozen men to play the part of a sea-serpent. However, it is an open secret that the shop is truly a temple to Norgorber, and that when it closes business at the end of each day, the black-and-gray-clad faithful of the Reaper of Reputation come to worship the second Ascended God.

Unlike most cities, Absalom has no restrictions forbidding the worship of Norgorber. As an ascendant of the *Starstone*, he is seen as a native divinity who should at least be tolerated and sometimes venerated. That said, his followers gain no special protection from Absalom's laws either—stealing is still illegal in Absalom even if you do it to honor Norgorber's role as the Gray Master. As a result, his priests and worshipers hide their identities in Absalom as carefully as they would anywhere else, and the Graycloaks keep a close eye on the Black Mask any night it seems to be more active than usual. Of course, not every visitor to the shop is a follower of the god—groups of alchemists hold meetings after-hours at the Mask every few weeks, customers who genuinely just want to buy a costume-piece are common, and foes of Norgorber often wander into the shop to keep an eye on its activities. On the other hand, some of the alchemists worship Norgorber as Blackfingers the Poisoner, many of the customers are thieves and assassins even if they don't venerate Norgorber, and enemies of Norgorber can make as much trouble for Graycloaks as his faithful.

Though no thieves' guild officially operates in the Ascendant Court (even the Bloody Barbers don't undertake group activities under the watchful eyes of so many good-aligned priests), the Black Mask does serve as a meeting place for assassins, rogues, never-do-wells, and pilferers of all descriptions. If a group of such visitors decides to perform crimes within the Court, it's well known they would be best served by first seeking the permission of one of the masked clerks of the shop, and then to offer up 10% of any profits made as a donation to the store. Those who follow these rules are often put in touch with others

LEAP OF FAITH

The only publicly known part of the Test of the *Starstone* is that hopefuls have to cross the bottomless pit without using one of the existing bridges; nobody has been able to enter the *Starstone* Cathedral by taking the easy route. Hopefuls have used many ways in the past millennia to cross the pit: mages have flown across with magic, priests have walked on air, and others have used flying mounts. Stranger methods include giant slingshots or walking a tightrope, while some make mighty leaps, convinced of their worthiness. Not all of these methods are successful, and what worked for one person can fail for another; some don't make it across, and some do but cannot enter the cathedral.

One thing that is consistent across all cases is that they attract an audience. News of a hopeful planning to make an attempt spreads like wildfire through the city, and soon a crowd gathers, maintaining a respectful distance. Reaching the cathedral usually means loud cheering, while a fall or inexplicable failure creates a sad silence before the crowd disperses. If a hopeful enters the cathedral, the crowd usually waits for about an hour before boredom and other business causes them to dwindle away—after all, nobody knows how long the Test should take, life goes on, and if the hopeful does succeed, the locals will hear about it soon enough.

of their profession with opportunities for bigger scores in other parts of the city; those who don't often turn up dead or find someone has left a tip about their next job with the district watch.

Every few years, the Black Mask begins selling numerous leather costumes with ragged, rawhide edges and ghoulish, demented faces. Such outfits are called "skinsaws" by shop clerks, and are sold cheaply. Within a few weeks, a rash of cult killings hits some poorer section of Absalom. No one has ever proven any connection between the skinsaw costumes and the killings, and even if a link exists many people believe the costumes serve as enough of a warning. Regardless of connection or intent, the poorer and weaker residents of the city always fear the news that "skinsaws" may be bought at the Black Mask.

Azlanti Keep

Azlanti Keep is a working fortification, but it is also so large as to qualify as its own district. It is the home and domain of the First Guard, the main element of the army of Absalom. The Guard watches the gates, mans the walls, and commands most other Absalom forces in time of war. It also serves as one of the checks on the power of other groups within Absalom, for the commission to command of the First Guard is for life, and its oath is to protect the city, not the Grand Council.

COST OF LIVING: AZLANTI KEEP

The following costs of living are averages for the Azlanti Keep District, outside of the Open Quartering.

GENERAL EXPENSES

Food Costs	75% normal
Transportation Costs	75% normal
Goods Costs	100% normal

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Rothos of House Vastille, Captain of the First Guard, Commander Militant of Absalom; **Chun Fe Seung**, First Siege Gear; **Utgar of Gyr**, Third Spell Lord; **Wynsal Starborn**, District Seat of the Grand Council, retired Captain of the First Guard; **Lord Yuvin Vatir** of House Damaq, Quartermaster, Silver Sword

The Outer Gate: The largest gate in Absalom, and perhaps the world, the Outer Gate stands 200 feet high, half that wide, and 20 feet thick. Supposedly designed by Aroden himself, the Outer Gate is so thick that it has internal guard positions, including a wide balcony on each gate that permits line of fire directly down. In the history of Absalom, no enemy force has ever breached this gate, though the First Guard has records of the thousands of soldiers who have given their lives defending it from spells, monsters, demons, and siege weapons alike.

Grand Vault: The largest single, open room in Absalom, this massive interior space is the last refuge should Absalom’s city wall and the outer sections of Azlanti Keep fall to enemies. It is large enough to hold thousands of soldiers and residents at once, and the First Guard holds all assemblies here, under the banners and pennants of a hundred war companies that failed to penetrate the keep’s defenses.

Little Roofs: Though every rooftop in Azlanti Keep is accessible from within and serves as a platform for siege weapons and massed archers, a series of roofs spanning the southern edge has not been manned in centuries. Known as the “Little Roofs,” this area is a common gathering place for off-duty members of the Guard.

Open Quartering: Anywhere else, this would be called a market, but in Azlanti Keep the Open Quartering (also just called “the Open”) is where the surplus goods and material acquired by the Quartermaster are sold at reasonable prices by rasars (soldiers working in supply houses for the Quartermaster). The Quartermaster and his rasars sell everything with very little eye for profit, which keeps prices very low (10% to 25% lower than the normal market value). However, only members of the First Guard or the various district guards may shop in the Open Quartering, and none

may buy more of something than a rasar determines could be used by a household of four (to prevent reselling on the open market). Thus merchants and common citizens are cut off from the cheap goods of the Open and guards can often find things more cheaply than merchants can get it wholesale, which is a point of mild friction.

Though it’s not common, the Grand Council can grant individuals honorary commissions within the First Guard. Such ceremonial ranks grant no right to enforce laws or wander the secure areas of Azlanti Keep, but they do grant the right to buy in the Open. Lord Gyr grants such rights more often than previous primarchs did, usually to young spellcasters who have taken some risk for the benefit of the city without being hired to do so. The Quartermaster



recently ruled that the Muckruckers (unpaid guards of the Puddles) did *not* qualify for Open Quartering, though few made the trip to try to take advantage of it. This has become a popular cause among merchants, who claim it is a violation of the city trade laws.

Craft Vaults: These are a vast, interconnected series of workshops, stables, and armories constantly working to keep the First Guard ready to fight. They are ostensibly under the command of Lord Yuviv Vatir in his role as Quartermaster, but in truth are directly overseen by Chun Fe Seung, the First Siege Gear of the Guard. Chun Fe is a master craftswoman in her own right, and is constantly working to improve the designs of the many siege weapons mounted on the roofs of the keep, and to a lesser extent those posted on the walls around Absalom. She has numerous pet projects, including building a new kind of trebuchet with enough range to attack ships beyond Absalom's harbor. So far, she is nowhere near that range, and the Grand Council has limited her test shots to firing once or twice a month out into the wilderness.

The largest of the craft vaults are the forges, where weapons and armor are pounded out of various metals. There are a few master smiths able to work mithral and adamantine, and these are given the same respect (and benefits) as senior officers. The basic design of the First Guards' gear has not changed for more than 2 centuries, and the current forgemasters are traditionalists who see no need to change what has worked so well. A group of younger smiths, mostly of Andoran decent, have pressed for a series of tests and competitions to see if new materials, weapon designs, or even tactics might serve to better defend the city against the next inevitable siege. This group has been called the "Revolutionaries," both because of their links to Andoran and their attitude toward innovation. As yet, the Revolutionaries have made little headway, but their monthly meetings in the Three Columns Yard within the keep, where they test new weapon ideas, have become a popular spectator sport for many of the common guard members.

Many workers in the craft vaults are young soldiers serving as apprentices, learning the basics of a craft as they get paid for their service to the guard. This is one of the few ways in Absalom to pick up a new trade without paying for an apprenticeship (or being born into it), and the turnover for young crafters is fairly high. For this reason junior crafters receive none of the increased pay or prestige of senior workers, and are often seen as temporary guard members at best. However, any crafter who signs up for a second 5-year term of service is immediately seen as a major asset to the First Guard. While few of the carpenters, smiths, and tanners actually reach officer ranks, they are treated more like officers than enlisted guardsmen. Additionally, those who specialize

TRANSPORT IN ABSALOM

In large part due to its size, Absalom is a city of animal-aided travel. Steeds and saddles can be rented in most districts, merchants are often ranked not by goods but by number of beasts of burden, and owning a personal steed (in a city where it must be stabled and food imported for it) is an important symbol of wealth. Even for commoners, animal transport can be critical—long bench-wagons make regular circuits through the major roads, allowing commoners to ride along for a copper, and halflings with dog-pulled travois will haul any shoppers' packages back to their homes for a similarly low price.

However, horses are extremely rare in Absalom. No native herds exist on the island, and those released into the wilds are either killed by angry centaurs (who see them as a direct attack on their small plains) or eaten by harpies. Instead, camels are the most common mounts. Breeds imported from Osirion have proven extremely well adapted to the island, and are the steed of choice among nobles and merchants alike. Camels are also used as beasts of burden, to pull chariots and wagons, and as farming beasts for the fields around Diobel. Most of Absalom's district guards have at least one small unit of camel cavalry, and camel barding is more common than horse armor within the city's shops. Rumors claim a breed of winged camels exists on the northern end of the isle of Kortos, but if so their numbers must be very small, as none have ever been captured.

Giant flightless birds called axebeaks are the next most common portage animals, though they are also herded for food by some Vudrani families. Bladebeaks are much more aggressive than camels, but also faster and more able to defend themselves, making them popular for Diobel-to-Absalom caravans. Riding dogs, various huge lizard-like creatures, elephants, and even monstrous (non-venomous) centipedes are also found as beasts of burden in and near the city. Occasionally a centaur banished from its home clan also takes up work in Absalom as a steed, though doing so is always a sign of its great shame and dishonor.

The dizzying array of possible mounts found throughout Absalom used to mean most riders either had to have their gear custom ordered or visit a dozen shops to match the saddle and tack needed for their own beasts, but this changed a decade ago with the opening of the Hackamore House.

in imbuing weapons with magic, building siege weapons, or mastering the architectural skills needed to maintain the keep's walls often gain officer ranks and are among the most valued and protected of all the guard.

Bunk Fields: This is a dull, uniform section of row after row of simple bunks. Since the First Guard is never at more than 20% capacity unless Absalom is actively under siege, many of these small rooms are empty, and may be the site of unsanctioned games of chance or assassinations.

Knigh Country: The upper reaches of the keep are reserved for siege crews, specialists, and senior members of the Guard. Known as Knight Country, this area admits only those with invitations or a badge marking them as one of these groups (or squire to someone in those groups). Lord Gyr keeps a private room here to allow him to escape the pestering voices of envoys and statesmen. The rooms are large and well-appointed, though none have balcony or window views (as outer rooms are reserved for siege weapons).

The Vents: The lowest reaches of Azlanti Keep are abandoned halls and narrow corridors that run alongside and bridge over vast vents leading deep into the earth. Steam often comes up from the vents, and the smell of brimstone can sometimes be detected. These lower reaches are only connected to the upper sections of the Keep through four rooms, each easily held by just a few men. These rooms are always manned, though there is no record of anything happening in the vents for more than a century (the records noting what went on in these rooms more than a century ago were all lost).

The Coins

If it can be bought, it's for sale in the Coins. Money is the only authority here, and you get what you pay for. The Coins is the most crowded and noisy of all Absalom's districts, and the shouting and haggling does not quiet much at night. Taverns never close, the open markets light up with torches and spells of illumination alike, and public Time Callers wander about shouting out every hour on the hour. Even when not in a store or the bazaar, a visitor can see buying and selling on every street corner and in every restaurant. It's been joked that wives in the Coins bargain the price of their husbands' dinners, and for at least some families it's true.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Myleena of House Arnsen, Nomarch of the Coin Council; **Lady Kythes Finch**, Captain of the Token Guard, owner-operator of the Saucy Wench; **Bwutuzu the Panther**, Bazaar Overseer, Keeper of the Measures; **Lord Navvem of House Wachail**, Seat of the Coin Council, Slave Overseer; **The Harlequin**, Guildmaster of the Forthright Men Thieves' Guild

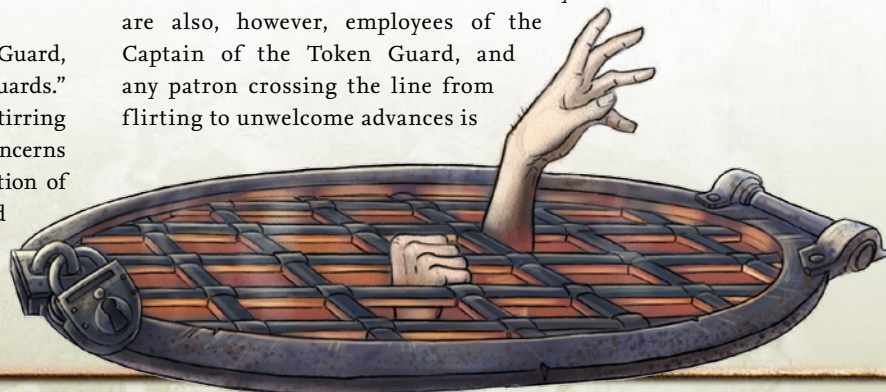
Bail House: Headquarters of the Coins District Guard, though nearly everyone calls them the "Token Guards." The guard takes a very lenient view of most crimes, stirring themselves only when paid to do so by private concerns or because a situation threatens to draw the attention of the primarch. For most offenses, the Token Guard simply arrests everyone in sight and holds them for disturbing the peace. This requires someone to post bail for the incarcerated (at a cost of 1 cp

per arrest), which results in the headquarters being called the Bail House. A squat, wood-and-mortar building with barred windows and only two entrances (both gated), the Bail House is clearly designed to survive short-term riots first and foremost, and serve any other function second.

Grand Bazaar: It has been said anything can be found in the grand bazaar of Absalom, and that claim isn't far from wrong. Under the watchful eye of Bwutuzu the Panther, merchants sell everything from Qadiri carpets, dwarven axes, elven bows, and Tian silks to minotaur-horn drinking cups, harpy-feather cloaks, and Osirian papyrus. Very few permanent buildings exist, but hundreds of pavilions, carts, portable stages, and merchant wagons cram together with little rhyme or reason to sell anything a buyer's heart might desire. The colors and styles are bright and garish, as every merchant tries to catch the eyes of potential buyers, with scantily clad dancers, gnome illusionists, and exhibitions of every imaginable skill also used to bring crowds close enough for a trader to cry out the value of his wares.

Red Silk Route: Although officially just an area where goods of a personal nature can be sold, the section of the Bazaar cordoned off with red silk flags is among the most notoriously hedonistic in the city. Pleasures of almost any kind can be found, and even activities and opiates illegal elsewhere are allowed within. The shows put on to draw interested buyers are also much more explicit, and visitors to Absalom often find themselves agape with amazement, enraged with moral fury, or both. To keep things quiet, and money flowing, this is the one area in the Coins with a strong presence of Token Guards on duty. In truth, it is the less visible agents of the Forthright Men, the thieves' guild of the Coins, that keep the Red Silk Route quiet.

The Saucy Wench: There are very few permanent buildings within the Bazaar, which is one of the reasons the sturdy and massive Saucy Wench remains popular. Located near the center of the vast trade grounds, the Saucy Wench is a capacious four-story mead hall, dealing in nothing but meat hot from the spit, hearty bread, and copious quantities of mead. It's famous for its all-female, interracial serving staff (and their identical wench serving outfits), who are indeed among the sauciest women in all the Coins. They are also, however, employees of the Captain of the Token Guard, and any patron crossing the line from flirting to unwelcome advances is



hauled off by an off-duty guard before he realizes how many patrons also work for the hall's owner. All the serving women also live in the building (on the top floor), so while an unwelcome move is swiftly punished, welcome advances are often rewarded by the wenches just as quickly.

Hackamore House: Operated by its owner Aetris Thunderhoof (a centaur), and her paramour Glenair of House Jefreet (a shapeshifting druid born in Diobel), this is the premier steed and carriage shop in Absalom. Aetris arrived in Absalom penniless, took over a failing cul-de-sac of businesses selling meat and leather, and managed to convert it to its current purpose. Once an open-air market, she has sectioned the massive wooden storage bays and tent roof into a series of stalls for steeds of all kind, and brought several independent crafters to set up their shops under her aegis. Thus, any needed steed, gear, or wheeled transport is likely already available, and if not can be designed and ordered from her single location. Aetris even allows other centaurs to be shod in her establishment, though she requires they be muzzled the entire time they are on her grounds. This last point is nonnegotiable, and the only troubles Aetris has ever had with the Token Guards has always involved a centaur refusing to put up with such treatment, and Aetris violent response to any attempt at an exception.

Misery Row: Running the length of the eastern edge of the Coins, bordering the Merchants' Quarter, is the street on which the purchase and sale of slaves is always legal—Misery Row. Officially part of the Coins, no member of the Token Guard or District Council ever shows his face in the Row, avoiding the accusation of supporting slavery. However, the captain of the guard and all the Council receive a portion of the price of every slave sold. The Row is elevated from street level, making it a wall between the Coins and the Merchants' District, with access to its top found in heavily guarded stairs every few hundred feet. In places Misery Row is as much as 500 feet wide, making it a long, elevated platform rather than a simple street or wall.

This means that the auction stages, where slaves are sold to the highest bidder, are elevated and easy to see. It also means getting to the Row to cause trouble is difficult without magic. While such magic is plentiful, anyone using spells to harass the Row is in direct violation of the rules set down by the first spell lord, who also happens to be primarch. Lord Gyr ignores subtle, mundane efforts to free slaves (though he also ignores anyone killed by slavers on the row in the attempt), but comes down like an iron golem on anyone who flaunts the laws of Absalom with magic.

However, most slaves are not bought at auction; only the most attractive, strongest, most exotic, and most skilled

COST OF LIVING: THE COINS

The following costs of living are averages for the Coins District:

BUILDING OWNERSHIP

Manor	100,00 gp and up
Villa	60,000 gp
Townhouse	40,000 gp
Flathouse	7,000–25,000 gp
Flop	2,000–8,000 gp
Bunk	150–300 gp

BUILDING RENT (PER MONTH)

Keep	5,000 gp
Manor	1,000 gp
Villa	500 gp
Townhouse	200 gp
Flathouse	100 gp
Flop	20–50 gp
Bunk	2–8 gp

GENERAL EXPENSES

Food Costs	100% normal
Transportation Costs	125% normal
Goods Costs	90% normal

are worth the effort it takes slavers to run a complex sale. Most slaves are bought in lots, often sight unseen, from their holding chambers. Buyers needing just one or two slaves can wander along the chambers, even talking to prospective slaves to judge their skills and willingness to be owned without causing trouble. These chambers are almost always sunken into the wall of Misery Row, accessed only from above at wall-height, resulting in the term "The Slave Pits of Absalom."

The Eternal Shackle: A 20-foot-tall stone arch of unknown origin, this monument is found at the northernmost edge of Misery Row. Currently a massive flame burns beneath the arch—a magic fire that needs no fuel and no deluge can extinguish. Locals claim the flame did not burn for decades, until the Flesh Taxes were reinstated in 4635 AR, legalizing slavery once more. Occasionally, a hermit or madman comes to the Shackle to venerate Droskar, the dark smith and god of slavery.

The Devil's Advocates: This is a small Chelish slave brokerage that specializes in highly trained, skilled slaves who come from Cheliox. Most of these were sentenced to slavery as a result of some crime, and if they refuse to submit to this sentence, their families in Cheliox suffer for their rebellion. Thus, these Chelish slaves are generally obedient, well-trained, and expensive. The slave pits of the Devil's Advocates are fairly comfortable, well-

appointed, roofless cells where slaves can maintain their appearance and practice their skills. As the name of the brokerage might suggest, most in its employ are expert sages and scribes, trained in dealing with the intricacies of Chelish laws. Indeed, many trade houses keep at least one slave advocate around to answer questions about Chelish laws, as well as advise on merchant opportunities throughout the Inner Sea.

Scales of Labor: The Scales of Labor is not the oldest, largest, or most successful slave pit on Misery Row, but it is typical of most such establishments. It is composed of a single modest shop on Misery Row, near one of the auction platforms, and a number of metal-grate-topped pits in which slaves are kept. One pit is reserved for nonviolent slaves (mostly pleasure slaves and those too old to cause trouble, but still able to clean, cook, or care for children), while the others are always watched by an armed guard. Food is lowered with a chain and winch, and slaves brought up the same way. The conditions are so horrid that few slaves ever refuse to be lifted up for sale, and those that do are killed. The place is owned by Kistav Mufurier, a young wizard from Ustalav who found slaving more profitable than adventuring.

Mudhaven: In the lowest grounds of the Coins lies Mudhaven. Constantly wet as a result of sitting below sea level and having poor drainage, this is where most of those who work in the Coins live. It is a dreary, dirty stretch of ragged shops, rotting homes, and unpaved roads. Violence is a nightly occurrence here, and the Token Guard never enter in squads of less than 24 men. Riots are not uncommon, but normally play themselves out by dawn when the rioters sober up.

Temple of Lost Coins: This ramshackle, half-ruined church is no more a temple than the Forthright Men who run it are priests. In this broken castle within a forgotten slum, the thieves' guild of the Coins holds meetings, gathers taxes and dues, and trains new members. It is also residence of the guild master known as the Harlequin, who both dresses in bright motley and hangs every abandoned circus banner and fair streamer ever dropped or discarded in Absalom from the temple's arches.

As a result of a loophole in the Coins' law, the Forthright Men are a legal organization as long as they pay taxes on their profits and never deny their involvement in any crime of trespass or theft. Thus if captured and questioned, a Forthright Man admits to any stealing or spying he has done. Stolen goods must be returned, and minor damages paid for any such act they admit to, but beyond that no punishment falls on them. Since it is also a crime to falsely accuse any citizen of a crime, Forthright Men are only called to account when strong evidence ties them to a crime or a victim is certain of exactly who stole something. It's not enough

to be convinced one of a group of Forthright Men committed a crime; witnesses must be able to identify exactly who was involved, and be willing to answer to charges if their accusations don't pan out.

Monger's Mart: While the things sold in the Grand Bazaar are normally nonperishable items, especially rare materials and relics from far-off empires and cheap local goods, the Monger's Market is all about items that eventually go bad. While the most obvious items are cheeses and meats (especially fish), the biggest moneymakers in the market are actually spices. No matter how well preserved or dried they are, spices lose much of their value in their first few months of existence, and eventually spoil entirely. Thus the Monger's Market is full-to-bursting with huge tents of sellers from Vudra and Osirion, elephants carrying mobile shops from Taldor and Qadira, and even lone merchants carrying tiny vials of precious flowers and musks from Sargava, the Lands of the Linnorm Kings, and Tian Xia.

The Docks

The Docks is the gateway into Absalom for most people, and it is a combination of constantly shifting ships and cargo, and cheap places for sailors to get drunk, fulfill their carnal desires, and sleep off the effects of both. No one planning to stay in Absalom for more than a day should stay in the Docks, where security is low and the quality of goods is cheap. The docks are remarkably permissive of minor scuffles, with the Harbor Guard allowing fistfights to go on without interference, and ignoring knife duels or minor spells as long as no one of importance is involved and it doesn't seem likely to turn into a riot.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Lord Archych of House Dureanz, Nomarch of the Docks Council, owner of the Devil's Own Shipyard; **Goodmiss Alidane of House Candren**, Docks Council member, manager of the Sea King Shipyard; **Ptarnex Dexarion**, Second Harbormaster, owner of the Red Drake Warehouses and the OGREKIN

In addition to the constant yelling of working men shifting loads and readying ships, criers also add to the ruckus of the Docks. All day and night, the services of nearly every business in Absalom is advertised by loud youths who offer directions to any place in the city for a copper, or to their own master's businesses for free. Guides, guards, and hotspurs looking to serve as both also trawl the Docks looking for prospective employers or easy marks. However, thieves rarely pick pockets at the Docks, as Lord Gyr dislikes crimes occurring on the doorstep of trade into his city. Instead, victims that look likely to be worth the effort are followed and jumped once they pass into another district.

The Beast: Located at the Long Pier near the center of the Docks, this building appears to be a five-story stone windmill-like structure, with a long wooden winch and rope system sticking out of the top where fan-blades would be found on a true windmill. This is the Beast, the largest crane in the known world, a massive, rotating lifting device containing 16 human-operated treadwheels within its stone structure. Built 500 years ago and well-maintained since, the Beast is capable of lifting nearly 60 tons to a height of 55 feet.

The Beast is used to unload the heaviest and largest loads in Absalom, though it rarely reaches anywhere near its full capacity. The entire building can spin on its axis, and the main arm can extend out from its normal 25-foot length (though not when at maximum weight capacity). When lifting loads of 10 tons or less, it can swing them in a 360-degree arc anywhere within 100 feet of its central tower (extending its long winch arm up to four times its normal length). As a result, all the warehouses built around the Beast are multistory structures, most with more than 20 levels (some underground), and all with central shafts to allow the Beast's cables to raise and lower cargo to any floor.

The Beast is set right on the edge of the Long Pier, able to reach into ships to either side of it. Most ships that need the Beast use it only for their largest cargoes, then move farther down the pier to allow porters to carry free anything else. The crane has been a common target of city sieges, but only once, in 4499 AR during the Red Siege, has any enemy vessel ever come close to it. In that case, the Beast was handily able to defend itself, using a 1-ton block of stone as an oversized flail, and crushing the enemy ship and nearly all aboard.

Operation of the Beast is a closely guarded prerogative of the First Harbormaster, currently putting it in the demesne of Goodman Hugen of House Candren. However, running the Beast is a full-time venture requiring engineering expertise, and thus is always hired out to a professional crane master. Currently the chief engineer of the Beast is Adrielle Nepratsep of House Fyrlenn, a vital and fiery woman who drives her crew like the well-oiled machine she insists the Beast remain. Nepratsep sees herself as a baroness of the docks, and while she makes no effort to interfere in the power plays and politics that surround the heart of Absalom's economy, she also brooks no threats to herself, her men, or her machine. She guarantees the safety of every cargo while it is in the Beast's winch, and will use her considerable wealth (and the Beast's manpower) to seek retribution if anyone dares interfere with that promise.

The Grog Pit: The most notorious tavern and flophouse on the docks, the Grog Pit is a place to avoid if you possibly can. The drinks are

COST OF LIVING: DOCKS

The following costs of living are averages for the Docks:

BUILDING OWNERSHIP

Villa	60,000 gp
Townhouse	40,000 gp
Flathouse	10,000–35,000 gp
Flop	1,000–5,000 gp
Bunk	100–200 gp

BUILDING RENT (PER MONTH)

Keep	10,000 gp
Manor	1,500 gp
Villa	500 gp
Townhouse	300 gp
Flathouse	150 gp
Flop	10–50 gp
Bunk	1–4 gp

GENERAL EXPENSES

Food Costs	100% normal
Transportation Costs	75% normal
Goods Costs	100% normal



sour, the bartender sourer, and a third of the patrons are either cutpurses or con artists. An example of the unsavory nature of the place comes from the fact its famous grog is simply a collection of whatever the owner can find to pour into a central open-topped barrel, including leftovers from patron's glasses, spoiled wine bought from resellers, and rotting hallucinogenic herbs steeped in seawater. Brawls are a nightly (and sometimes hourly) occurrence, patrons rarely bother to go outside to relieve themselves, and while the virtue of most of the serving girls and busboys is up for rent, there aren't separate rooms to conclude such business.

However, the grog is cheap (any coin of any nation gets you a large, wooden mug full), no one is denied service, and the stone walls are (thankfully) fireproof. Anyone who buys a mug can sleep off its effects in the main hall for free (unless you count the price of being robbed, raped, or infected with lice), and bad behavior never gets you kicked out. Large enough groups of sailors are usually safe, and charitable priests occasionally make passes through the building to cure the worse diseases present. Despite the best efforts of many merchants and ship captains, the Grog Pit stays open because it's popular with the dock workers. When it gets closed down, no goods move on or off ships until it's reopened.

Ogrekin Hall: A stout, simple stone building, Ogrekin Hall is the home of the Ogrekin, a portage and hauling business that carries anything you need moved anywhere within the city. Owned and operated by the Second Harbormaster, Parnex Dexarion, the employees work closely with the Pilot's House and Harbormaster's Grange to get to ships first, and offer to move their goods quickly, safely, and securely. Though none of the workers have any actual giant blood in them, they are uniformly large, broad-shouldered individuals who generally come out on top in dockside brawls.

Sea King Shipyard: Dominating the only dock still functioning in the Precipice Quarter, the Sea King Shipyard is a small operation that builds a single ocean-going vessel at a time. However, the yard builds ships to a high degree of precision and sturdiness, creating vessels that can sail the most dangerous waters in the Inner Sea.

Eastgate

Eastgate is largely a residential area, with most of its residents working in other sections of the city. Often residents of Eastgate must walk for 2 or more hours to get to and from their places of business, but the lower crime rate and cheaper housing prices make the travel worthwhile for many of them. Some larger employers actually hire elephants to carry their employees to work, and there are always numerous rickshaws ready to run employees who are late to their destination for just a few copper pieces.

Because the local guard captain is also the nomarch of the district council, and has the full support of the fourth spell lord (who isn't on any council, but reports directly to Lord Gyr), politics in Eastgate tend to be no more than quiet, local matters between neighbors.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Ayunga of House Akkesh, Nomarch of the Eastgate Council, Captain of the Post Guard; **Scion Lord Haimon Hueff of House Mercerene**, retired Pathfinder venture-captain, Bronze Sword, district seat on the Low Council; **Muar Gauthfollow**, Fourth Spell Lord

Gilltown: More a small neighborhood than a building, Gilltown is at the southern edge of Eastgate, just north of the Precipice Quarter. It is a secluded section of the district, behind the rows of cheaper housing for Post Guards and poor families, in a depression not visible from any major road. The area is set directly on the bedrock of the island and is riddled with long tunnels that lead under the Precipice Quarter into the Bay of Kortos. The area, smelling strongly of stale water and rotting shellfish, is populated exclusively by a few Low Azlanti, gillmen who travel nowhere else in the city. No formal shops exist here—indeed, most buildings are temporary lean-to's or tiny, old baked-clay huts—but it is possible to buy rare items from the sullen, suspicious residents for the right price. Of course anything that might be recovered from the ship graveyard may be found, but oddly enough, items with necromantic uses are also often found for sale here. The gillmen never speak of where they find such things or what use they may have, and as long as the gillmen don't make trouble for others in Eastgate, the local authorities are happy to leave them alone.

Postern: The eastern gate of Absalom, also called simply the Postern, is the smallest of all the city's gates, and the only one kept closed and locked as a general rule. As it is only 50 feet high and 40 feet wide it lacks the splendor and size of the Outer Gate of Azlanti Keep, but shares the thick stone and balconies within the gate itself, features common to defensive buildings designed by Aroden. It is used primarily to get goods to and from Starwatch Keep, on the eastern edge of the Flotsam Graves. It was often the focus of siege attempts early in Absalom's history, before the western Sally Port was added. During the Siege of Prophets in 1298 AR, forces of the Prophet Kings actually managed to breach the gate itself, but were unable to penetrate the city. A carved stone set in the last hall within the Postern commemorates the deepest the enemy forces reached. It reads "And No Farther," which is also the motto of the Post Guards.

The Postern serves mainly as the headquarters of the Post Guard, the district guard of Eastgate. The guards

remember they are the one force that nearly failed Absalom, and train more rigorously than even the First Guard to be ready for the next siege. They are officially assigned only to guard the Postern gate in times of war, but have a history of volunteering for dangerous or suicidal missions to save the city. They also have an unusual duty schedule, with each guard given 3 months off-duty each year. Some guards use this leave to spend time with their families, but most either train to learn new skills or hire themselves out to serve as caravan guards or explorers of the island's interior.

Mercerene Manor: The largest estate in Eastgate and the ancestral manor of House Mercerene, the manor is a large fitted stone-and-brick building with wide covered courtyards, long winding garden paths, and white marble colonnades. The architecture is clearly of Avistani design, which clashes with the Tian hangings, statues, and ornamentation. As the home of Scion Lord Haimon Hueff, Mercerene Manor is famous for having unusual house guests invited to dinner parties and occasionally even for longer visits. Lord Hueff is long retired from the adventuring life, but still likes to hear details of the adventures of more active explorers, especially those associated with the Pathfinder Society. He often sends invitations to groups who return to Absalom from some dungeon delve or bush war, and wines and dines them in return for stories of their exploits. He has also been known to act as a middleman for adventurers seeking some specific skilled expert or bit of lore. Lord Hueff does this only as a courtesy, making no promises about the quality of contacts he can offer, but his long association with adventurers often allows him to put together parties for their mutual profit.

The Blue Tower: The tallest building in Eastgate, and among the tallest in the whole city, the Blue Tower is made of pieces of light blue coral fitted together to form a spiraling horn topped with a more conventional stone lighthouse. So tall is the Blue Tower that it can focus a light beyond the Flotsam Graves to mark a ship beyond Absalom's harbor.

The tower is home to the Winged Sandals, an order of dedicated messengers who worship Iomedae. The Winged Sandals claim to trace their origins back to Aroden, who they say commanded them to be ready to take messages to anywhere in the world. When magical means of communication don't work, aren't trusted, or can't be afforded, the Winged Sandals are willing to carry a script to any place for which a map exists. The cost is reasonable within the Inner Sea (1 gp per page of the message), though delivery dates are never offered. Messages to go farther, or to be given to someone with an unknown location, can cost thousands of gold pieces, but there are always those willing to pay.

COST OF LIVING: EASTGATE

The following costs of living are averages for the Eastgate District:

BUILDING OWNERSHIP

Palace	200,000 gp and up
Manor	60,000 gp and up
Villa	40,000 gp
Townhouse	30,000 gp
Flathouse	15,000–25,000 gp
Flop	3,000–7,000 gp
Bunk	250–500 gp

BUILDING RENT (PER MONTH)

Keep	7,500 gp
Manor	800 gp
Villa	300 gp
Townhouse	200 gp
Flathouse	100 gp
Flop	20–75 gp
Bunk	2–10 gp

GENERAL EXPENSES

Food Costs	100% normal
Transportation Costs	100% normal
Goods Costs	125% normal

Backhill's: From the street, Backhill's seems to be nothing more than a large thatch roof sitting a foot or so off the ground. In fact it is a popular meadhouse owned by Dege Blackhill (famous for his Underbrew, a special spiced mead particularly favored by those of Numerian blood) that is essentially a covered basement with earthen walls. The main hall features huge smoking pits that run nonstop day and night. Though lacking the clientele of establishments in the Ivy or Petals districts, Backhill's is popular with members of the Post Guard. The off-duty guards here can sometimes be hired for dangerous missions into the wilds of the island, and also occasionally hire experts themselves to assist with missions paid for by higher-class patrons.

Flotsam Graveyard

The Flotsam Graveyard is not officially a district, but neither is it within the Docks District. It is the domain of the Pilots' Guild and the Starwatch, and receives a low seat on the Grand Council. The only outsiders to stay long in this area are those invited by the masters of guild and keep, and those are few indeed. Even if a pilot of the Starwatch wished to do business, they would make any meetings elsewhere in the city. The Graveyard is the front line of Absalom's defenses, and its security is taken seriously by all who work here.

COST OF LIVING: FLOTSAM GRAVEYARD

The following costs of living are averages for the Flotsam Graveyard District:

BUILDING OWNERSHIP

Townhouse	60,000 gp
Flathouse	5,000–35,000 gp
Flop	1,000–2,500 gp
Bunk	250–5000 gp

BUILDING RENT (PER MONTH)

Villa	1,000 gp
Townhouse	200 gp
Flathouse	100 gp
Flop	20–80 gp
Bunk	1–2 gp

GENERAL EXPENSES

Food Costs	150% normal
Transportation Costs	150% normal
Goods Costs	125% normal

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Goodman Hugen of House Candren, Grand Councilman, owner of the Sea King Shipyard, First Harbormaster; **Asilia of Gyr**, Captain of the Starwatch, Commander of the warship *Hurricane Wings*; **Lemaria Kumari**, official ambassador of the Low Azlanti; **Darabele Fairwind**, Pilot Mistress, Guildmistress of Pilot House, District Seat of the Grand Council; **Oirel of House Uiry**, Commander of Fort Tempest

The Black Whale: Though most of Absalom’s prisoners are kept in the Brine in Puddles, some are so dangerous and politically sensitive they aren’t kept within the city itself. Some criminals Lord Gyr wishes to see placed under special watch, and these he personally assigns to imprisonment under his direct authority. Such reprobates and hostages are placed in the Black Whale, a floating prison in the Flotsam Graveyard. Set in the western edge of the harbor, under the watchful eyes of Fort Tempest and its siege engines, the Black Whale is actually a collection of six ships, all of which are firmly beached on a reef and bolted to it with long chains. The ships have been lashed together, and while they groan as the tides come in and out, they have not shifted for years. There are no other major ships or wrecks near the Black Whale, and the razor-sharp reefs holding them extend for many yards in all directions, at and just under the sea’s surface. As if that were not security enough, all food scraps from the Black Whale itself and the Pilot House are dumped regularly around the reef, chumming the waters so sharks and rays patrol it constantly for fresh food.

The Lord Warden of the Black Whale is the Fourth Lord of Laws, Guirden of House Gyr. Guirden, the boatswain on one of the ships Lord Gyr commanded in his youth, is a hard man with hard features. Though he has fattened considerably in the years since he took control of the prison, he remains a formidable fighter who can kill a man with his bare hands. It is unfair to call Guirden a cruel man, as he gains no enjoyment from harming others, but neither does he flinch from doing so when he sees it as his duty. Guirden believes in lashes for minor infractions of prison policy and dunking in the local seas while tied to an anchor for serious troublemakers. He never risks accidentally killing his prisoners, as anyone Lord Gyr places here is important enough to keep alive for some reason.

The Lord Warden and his guards all stay on the northernmost of the ships, which holds their quarters, the only rowboats on the Black Whale, the armory, and all storage about the prison. An adjacent ship is home to the galley and processing rooms, where prisoners are fed and readied for the other ships, as well as cabins for priority prisoners and holds where long rows of convicts remain manacled. A series of pulleys connects ropes and anchors to all six ships, and is sometimes used to tow supply ships in rough seas, with prisoners pushing a pulley axle on each ship. Normally prisoners only leave their seats to eat or for brief visits on deck while chained together.

The Black Whale is an invention of Lord Gyr, and has been in operation for only 15 years. In that time, no prisoner has ever died of anything but natural causes, and none have escaped. Recently the Lord Warden realized some of his “guests” were strong enough swimmers they might make it out of the harbor to another section of the Isle of Kortos, and he has preemptively hired gillmen guards to patrol the waters just under the ships. These water-guards have also begun training a few sharks to help track any wounded prisoners who try to swim away.

Fort Tempest: The smallest of Absalom’s strongholds, Fort Tempest was built a few centuries after Aroden’s death to secure the Western Point, after the Radiant Siege of 1619 AR proved a foe could take the point and use it to build a tower able to fling rocks into the city itself. Indeed, the fort is largely a reworked and expanded version of the tower that Kharnas the Angel-Binder built during the Radiant Siege, though a family of dwarves worked extensively to bring it as close to the standards of Azlanti Keep as possible with the resources of the time.

Fort Tempest is considered a throwaway post, where members of the Starwatch are put if they’re to be punished, though not as severely as flogging or banishment. While it’s not common, rejects and embarrassments from other guard units are also sometimes assigned here to keep them out of the way. The fort is badly supplied, since it lacks the

direct ship support of Starwatch Keep and few merchants bother to take goods through Puddles. Tempest guards often go hunting for food in the wilds rather than depend on the closer city markets. The current fort commander, Oirel of House Uiry, asked for the assignment, and has sworn to turn the laughingstock of the city's forces into an elite unit feared worldwide.

Pilot Island: In the center of the Ship Graveyard lies Pilot Island, home of the Absalom Lighthouse, Pilot House, and Harbormaster's Grange. The lighthouse is a famed piece of architecture, built under the command of Aroden and reaching an incredible 655 feet in height. Inner Sea navigators know the light from this tower can be seen from as far as 50 miles away on a clear night, and is visible no less than 25 miles even on stormy evenings and bright afternoons. It is an important navigational marker, and the ease of finding it has helped make the City at the Center of the World a successful trade port.

Ship Graveyard: The outer boundary of Absalom's harbor, and for most practical purposes Absalom's laws, is the vast Ship Graveyard. Here the wrecks of hundreds of ships and war-barges brought to do battle with Absalom over the course of thousands of years lie in an ever-shifting maze of broken masts, entangled sails, and groaning hulls. The mass is anchored on hundreds of reefs, all of which vary from being just visible at low tide to sitting below the waves at exactly the depth of a medium ship's keel. While the Grand Council could likely clear the Graveyard if it dedicated itself to the task for a few years, the barrier is actually considered a valuable defense line. Indeed, when ships become too old to be repaired, or are confiscated from smugglers and show no signs of being valuable enough to sell, they are often towed into the Graveyard and broken apart to add to the wreckage.

Starwatch Keep: The home of the Starwatch is ultimately charged with maintaining order within all Absalom (as opposed to the First Guard, who protect Absalom from outside threats and refuse to become involved in internal affairs, or the district guards, who have authority only within their districts). The Starwatch house themselves outside the city's walls as part of an ancient pact between themselves and the First Guard. The First never involve themselves in internal political struggles, and maintain the outer wall of the city (and Azlanti Keep). The Starwatch serve the Grand Council, and are often involved in internal conflicts, but can't enter the city if the First Guard refuse to open the city's eastern Postern Gate to them. This means the Starwatch must keep internal conflicts from brewing into full civil war that could threaten the city, or the First Guard will prevent them from being able to move freely.

Unlike Azlanti Keep, Starwatch was built after Aroden left the mortal world. It was specifically built after the Siege of Prophets in 1298 AR, when enemy forces nearly breached the

Postern Gate. The Grand Council of the time decided a new fortification was called for, to allow for both reinforcement of the Postern Gate and direct attacks on any ships in the harbor by means of siege weapons. In an actual time of war, the Starwatch falls under the control of the Harbormaster's Grange, and is responsible for providing siege weapon support to Pilot Island. The Watch doesn't try to move in and out of the city during sieges, instead taking refuge in Starwatch Keep to provide a viable threat to anyone trying to breach the city's walls. Those attackers who have thought to end this threat by destroying Starwatch Keep first have found themselves assaulted by troops secreted from Absalom by boat to their flank, catching them between the keep and ground troops supported by the smaller, ship-mounted siege weapons of Absalom's navy.

The current commander of Starwatch Keep is Asilia of Gyr, a native of Fangwood who fought beside Lord Gyr during his time there before he became primarch. She took to the sea with a love of sail and plank, and actually spends more time on her warship, the *Hurricane Wings*, than in Starwatch Keep. However, her loyalty to Lord Gyr and military acumen go unquestioned within Absalom, and her fierce defense of the keep during any time of unrest is one of the cornerstones of Lord Gyr's grip on the city as a whole.

Foreign Quarter

The Foreign Quarter is where most non-native residents of Absalom live, largely due to relaxed tax restrictions. In most districts, non-citizens pay more for basic city services, but in the Foreign Quarter this is not the case. Local law also extends the protections citizens of Absalom enjoy in other districts to anyone who has been a resident of the Foreign Quarter for at least 3 months. As a result, merchants who have business interests in the city, visitors from other lands who have run out of funds to buy a ticket back, foreign adventurers trying to make their fortune in the City at the Center of the World, and displaced peoples with no other home to go to often end up here. The culture in the Foreign Quarter is even more tied to other nations than elsewhere in Absalom, and some blocks have a distinct Chelish or Osirian feel to them as members of those lands gather in tight, small communities.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Torman Iates, District Nomarch, owner of the Crimson Coin; **Ysia Iron-Palm**, high priestess of Irori; **Ganfen of House Kethlin**, District Councilman, Master of Blades; **Lord Omrys of House Ahnkamen**, District Councilman

The Foreign Quarter is also home of the Irorium, a massive arena that holds numerous fighting bouts each day. While many of those that fight within are professional

COST OF LIVING: FOREIGN QUARTER

The following costs of living are averages for the Foreign Quarter:

BUILDING OWNERSHIP

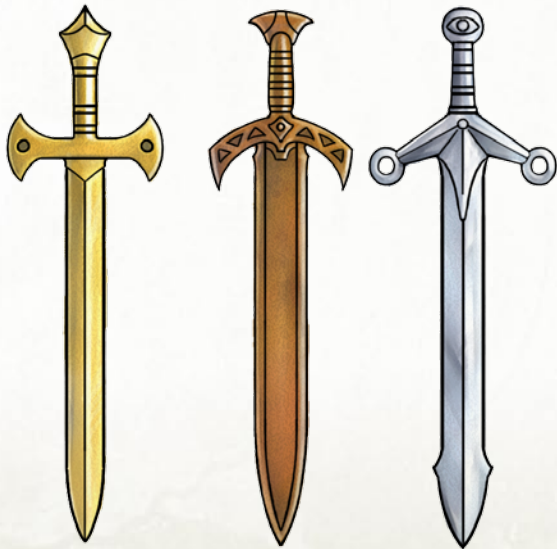
Palace	400,000 gp and up
Manor	160,00 gp and up
Villa	100,000 gp
Townhouse	60,000 gp
Flathouse	15,000–60,000 gp
Flop	4,000–16,000 gp
Bunk	200–500 gp

BUILDING RENT (PER MONTH)

Keep	8,000 gp
Manor	2,000 gp
Villa	800 gp
Townhouse	500 gp
Flathouse	200 gp
Flop	35–150 gp
Bunk	4–8 gp

GENERAL EXPENSES

Food Costs	125% normal
Transportation Costs	75% normal
Goods Costs	125% normal



SWORD PINS OF THE IRRORIUM

gladiators, there are always a few poor and dispossessed in the Foreign Quarter willing to take up a sword to earn enough coin to buy a better life, or sea passage home. The local name for such untrained neophytes is “meat.”

The Irorium: Proclaimed the largest arena in the known world, the Irorium began as a vast practice ground where adherents of Irori’s tenets of constant self-improvement tested themselves against one another. The field was placed on a large hill, so to even get to it required a rigorous climb. During the era of the City of Excess, these test bouts became a very popular spectator sport, and stands were built to house watchers, gamblers, and those studying the fighting techniques displayed. The primarch of the time grew obsessed with the bouts and commanded a vast arena be built to house them. When priests of Irori complained, the primarch offered them both an extensive temple and the opportunity to test themselves against dangerous monsters brought in from the wilderness. The followers of Irori relented, and the Irorium was built.

The building itself is a huge stone edifice, with 200-foot-high outer walls and a 10-acre central stage. Standing around the outer wall are 33 statues of famous warriors, masters of Irori’s faith and champions of the arena over the centuries, each statue 150 feet tall and facing outward. Flags can be hung from the arms and weapons of these statues, turning them into huge displays of upcoming events (though several are cracked from the terrible earthquake a decade ago). Wooden spars jut out from the top of the wall, hanging over both the inside and outside of the arena, with huge swathes of fabric run from spar to spar. This provides some shade on even the hottest days, though only the most expensive seats receive shade for more than a few hours (and even this varies by season).

The true worshipers of Irori no longer fight in the arena and have not for centuries, though even most natives don’t realize this fact. Instead there are vast vaulted chambers below the lowered gladiatorial holding pens, connected to the original Irori temple. Here the faithful of the Master of Masters still train, ignoring the far-off roar of crowds cheering some bloody blow in fights staged not for self-improvement, but for coin. The priests of Irori have discovered that if travelers and gawkers believe the barefisted warriors of the public games are the best the faith of Irori have to offer, they no longer seek out the “secret” training grounds where true perfection is sought.

The arena itself is controlled by a “Master of Blades” who runs the staff that collects fees, controls bets, approves bouts, and generally oversees the running of the arena. The current Master of Blades is Ganfen of House Kethlin, who unlike most previous masters has no fighting experience himself. What Ganfen does have is

a knack for business, and a willingness to use the lower levels of the arena to hold prisoners for wealthy houses in Absalom, in direct violation of local law. Because he approves matches Ganfen is also able to call upon the aid of a large number of gladiators to assist him in return for the promise of prime billing in future fights.

The Crimson Coin: A typical tavern in most respects—a large, open mead-room, a balcony running around a second floor with rooms for rent by the hour, and a large fire pit and long serving bar—the Crimson Coin stands out for only two reasons. First, it has a deep earthen pit in the center of the mead hall, roped off to protect drunkards from falling in too often, where anyone willing to put up a gold coin can try to last 60 seconds against the house champion in a barefisted brawl. Second, it is the only place off Irorium grounds where wagers can be placed on the outcome of major gladiatorial games. It is also a common retreat for young gladiators, especially females, hoping to catch the attention (and patronage) of the tavern's own.

The Crimson Coin is owned by Torman Iates, a canny merchant and trademaster who is also addicted to the gladiatorial games in the Irorium. Once a fighter himself, Iates is now monumentally obese (at 6 feet in height, he weighs a massive 480 pounds) and often doesn't feel like climbing the steps to his box at the arena. (Though he has a litter, carried by eight mighty half-orc warrior-women who serve as both his personal guard and his harem, his litter is too big to be carried up the steps of the arena itself). He thus pays for runners to carry news of each bout as it happens to the Crimson Coin, and has passed laws as nomarch to only allow betting on such games in his tavern. He also runs a stable of gladiatorial fighters, mostly women, who often fight in the arena. While having the same person run fights, own a betting parlor for those fights, and write laws regarding both is a clear conflict of interest, no one seems willing to bring that point up to Iates.

Pugilist's Hall: This is a squat, ugly building with no windows and open archways rather than doors. Inside are several circles of sand; each has a wooden podium with a clerk. Those wishing to fight in the Irorium, be they master, general, or lowly slave, must first come here and convince a clerk to grant them a writ of combat (after paying a small fee, of course).

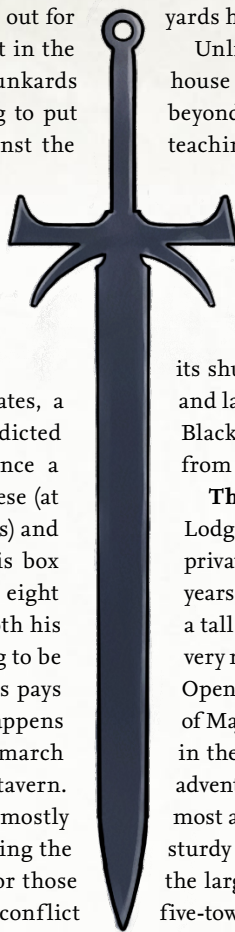
Blackblade's: One of many fighting schools in Absalom, Blackblade's is newer and more successful than most. It is run by Benkhal Blackblade, a renowned swordsman, mercenary, and one-time member of the Pathfinder Society. Retired for more than a decade, Blackblade runs a general fighting school, where anyone able to pay 5 gp

a month can take classes on combat twice a week, and personally tutors students that show special promise. Blackblade himself has trained at fighting houses in Vudra, Tian Xia, and Taldor, making him one of the most versatile warriors in the world. Blackblade's best students often spend time at the school as instructors, and sometimes take on special students themselves. Classes are always held in one of the many yards that surround the building, though private lessons take place in enclosed yards hidden from the eyes of passersby.

Unlike some fighting schools, Blackblade's does not house its common students, nor does it have any staff beyond whatever senior students aid Blackblade with teaching duties. Everything that needs to be done at the school, from cleaning to cooking to repairing the walls, is done by Blackblade and his most trusted protégés. Blackblade himself lives in a small cell within the school, and while he does sometimes house guests, once formal classes end at sundown the building shuts its doors and locks its shutters, becoming a small fortress. Drunken song and laughter can often be heard late into the night, but Blackblade himself never shows any detrimental effect from such long celebrations.

The Pathfinder Society Grand Lodge: The Grand Lodge is a massive fortress, easily one of the biggest privately owned strongholds in the city. Established 400 years ago, it contains extensive grounds surrounded by a tall stone wall with a single, huge main gate (which is very rarely closed, and is decorated with the Glyph of the Open Road), many yards and outbuildings, and a series of Major Halls. It sits in front of one of the larger plazas in the Foreign District, ringed with shops that cater to adventurers of all stripes (and charge higher prices than most anywhere else in the city). The wall encircles seven sturdy stone fortresses of different architectural periods, the largest of which—Skyreach—is an enormous, white, five-towered palace that stretches high above the others structures and the surrounding city.

The Great Hall within Skyreach is designed to allow large numbers of agents to gather in safety for assemblies and exchanges, and is comfortably appointed but lacks any unifying theme of decor. An ornate fountain magically produces ice-cold water, and an eclectic selection of chairs, rugs, divans, cushions, tables, stools, end tables, and hammocks provide numerous places to sit and spread out maps or goods. The largest table of the Great Hall is the Atlas Tableaux, a mighty table 20 feet to a side that contains an illusory map of the Inner Sea and the lands around it. As new information about regions is sent in by venture-captains, the illusory map is updated to match. The ceiling of the room is also clad in illusion, showing the sky above the city as if it were night,



COST OF LIVING: GREEN RIDGE

The following costs of living are averages for the Green Ridge District:

BUILDING OWNERSHIP

Manor	75,000 gp and up
Townhouse	20,000 gp
Flathouse	4,000–15,000 gp
Flop	1,000–5,000 gp
Bunk	100–200 gp

BUILDING RENT (PER MONTH)

Manor	1,000 gp
Villa	8000 gp
Townhouse	450 gp
Flathouse	50 gp
Flop	10–40 gp
Bunk	1–5 gp

GENERAL EXPENSES

Food Costs	75% normal
Transportation Costs	100% normal
Goods Costs	125% normal

and with astrological markers identifying constellations and the locations of other planets; the Decemvirate can dismiss or reactivate this illusion with a command word, revealing an intricate skylight that lets in the light of day. The overall look of the room is chaotic in the extreme, and it is usually empty except in the rare event of the Decemvirate calling a large meeting.

Most Pathfinders visiting Skyreach prefer the more intimate setting of a smaller lounge or meeting room, most of which have a number of comfortable chairs, a small table or two suitable for a large map, and perhaps a fireplace. These places have welcoming names such as the Den, the Pipeweed Nook, Second Home, and so on. Frequent visitors to Skyreach tend to develop a favorite room and spend most of their idle time there, and it is common for those who share interest in a particular lounge to become friends or go on missions together. Some Pathfinders leave notices in these rooms or in the Great Hall announcing exotic or magical goods for sale or trade and plans for new expeditions arranged by some venture-captain.

Off the main chamber of the Great Hall are the Lodge Offices, where Janiff Ivulxtin administers the business of running the central command of a world-spanning collection of independent agents. A Garundi venture-captain with many adventures under his belt, Janiff oversees the defense, maintenance, and administration of the Grand Lodge. He ensures that tariffs offered by

agents are safely collected and put away, that arguments between agents are settled quickly and safely, and that visitors understand that the lodge's staff works for the Decemvirate, not individual agents.

Several other halls within Skyreach are named after specific countries (Osirion Hall, Cheliar Hall, and so on), as well as many rooms named after historical figures (the Room of the Undying Pharaoh), professions (the Mage Room), or even just numbers (Room 17). Use of any of the rooms in these halls is available only by arrangement with Janiff, and most Pathfinders never get to see all of the rooms—some reputedly haven't been opened in years. He signs them out for short private meetings fairly often, but experienced venture-captains can sometimes rent one for a number of days to use as a base of operations in Absalom for an entire Pathfinder team. The decor within these halls does not always match the countries they are named for, and the halls are sometimes unavailable for any use without explanation of advance notice. Though Janiff never denies or confirms any speculation about the halls, many scholars look for clues to the identities of the Decemvirate by examining the decor and times of availability within the halls. The other six fortresses of the Grand Lodge have a wide range of uses but are generally off-limits to visitors without the explicit permission of Janiff or one of the many resident Pathfinders who live and work there, conducting research projects and other experiments in their many specialized libraries and collections.

Like any Pathfinder lodge, the Grand Lodge has housing for itinerant Pathfinders on legitimate business, which is offered at no cost and with no oversight of what each agent's business may be. Located in rickety wooden outer buildings of the facility, these rooms are each little more than a simple cell with a cot, a ledge to serve as a writing desk, and a stool. Privies and bathing facilities are public affairs, and agents are expected to behave themselves within them regardless of personal ideology or cultural norms. Unlike most lodges, the Grand Lodge offers free food to lodgers, but it is always a simple gruel of unflavored grains with a few pieces of salted fish—no one eats it unless bankrupt or in too great a hurry to find better options. Official guests of the lodge, ranging from foreign dignitaries to those agents summoned by order of the Decemvirate, are placed in much nicer quarters.

There are smaller stalls and outbuildings, located between the main halls and the outer perimeter of the Grand Lodge's expanse. In these are common meeting rooms, storage space, craft shops, roasting pits, small dormitories, stables, and a menagerie of foreign beasts, though many outbuildings are off-limits to visitors. Most of these are arranged around small squares and yards, allowing them to be used as long-term camps for large groups that gain Janiff's permission to stay on the Lodge's

grounds for weeks or even months at a time. One of these yards includes a large covered area, which contains an earthen circle ringed with a thick anchor-rope. This is the Lodge's sparring ring, which is used for training and friendly bouts between agents. The ring is a common place for larger gatherings of agents, featuring drinking, gambling, and challenges to settle disagreements. Near the back of the compound is the doorless, windowless Repository, where 66 geas-compelled convicted criminals transcribe approved field reports to create the latest editions of the *Pathfinder Chronicles* for distribution. Under the Grand Lodge is a series of tunnels and rooms called the Vaults. The Society uses the Vaults to store things for long periods of time, especially dangerous things they'd like the rest of the world to forget about.

It's important to realize that while the Pathfinder Society is well-accepted as part of Absalom, they are not seen as local champions or strong supporters of the city itself. The Grand Lodge is located in the Foreign Quarter for a reason—the Pathfinder Society is a collection of individuals from a dozen nations, not an arm of Absalom's native culture. Though the Grand Lodge is a major stronghold, neither its guards (normally Pathfinder agents and initiates working to pay for use of some facility) nor the Decemvirate takes any noteworthy direct action outside its walls. Though individual venture-captains run missions all over the city, the Decemvirate does not try to influence local politics in either the Foreign Quarter or the city as a whole. Indeed, while the Society has occasionally moved itself to neutralize threats to Absalom, the actions of venture-captains are sometimes at cross-purposes.

As long as the Society does not make any move against the city, and seems as interested in foreign adventures as local problems, the Grand Council of Absalom is happy to leave the Pathfinders alone, and trusts the Decemvirate will return the favor.

Green Ridge

Green Ridge is one of the smaller, quieter communities in Absalom. It is lightly populated and heavily plant-laden, with many small parks, extensive gardens, open-earth squares, and numerous copses of trees scattered throughout the district. There are even numerous small farms, holdovers from the many sieges the city has suffered when growing food seemed a viable use of space. The pace of life is slower in Green Ridge, and the relentless pursuit of money or political advantage much rarer. Indeed, natives from other sections of the city often refer to anyone seen as lazy or unambitious as a "ridger." This rarely bothers residents of Green Ridge, who are much more interested in seeking harmony with their neighbors and the Isle of Kortos itself than acquiring material wealth and power.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

The Horned Man, Lord of the Circle of Stones, Shaman of the Shaded (Green Ridge District Council), master druid; **Mircen Kingsgate**, Commander of the Eagle Garrison; **Evigail of House Wycomb**, District Seat of the Grand Council, Mistress of the Children of Spring; **Parsin Guile**, Shaded Councilmember, Guildmaster of the Woodcutters

Evergreen Park: The largest park in Absalom, Evergreen Park is locked in an eternal state of spring. Its flowers are always in bloom, its grass is always green and growing, and its ponds never freeze over. The park is replete with secluded paths, small vending stands for drinks and light foods, mid-sized stages, copses of fruit-bearing trees, and lush grassy hills with small stone tables. In addition to visitors from all over the city, this park is the place where Evigail of House Wycomb is most likely to be found, as the green-haired priestess rarely goes anywhere else (and frequently misses District Council meetings as a result).

Her near-constant presence is explained by the fact that the park is maintained by her cult, the Children of Spring, a priestly order of Gozreh dedicated to maintaining the endless growth cycle of the plants within. Though his worship is not common in Absalom (being restricted mostly to this one small cult), the locals accept them because they care for the park. They maintain a small open-air shrine to Gozreh near the center of the park by its largest pool, and occasionally nervous sailors come here to make a quick offering.

Grand Holt: The Grand Holt is a massive fig tree, its main trunk being more than 20 feet in diameter, that supposedly predates the city of Absalom. According to myth, when Aroden rested the first day after raising the Isle of Kortos, he took shade and nourishment from the only plant to arise with the island, the Grand Holt. It has never been pruned, and when it grows into homes or streets, the Grand Council pays to have the homes moved and new roads built. The Grand Holt is now a collection of 17 distinct trunks, intertwined and twisting about one another, with a floor of solid root that covers an area the size of a city block.

However, not even mythic figures are allowed to sit idle in Absalom, and the Grand Holt serves as home to dozens of residents. It is controlled by the Circle of Stones, a small druidic order dedicated to this single tree, and anyone proving respect for nature and the Holt itself may be allowed to stay within it. The tree is never cut, but its twisting trunks and branches have been encouraged to grow into various rough, rounded rooms and corridors. HOLLOWED BRANCHES bring water to the residents, and cunning chutes allow the tree to have waste removal and fertilizer as a single function. Many visiting worshipers of

the forces of nature will stay nowhere else when visiting the city, and it has been declared a holy site by numerous Mwangi spirit-talkers and Vudrani wise-women.

Though there is no formal arrangement for it, older residents of the Grand Holt often sit on its outer roots and teach any youngster who wishes to listen about the forces of the woods and nature, and how they interact.

The Watchtower: The only wall tower located on the section of city wall along Green Ridge, the Watchtower is the tallest tower in the city's defenses, rising higher than the Blue Tower in Eastgate and rivaling the Lighthouse of Pilot Island. From its top deck, it is possible to see almost all of Absalom, as well as the Cairnlands and more distant woodlands of the Isle of Kortos. The Watchtower serves two functions. First, it is always manned by a fire watch, scanning night and day for any serious signs of smoke within or near the city. Second, it is the headquarters of the Eagle Garrison, who serve as both the district guard of Green Ridge and, in times of war, a scouting force for the First Guard.

The Eagle Garrison is the smallest of the paid district guards (the Muckruckers may be fewer in number, but because they don't draw pay no one bothers to keep an exact count of them), and they are among the few that have normal duties both inside and outside the city. The Eagles run regular patrols along the main paths near Absalom, and run periodic patrols into the nearby wilderness areas. These patrols are not designed to enforce laws; indeed, if they come across a major legal infraction they are more likely to report it than try to stop it, but they serve an important function nonetheless. Absalom has learned over the centuries that major sieges rarely happen without warning, and it is these kind of large-scale problems the Eagles are to look for. They report everything from patrols of centaurs to merchant caravans, lone wanderers, bands of adventurers, and rogue slaver camps, but have no mandate to oppose anything they come across. While some Eagle officers take action when they see a reasonable chance of success in stopping a crime, their orders are to ensure whatever they see is reported back to the First Watch.

Watercleft: Against the cliff face upon which the Petals District sits is Watercleft, a public speaking space and where the Shaded (the Green Ridge District Council) holds all its meetings, making it the only council to hold all meetings publicly. The area is named for a spout of clear, pure water that bursts from the side of the cliff, an underground freshwater stream that pours into an aqueduct designed for it. Access to the stream is free, and it's not unusual for bathers, water-carriers, and frolicking natives and visitors to all mingle, making the area the social center of Green Ridge. From the open space, the stream is carried by channels into Evergreen Park, and from there into smaller private waterways throughout the district. Though there

are numerous grassy squares in Green Ridge, most festivals, market days, and gatherings occur at Watercleft, as much out of tradition as for any other reason.

Ivy District

The heart of art, culture, and performance in Absalom, the Ivy District is among the most expensive places to live in the city, which is ironic because so many of its residents are struggling artists with little spare coin. It is also one of the more popular destinations for visitors to the city, and as long as it brings in foreigners with money to spend, the Grand Council is content to allow the district council to run the area with little interference. As a result, the district's watch has a fairly permissive view of what is allowed in the area, and very little draws its ire unless it is unpleasant enough to risk driving off customers. As a direct result of this policy, a group of enforcers under the leadership of a paladin of Abadar has begun patrolling the streets, led by Bor Dralfo. This has led to tension between Nomarch Alain Always and Councilwoman Jostlin Ferqyr, but as yet that tension has not resulted in direct conflict.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Alain Always, District Nomarch, Guildmaster of the Street Performers and Actors' Guild; **Bor Dralfo**, leader of the Brotherhood of Abadar; **Jostlin Ferqyr**, District Councilwoman, Keeper of the Vault of Abadar; **Eleena Woodsong**, High Priestess of the Shrine of Shelyn; **Zharep Apul**, Captain of the District Watch

Perhaps because of its focus on beauty and grace, or as a natural result of having a large open-air park, the Ivy District has a much higher concentration of elves and half-elves than any other district in the city. Those elves who live here are almost always fully integrated natives of Absalom, with no particular ties to Kyonin or the politics of elves in other lands. Even so, their aesthetic often draws visiting elves to the Ivy District in short order, and many elven traders and emissaries refuse to do business anywhere else in Absalom.

Additional information about the Ivy District can be found in the Pathfinder Module *U1: Gallery of Evil*. Locations covered in more detail in that book include Flower Street Market, Ivy District Park, the Ivy Playhouse, Norgorber's Knot, the Perfumer's Conglomerate, the Shrine of Shelyn, and the Union of Carpenters, Stonemasons, and Metalworkers.

Flower Street Market: This is a lively open market, specializing in fruits, flowers, fine clothes, and objects of art. It is also a popular venue for people who don't require a street performer's license to ply their trade, including fortune tellers and paid courtesans.

Ivy District Park: One of the finest parks in Absalom, the Ivy District Park has an extensive topiary menagerie at its center. Rumor claims that these topiary animals occasionally come to life as agents of one or more of the gods of nature to punish those who would befool the park.

The Ivy Playhouse: Headquarters of the Street Performers and Actors' Guild, the playhouse serves as both Nomarch Alain Always's home and a theater famous for some of the finest stage performances in Absalom—as well as some of the most scandalously risqué.

Norgorber's Knot: This small potion shop also serves as the front for a group of assassins.

Perfumer's Conglomerate: A shop of scent and flowers run by druids and alchemists, the Perfumer's Conglomerate is secretly a supporter of the Red Mantis assassins.

Shrine of Shelyn: This circle of oaks in Ivy District Park serves as a monument and place of worship for Shelyn, goddess of love and beauty. It is also a popular spot to relax and seek artistic inspiration.

Union of Carpenters, Stonemasons, and Metalworkers: This is both a shop where the finest crafters in Absalom ply their trade and a training hall where those skills can be learned by those willing to undergo lengthy apprenticeships.

Vault of Abadar: A building that seems ready to topple over at any moment, but is in truth solidly built and sturdy, the Vault serves as both a place of worship for Abadar and a private bank and secure holding facility for those who want to borrow, loan, or leave valuables without involving the state mint of Absalom. Run by Jostlin Ferqyr, the Vault often funds both young merchants with new trade ideas and new artist groups seeking to expand their performances. The Vault almost always makes a profit on such ventures.

Alyssia's: A renowned teahouse and art galley, run by the extremely graceful Alyssia of House Kyonin. Alyssia's is a very popular retreat for elves who visit Absalom, as the decor and cuisine are all strongly influenced by her elven heritage. However, Alyssia does not discriminate, and does not welcome patrons who cause trouble by making comments about other customers. While she is happy to allow business of all kinds to be discussed at her secluded tables, she is only more than happy to call either the Watch or the Brotherhood of Abadar to roust anyone threatening to cause trouble in her establishment.

The Wandering Monster: The Wandering Monster is officially not a stage or a theater, but rather a small, independent park. Of course the "park" has seats in a natural amphitheater, all facing a lowered section of

short-cropped grass. However, since it does not officially count as a stage, anyone can perform here without bothering with a Performers' Guild writ or membership in the Street Performers and Actors' Guild. It is thus a popular venue for itinerant performers, often of bawdy material such as ribald songs, limericks, and puppet shows of questionable character. A few "regular" troupes and acts make appearances on set nights.

In years past, the District Watch often harassed performers here in an attempt to force them to join Alain Always's guild. However, in recent months the Brotherhood of Abadar has kept at least one member here at all times to ensure that no one is forced out unless he violates some law. Even so, the name of anyone giving a show here generally gets back to Always, and generally ensures the performer won't receive guild approval if he applies for it.

White Grotto: The premier bardic school in Absalom, and one of the most revered of the Inner Sea, the White Grotto is a large manor with many outbuildings and secluded rock gardens, with a winding creek traveling through the grounds. An amphitheater that can seat a few hundred patrons sits next to the Grotto for the school's use, but is not officially part of the grounds. Though not controlled by any guild, the Grotto pays hefty fees to the District Council and a few of the shops and playhouses in the Ivy District to ensure their students are not hassled or pressured to join other organizations. Upon graduating, students must deal with the normal difficulties of earning a living, but while enrolled in the Grotto they are allowed to practice their student trade without worrying about political repercussions.

Students are required to wear simple tunics to denote their station within the school. Apprentices wear green (and are often called "greens" by natives of Absalom), journeymen blue, and masters black. Tradition dictates that all other clothing be white, at least during performances, but no rules exist regarding anything but the tunic. (Indeed, some wear the tunic by itself, belted and treated as a short dress.) Most students also carry a white cloth satchel bearing the tools of their trade, be those books of music, instruments, brushes and pigments, or flasks of lemon tea to keep their voices crisp. Their distinctive dress allows the students to sing and otherwise perform without interference by any guild, but it also ensures tavern-keepers and patrons know to pay only "apprentice" rates, usually a few copper pieces a night. Of course better students can command higher prices, but it is always a fraction of what a guild performer commands.



The school is broken into five conservatories, each dedicated to one branch of the performing arts. They are Voice (which includes singing, acting, and spoken performances such as epic poems), Drum (including all percussion, as well as the basics of cadence, timing, and rhythm), String (including all stringed instruments and the basics of orchestration), Pipe (including all wind instruments), and Script (which includes both composition of music and the written word, as well as all visual mediums from sculpture to painting). The Master of Voice, Rosvierre Ibanc, is also the grand master of the Grotto. An older human nearing the end of his career, Master Ibanc does his best to avoid confrontation and politics, but supports his students absolutely.

The other masters are the sturdy dwarf Durga Den (Drum), the half-elven Etrenne Rylwynn (Strings), the dashing fencer Jaren of House Wycomb (Pipe), and enigmatic Tia Yi Gan (Script). Only Durga Den has been at the Grotto longer than Master Ibanc, and the stolid percussionist shows no interest in doing anything but mastering his own war-drum skills, and teaching students only when they dare to point out they are waiting on him. The other instructors all seem to take real pleasure in training a new generation of artists and have very few interactions outside the Grotto. However, rumors constantly swirl around the staff, driven at least in part by the natural imagination of a few dozen bardic students. Hearsay claims that Master Ibanc traveled with Lord Gyr, that Jaren spent a stint as a pirate (which is where he learned his fencing skills), and that Tia Yi Gan cannot return to her home for fear of being killed for dishonoring her family. Of course students have also claimed that Etrenne is secretly a silver dragon, so their imagination clearly knows no bounds.

Merchants' Quarter

Though a great deal of buying and selling goes on in the Coins and the Docks, real business takes place in the Merchants' Quarter. It is here that the merchant caravans of half the world are bought and sold before they ever set out from their homelands, the price of mead is set throughout the Inner Sea, and fortunes that would make kings weep are made and lost every day.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Lady Nymara of House Damaq, Nomarch of the Merchant's Council, Supporting Patron of the Third Balcony of the Grand Dance Hall of Kortos; **Lord Riodos of House Morilla**, Guildmaster of the Guild of Spears, Trademaster; **Anken the Cutter**, Master of the Bloody Barbers Thieves' Guild

Clockwork Cathedral: The origins of the Clockwork Cathedral are not well understood, though natives now

take it for granted. Less than a century ago, a tall, gaunt, cloaked figure called the Assembler arrived on an iron-hulled ship from the south. The pilot who steered the iron ship through the ship graveyard reportedly claimed no creature of flesh was to be found on board. The Assembler bought a ruined building that had once been a temple to Asmodeus, destroyed by a mysterious fire months before. Throughout the night of the Assembler's arrival, neighbors reported sounds of shattering stone, grinding metal, and low, rumbling thunder. By the next morning, the old temple was gone. In its place was the Assembler's iron ship, though no member of the Harbormaster's Grange could say how it got from the dock to the center of the city. For the next month, the sounds continued every night, and the iron ship was larger and more complex every morning. When the sounds stopped, the Clockwork Cathedral had claimed every inch of land the Assembler had purchased.

The Clockwork Cathedral is the newest and most specialized of Absalom's Great Schools. It is the premier center of learning focusing on mechanics and constructs, and no one outside of Alkenstar can claim better knowledge of these subjects. An imposing building of heavy iron plates, interlocking gears, gothic arches, and sliding joints, the single-building academy has oft been compared to a mechanical centipede with a clock tower on its back. The long cathedral has numerous segments in its "hall," each buttressed by several wrought-iron sliding braces. A giant gear sits between each segment, interlocked with smaller cogs and levers throughout the cathedral. The movement of these gears within each segment periodically cuts off a number of rooms, all driven by the central clock tower. Those who study within its metal halls must learn to time the movements of these gears, as there is no warning when they will shift, sometimes blocking off rooms for days at a time.

Basic classes are often taught by senior students and generally not on school grounds. Anyone who wishes to apply for such classes may do so, but no one knows how the governing body of the cathedral (called the Ruling Escarpment) decides what students to take on. Each applicant receives a letter, delivered by a small construct, telling them if they have been rejected or accepted, and if accepted the amount of their tuition. These acceptances and the prices charged appear to be random, and no bargaining or renegotiation is allowed.

The cathedral has no living maintenance staff, with all repairs, errands, cleaning, and (when needed) security provided by short, rotund constructs called "Thumpers" (due to their less-than-silent walking style). Thumpers carry the messages that offer terms to new instructors, deliver monthly salaries, and act as go-betweens for the teaching faculty to the Escarpment, the never-seen

ruling council of the cathedral. No living being is ever allowed to speak directly to the Escarpment (at least that they'll admit to), and rumors about the nature of the cathedral's ultimate authority abound. Some students claim to be followed at random by pole-thin robed figures during their tenure at the school, leading to suggestions the Assembler remains in control of his construction. Others claim the Assembler was himself a construct, and the whole cathedral is a vast, uncaring machine. What is known is that, in his youth, Lord Gyr, like the primarch before him, went to the cathedral to demand answers. What he was told is unknown, but the first spell lord has supported the Clockwork Cathedral ever since.

Students often find the cathedral uncomfortable. There are numerous classrooms, laboratories, study spaces, and workshops, but nothing designed for the comfort of living students. No dorm rooms are found within the iron walls, nor any privies, cafeterias, lounges, or even padded chairs. Contrary to public perception, the interior of the cathedral is not furnished entirely in metal, but it is austere and spartan in its accouterments. Students can take classes and do coursework within the cathedral, but all their other needs must be seen to on their own time and with their own resources.

Any student who has completed at least a basic course may apply for an advanced class. Students are accepted on a probationary basis, and told only where the class meets. Such meeting spaces are always in rooms that only rarely have open entrances; most of the time, they are blocked by the cathedral's massive gears. To remove their probationary status, students must analyze the gears around the classroom and determine when the interlocking movements will grant access. Anyone who misses the first class is banned from advanced courses for one year. Once students have completed at least one advanced class, they often receive an invitation from the Ruling Escarpment to teach an introductory course to junior students, though once again the timing and terms of such an offer seem random to outside observers.

Because there is so little guidance from the faculty of the school, students themselves often form loose organizations, called cognates, with colorful names. These groups range from 3–12 advanced students and as many as 70 junior students. They are part study group, part commune, and part mercenary company, often living together in a rented villa, warehouse, beached ship, basement space, or even an unused section of the city sewer. Each cognate tends to specialize in a particular area of study, such as crossbows, traps, spring-powered toys, siege weapons, plumbing, wheels and axles, the study of falling and flight, and so on. At least one has developed a series of expensive automata with a tiny golem as the

controlling agent in a spring-powered chassis, though the utility and durability of these things still leave much to be desired. For years, the dwarf-founded Stirgeworks was the best regarded cognate, specializing in variant crossbows. In recent years, the more eclectic Brass Carrots have shown fast-growing popularity with their handheld gliders, and have been working with the Mithral Madmen (who create wind-up animal toys) on a design for a spring-powered bird automaton that can actually fly short distances.

Javelin Gallery: The Javelin Gallery is an old manor, dating back to the second millennium of Absalom, which has been converted to serve as both a weapons emporium and military compound. In both functions it is the domain of the Guild of Spears, who serve as the paid district guard of the Merchants' Quarter and operate the largest weapon-forges and arms imports in Absalom. Most of the Gallery's owners are retired guard members, though many actually served in different districts, and some even in the First Guard. As a result, the Gallery is among the most secure shops in Absalom, with off-duty guards frequently found lounging about, and the smiths themselves experienced veterans of a dozen battles.

In addition to crafting masterwork weapons and making specialty orders, the Gallery has a long-standing arrangement with both the College of Mysteries and several Clockwork Cathedral cognates to imbue their weapons with whatever mechanic or magical augmentations their clients desire. The Gallery does not deal with the Arcanamirium, which they see as competition. The Gallery is also in a more friendly competition with the Union of Carpenters, Stonemasons, and Metalworkers in the Ivy District. However, the Gallery refuses to train new smiths, using only journeyman-class crafters for even its lowest positions, directing those who wish to learn to the appropriate guild. This arrangement has worked well for both businesses, and forged a friendly bond between them despite their competition.

The Taurean Embassy: The odd circumstances that led to the existence of the Taurean Embassy are well known in Absalom, and fodder for numerous local songs, poetry, and the occasional alley-play. Though often the source of jokes and satire in the human-controlled City at the Center of the World, the master of the Taurean Embassy is also a beloved part of the City's local color.

The embassy is owned and operated by Nuar Spiritskin, more commonly known as the Minotaur Prince of Absalom. An albino minotaur of only human stature, Nuar was born 3 decades ago to a tribe in the mountains at the center of the island. Small and weak, he survived only because his tribe feared killing him would anger their patron-demon, who might have sent him as a messenger. As he grew, Nuar proved to be quicker-witted than his kinfolk, and despite lacking any true power he began to

command respect as a spirit-talker. When he pressed for command of his tribe, the chieftain's son beat him nearly to death and drove him out of the mountains.

Nuar made his way to Absalom and took work as a porter (for even a weak minotaur makes a good porter) and sometimes did shows at Aysepir's Astounded Abyss. One night he was resting within the Grog Pit and came across a man being beaten by foreign sailors. Nuar thought the man looked rich enough to offer a reward, and saved him. In fact, the man turned out to be Lord Gyr himself, wandering without guards to get a "true feel" for the city. Lord Gyr offered Nuar a reward, and the albino asked to be acknowledged as Prince of Minotaurs. Lord Gyr agreed, and the Grand Council gave Nuar the rights and privileges of any other foreign monarch—which, honestly, don't amount to much.

However, such entitlements do include the right to grant merchant licenses, the right to appear before the Grand Council, the same trade breaks as a trademaster, and the right to only be judged by the First Lady of Laws herself. As a result, Nuar has become something of a middleman in Absalom, using his title to pave the way in deals and placing his stamp on them to reduce tax costs and Grand Council interference. His influence is minor, and only Lord Gyr's continued support of the fiction that Nuar is a visiting monarch makes it possible at all, but the Minotaur Prince has likely done enough business to earn the title of trademaster aside from his royal privilege.

Ultimately, Nuar seeks to become ruler of the island's minotaurs in fact as well as in name. Though the tribes continue to rebuff him, the prince occasionally sends them gifts and offers of fealty (through well-paid, well-armed mercenary couriers), and has even been known to solve problems for minotaur tribes without their ever requesting it. He also continues to make treaties in the name of the minotaurs with trade groups and even foreign powers. While these agreements are meaningless now, should Nuar ever actually take power, they could shape the nature of diplomacy in the interior of the island for decades.

The Grand Dance Hall of Kortos: An ornate, round building with dozens of entrances at ground level and a few on the roof, this is officially simply a theater in-the-round for Vudrani-style dancing troupes to take the central stage of the vast, unbroken interior space. There they showcase everything from belly-gyrating silk dances

to mounted camel ballet to saber-tossing gymnastics. While many of the performers are true-blooded ethnic Vudrani, even more are Absalom natives who have studied at the Dance Hall their entire lives to perfect the eastern arts. Endowed by a rich rajah centuries ago, the Dance Hall has no need to charge for admission to its lowest levels, and instead allows in anyone who is well dressed and well behaved. However, those who wish to be allowed into the three tiers of upper balconies must become patrons, which has a hefty annual fee (the greater the fee, the more guests they may take with them). As a result, minor nobles and major merchants, along with their entourages, often visit the Dance Hall on a daily basis, with the height of their stay saying much about their financial and social status.

And there, they do business.

With chairs and tables surrounding the theater, and four tiers of balconies running around the whole building, the Dance Hall has become a major exchange for merchants, investors, majordomos, and crafters. Long before a caravan of ships sails across the Inner Sea, chances are its goods are discussed, bought, sold, and traded at the Dance Hall. The price of everything available along the Inner Sea, from slaves to swords to wine, is influenced by how many people have the commodities offered here, and how many want to buy them. Many merchants call the building the Hall at the Center of the World.

The level of business you wish to conduct is directly related to the level of balcony you can reach. People restricted to the lower level have access only to small caravan lists and small amounts of money. While this is a fine place to earn work as a guard or for buying a shipment of moonfruit from Osirion, the prices paid and opportunities available are only slightly better than can be found on the Docks or in the Coins, and access to them requires a fine level of dress and the ability to quietly haggle while a delicate dance is performed on stage. Those who dwell in the lowest level do so in the hopes of gaining an invitation to a higher balcony, for the farther a merchant or venture leader gets from the ground floor, the more opportunities appear, and the greater the profit for each gold piece risked. Patrons who are allowed at the upper levels may each issue a number of invitations per day, and each invitation is good for a whole day for that balcony and any below it. Thus doing anything to catch the attention or favor of a patron on a higher balcony



immediately opens up a vista of traders looking for buyers, factors seeking to hire guards and experts, and wealthy family scions casually talking about how the price of white onions will double in the next week.

The majordomo of the Grand Dance Hall is Lord Raijit Punjeer, a master dancer in his youth who now trains and choreographs the best dancers in Absalom. He is also a canny merchant in his own right and plays a careful game of controlling who has access to the balcony tiers without ever angering enough senior patrons that they take their business elsewhere. The Dance Hall is home to business out of tradition and convenience, not law or practicality, and Lord Punjeer walks a careful line between maintaining absolute control over access to the balconies and making sure the wealthiest and most powerful patrons remain pleased with their return on time spent here. He is not above encouraging the most graceful and popular of his dancers to spend quality time with the balcony patrons, and often dancers' careers are determined by how much they make Punjeer's life easier as much as their true talent.

The Second Labyrinth: The Labyrinth of Absalom is a mythical subterranean complex that supposedly Aroden had to brave to defeat a creature that once owned the Isle of Kortos. The Second Labyrinth is a high-end tavern, gambling house, and brothel. Owned by House Tevineg, it is also a major source of profit for the House, and a place Chelish spies and sympathizers can gather in secrecy and receive favored treatment. The games within are scrupulously fair, with the house possessing no edge, but a hefty 100 gp entry fee (waived for "friends of the house") to walk through the door, and extremely expensive food, drink, and paid companions ensure the Second Labyrinth sees a tidy profit. It is most famous for its unique betting card game, Maze, and its least expensive courtesan, the Sculptress.

Maze is a complex card game, and the Second Labyrinth holds tournaments every quarter for those who believe they have mastered it. In Maze, three to six players are dealt hands of two cards. Additional cards (equal to four per player in the round) are dealt face down. Players then bet secret amounts, which are revealed to determine the order of play (and then go into the pot). In order, each player looks at a single card. Once he looks at a card, he places coins atop it, leaving it face down. No two players may look at the same card. Then, each player reveals one of their facedown cards, after which each player either looks at a new card (and marks it with coins) or matches the coins on another player's card. This process is repeated, then each player has one last chance to place coins on cards (either cards no one has looked at, or matching coins on a card someone has seen), then all cards are revealed. The player with the best five-card combination, using

his three or four cards with coins and two dealt cards, wins all bet money. Any card used in a winning hand is discarded, but all other cards are simply reshuffled and placed on the board (along with whatever replacement cards are needed) for the next hand.

The Sculptress is a great beauty who always wears a full head-veil. Beneath it, her hair can be seen to writhe and heard to hiss. Though she is the least expensive of all the high-priced courtesans in the Second Labyrinth, the management requires any who wish her company to sign a document swearing they hold the Labyrinth blameless for any ill to befall them within the establishment. Even so, the Sculptress is rarely unattended for an evening, and numerous poems and songs ring through Absalom speaking of the unrivaled skill with which she entertains patrons of any race, gender, or nationality.

The Petal District

This elevated district is built upon a rise of land called Aroden's Hill. It is by far the wealthiest district in the city and the home to the most powerful noble families. Nearly every street has a brick-framed median filled with beautiful flower gardens, which gives the district its name. The paved public streets, gated private paths, and many mansions and palaces indicate money and power to anyone who sees this place.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Urkon of House Ormuz, Nomarch of the Conclave of Flowers (Petal District Council); **Elissa the Fair**, Guildmistress of the League of Courtesans, owner of the Silken Court; **Brythen Blood**, High Curator of the College of Mysteries, District Seat on the Grand Council, retired Second Spell Lord; **Ferret ap Morilla**, Captain of the Lotus Guard

The Silken Court: An unassuming and well-maintained villa, the only indication that the Silken Court is anything but the residence of a modest merchant is the constant presence of a hotspur or two on its front steps. Though apparently just waiting for a friend, these well-dressed duelists are security for the building, and alert for any sign of trouble. Such measures are called for because the Silken Court is the most expensive brothel in Absalom. Owned by Elissa the Fair, the court promises the ability to meet any desire, for any patron, if the price is right. In addition to its courtesans, the Silken Court offers the finest wines and drugs, hot baths of purified water or heated mud, masseurs brought from Tian Xia, and a well-appointed lounge where the very rich can relax in the presence of beautiful, young company and have their every need attended to.

In addition to the carnal skills one would expect from the employees of such a place, the courtesans here are

masters of conversation, parlor games, gourmet cooking, and talking quietly to those who find their hearts troubled. Indeed, Lord Gyr himself is rumored to come here once a season, to have the weight of the primarch's chain lifted from his neck for a few hours and allow Elissa herself to soothe his fevered brow.

While anything can be arranged for the right price, patrons who exceed the terms of their time in the Court are not only unwelcome, but are likely to be arrested by off-duty members of the Lotus Guard. A few senior officers are always lounging within the building, and are as quick as the hotspurs outside to draw a blade to protect the building or those who work there.

College of Mysteries: Much smaller than the Arcanamirium, the College of Mysteries is the oldest school of magic in Absalom, dating itself back to the first pilgrims invited to the Isle of Kortos by Aroden. It was originally known as the House of Secrets, and was a clandestine society dedicated to sharing secrets and techniques of magic from the different cultures that made up the early citizens of Absalom. Because many of the nations that made up Absalom's heritage believed sharing their cultural styles of magic, architecture, and even philosophy was a crime, the original House of Secrets restricted itself to advanced practitioners who could defend themselves from inevitable assassination attempts. These powerful individuals were, in general, the richer and more successful members of Absalom who could afford to buy whatever materials their new skills required and who sought to establish ongoing dynasties in the new nation of Absalom.

After the Arclords of Nex created the Arcanamirium, the Assembly of Enigmas, the ruling board of the House of Secrets, decided a response was required. Their answer was a massive single structure, a giant dome of arcane-fused gemstones and glass called the Lens in which the brightest, most talented, and most connected young progeny of Absalom's elite would be taught the mysteries of the world. Often referred to as the Crystal Ball and the Hall of Diamond, the Lens is the focal point of the College of Mysteries, and it is where the Assembly of Enigmas still holds classes. Students must either be direct offspring of students from earlier generations or show a strong natural talent for one of the courses of study offered by the school. Tuition fees are extremely high (though sometimes waived by the Assembly) and do not include living costs, materials, or the bribes most students pay to be invited to social

events held throughout the Petal District. As a result, wealth is often more important than skill in ensuring a student complete a course of mysteries at the college.

Instructors are seen less as teachers and more as custodians for a heritage of hidden knowledge. Called curators, they are well paid and well regarded in Absalom society, but must take loyalty oaths to the Assembly of Enigmas that last long past their tenures. Most curators are themselves graduates of one or more courses of mysteries at the college, which sometimes leads to claims by outsiders that the institution that once brought in new knowledge from across the Inner Sea has become an insular and incestuous pit of self-congratulation. While innovation is certainly allowed, any new idea or theory must be approved by the Assembly before it can be taught to students.

The college covers a variety of subjects, all drawn from once-secret cultural techniques and refined by 4 millennia of curators and students. Each subject is referred to as a "course of mystery," covering a concept from its most basic technique to complete mastery. Each course is broken into four stages representing four levels of mastery and each designed to take 2 to 3 years to complete. A student who completes a single stage of mysteries is considered a professional, able to work and be employed with their knowledge, while a graduate of all four stages is considered a grand master, among the most elite practitioners of the skills taught. Students are called "riddles" until they have completed at least one stage of one mystery, indicating that their true self has yet to be revealed. Each stage completed grants a new title: "shadow" (as students' true selves are revealed in outline by the illumination of knowledge), "charade" (as students learn to conceal their true selves), and "labyrinth" (as their true nature is now complex and difficult to comprehend). If students complete a fourth stage of a mystery, always taught one-on-one by a senior curator, they gain the title "enigma," and qualify to be invited into the Assembly of Enigmas (though not many ever receive that call).

While outsiders often think of the College of Mysteries as a school of spells, specific incantations are actually a very small part of the college's curriculum. The college focuses on ways to use magic, from metamagic techniques to creating magic items, identifying spell effects, and utilizing minor spells for major effects. As a result, many sorcerers and bards take courses within the college, and even priests come here to expand their



skill in spell use (especially clerics of Nethys, Shelyn, and Sivhana). Other subjects are taught as well, including healing arts, alchemy, riddling, architecture, tattooing, and script illumination.

As students masters various mysteries, they gain the right to mark themselves with *irezoko*, bright tattoos on the face (especially on the forehead and under the eyes) and along the arms, legs, chest and lower back. These marks are descended from the Varisian tradition of mystic tattoos brought to the college by early Varisian Enigmas but no longer have the same arcane power as true Varisian tattoos. Some Tian tradition has influenced the *irezoko* as well, and as a result only those trained in the college know the exact meaning of the tattoos, as no two seem exactly the same (and students often embellish their *irezoko* with other designs) though they share a common script. A student with a new *irezoko* is sure to be invited to at least a few major fetes in the Petal District in the following weeks, as curious minor nobles seek to discern the mark's meaning, and more experienced trademasters and overseers seek to make contact with a potential aid or agent.

The current High Curator of the college and master of the Assembly of Enigmas is Brythen Blood, also known as the Painted Man as a result of his extensive *irezoko*. Master Brythen is a rarity in the life of the college in that he is an outsider to Absalom, from no known Great House or bloodline, and he plays none of the social games common among the school's students and staff. He is unquestionably a skilled sorcerer, however, and despite his lack of interest the powerful political factions of Absalom continue to seek his approval for their own agendas. A rumor suggests he is an old friend of Lord Aven of Diobel, and that his loyalty is already sworn to that man, though certainly no one can say that for certain.

Magpie Manor: A solid and ornate building of marble and tile, Magpie Manor is a popular gathering place for the wealthy and cultured of the Petals. Run by a pair of retired actors, the manor allows anyone with decent manners and formal attire to become a patron for the princely sum of 250 gp a month. A patron may bring small parties of guests to the manor at any time, lounge in its many dens and gardens, eat light fare, and listen to young performers work to perfect their art.

The manor also serves as a kind of retirement for many older performers, who can no longer stand the rigors of a wandering minstrel or formal stage performer but have the fame, talent, or notoriety to amuse the indolent rich with a few choice lines or favored song. The retired performers, called "domos," share the profit of the manor and do very little actual work. They do, however, take on a few students each, who in return work very hard to amuse

patrons in return for receiving free educations in the arts from many of the great masters of Absalom.

Most revered of all the performers is Qia Xin, the Flawless Poet. A blind man from Tian Xia, Qia Xin is known throughout the Inner Sea as the greatest of all living poets. Well more than a century old, he sits from time to time in the Lotus Garden behind Magpie Manor and plays his odd 5-string lap harp and composes poems about every imaginable subject. He never copies down or repeats his poems, and may be struck to create them at any hour day or night. Patrons often enjoy sitting and listening to him, but even when no one else is around, younger performers at the manor listen and record his stanzas on life, death, love, magic, and the death of gods. It is said the best works of Qia Xin have made dragons forgo treasure, assassins give up killing, wizards turn to farming, and tears come to Primarch Gyr.

Precipice Quarter

The Precipice Quarter was once known as Beldrin's Bluff, and was the shining jewel of Absalom. The centerpiece of the area was the three-spired, ivory towers of Beldrin, built on the edge of the cliffs overlooking Absalom Harbor. Even when most of that tower collapsed into the ocean, the rest of the district seemed blessed with good fortune and fair winds—until the earthquake of 4698 AR, the most disastrous moment in the reign of Lord Gyr. Whole city blocks tumbled into the sea, and hundreds died as their streets and communities crumbled away, leaving an ugly, jagged scar of cliffside. The entire district was abandoned, and it no longer has a ruling council, district watch, or viable community. In many places, undead roam freely, and no one is allowed to cross into neighboring districts from dusk until dawn. Thieves, killers, and vagabonds sometimes seek refuge here, but as often as not their screams are heard at night as they discover there is no longer any safety in the Precipice Quarter.

From time to time, a public outcry demands the Grand Council reclaim the quarter, but nothing serious ever comes of these demands. Generally the Council agrees to investigate the question and makes a show of hiring some expedition to map the dangers of the area. Then, at the same time that expedition quits in fear or simply disappears, the Irorium has an unusually good run of fights, and a few wealthy members of the Council hold local festivals. The question is forgotten for another few months, and nothing changes in the district. The Grand Council considers it a write-off, and no one with the resources to make a difference has decided to risk the extensive dangers of the area.

More information on the horrors of the Precipice Quarter can be found in the Pathfinder Module



Uz: Hangman's Noose, including additional details on the following areas.

Arboretum Arcanis: This was once a magical, crystal dome that housed plants from all over Golarion. Now it is a garden of black and twisted things that can poison the air, animate corpses, and fire thorns at potential dinner.

Beldrin's Tower: One of the three towers of Beldrin still stands, sitting on the very edge of the precipice over the sea, actually groaning when hit by high winds. Rumor claims there are still items of great wealth and power within the tower, left by Beldrin and possibly able to rebuild the section of the city he loved so much. Adventurers have gone into the tower more than once, and while some return with treasure and others are never seen again, none have found any legendary artifact that can fix the district.

The Drownyard: Once this was one of the premier preparatory schools for children of the rich and powerful, but the quake brought forth a spray from the sewer that also contained the remains of an ancient necropolis over which the school had been built. Now it is a sea of filth in which the dead children still play, waiting for

new playthings to join them. The lower reaches of the Drownyard access the old necropolis, and have drawn a few explorers to risk the disease and undead-filled halls of learning in hopes of raiding the ancient crypts below.

Stinger's Scar: Once a pleasure park, this is now a constant swarm of every imaginable vermin in Absalom. In fact, it has drawn many vermin from elsewhere in the city, though those who comment on how pleasant that makes life elsewhere cannot explain what a churning horde of biting and stinging insects might do if it left the Scar and swarmed across the city.

Puddles

Puddles always had a flooding problem in serious storms, and a few of its structures are old ships washed up onto dry land during particularly turbulent squalls. When the quake hit a decade ago, Puddles sank a few critical inches lower, and much of it flooded and stayed flooded. The center of the district is now a festering lake, and most businesses are calf-deep in water even at low tide. Those who could afford to relocate have moved on, leaving only the poor, dishonest, and bullheaded to make a damp

existence in homes that are rotting from below. There are no surviving records to show who owns what, so some new residents have moved in simply to claim cheap buildings, no matter how badly flooded. Criminals, con men, and homeless flock to Puddles, believing life there to be a better option than expulsion for vagrancy.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Haigen Topkick, Nomarch of the Puddles District Council, Captain of the Muckruckers, Guildmaster of the Salvagers Guild; **Lady Seichya of House Tevineg**, High Warden of the Brine, Trademaster of the Salt Cartel; **The Green Strumpet**, local witch.

There are only three major political forces in Puddles. The district council is a single man, Haigen Topkick, who also runs the local guard and the only viable business, the salvage guild. Haigen runs much of Puddles as his private—if impoverished—domain, and receives very little pressure to do otherwise. His authority, such as it is, legitimately comes from the Grand Council, and as long as he asks them for no funds to fix the district, and even manages tax payments, the Grand Council is happy to allow Puddles to become the city's cesspool. His sole official competitor is Lady Seichya of Tevineg, who runs the main prison of Absalom on the southern edge of the Puddles. Lady Seichya has made Haigen an ally rather than an enemy, and the two agree that matters around the prison are her concern, and the rest of the Puddles is his.

Their only rival is the Green Strumpet, a local olive-haired witch who seems to live under the water, and claims to be half gillman. She is the only healer and wise woman most residents of Puddles have access to, though her underwater lifestyle means no one can predict when or where she will appear. She is also well known for attaching herself to one or more adventurers when such groups come looking for something in Puddles, acting as a guide until they leave. She refuses to ever leave Puddles, or say why she cannot move about the city.

Aysepir's Astounded Abyss: This is the only reason any visitor would want to delve into Puddles, and it's a bad reason at that. A dank, muck-covered carnival of patched tents and unsteady huts is home to the largest freak show in the Inner Sea region. Begun generations ago by an Ulfen explorer, Aysepir Dragon-Skin, the "Abyss" is presented as a mortal patch of hell, with every imaginable and unfortunate combination of creatures and objects. For just a few pieces of copper, patrons can witness the twitching Living Eye, the ghoulish Self-Consuming Troll, the sad Ghost Girl—with her constant song of loss accompanied by her endless repetition of her own suicide—and even the Inverted Man, whose white bone framework barely holds in his oozing organs and pulsing muscles. Of course most patrons believe the freaks are

likely illusions or costumes, but come anyway to see what new horror the Abyss will offer.

In fact, the Abyss always presents its unfortunates as exactly what they are, most being the victims of terrible curses, unfortunate fates, or truly unique breeding. Its current owner, the Fish-Head Queen, is a cursed mermaid who has her woman- and fish-parts reversed. She does her best to protect her employees, seeing them as an extended family, but knows that many of her "children" are also murderers, rapists, and monsters. She preaches against such excesses, but as long as the crimes occur off Abyss grounds, she never punishes such acts.

The Brine: While Puddles is a bad place to live, even the poorest folk realize they have it better than the prisoners sent to the Brine. Not only is it usually calf-deep in water, but high tide often causes the sewer to back up and pollute the prison with humanoid waste. Guards use catwalks to stay out of the muck, but prisoners are forced to sit and sometimes even sleep in it, and filth fever is a frequent problem. Fortunately, some prisoners can get a chance at freedom before the Brine takes their lives (see the Street of Statues in Westgate).

The Little Inner Sea: The flooded central section of Puddles, this is an old park with rotting trees and crumbling clock towers sticking out of it. The "Little Inner" can actually be fished, and in severe storms, parts of the wrecked ships in Absalom Harbor are washed into the lake, resulting in regular salvage dives by the bolder members of the Puddles' poor. The Little Inner Sea is the only source of honest work within Puddles, and it is uncommon, backbreaking, low-pay work at that. Only when a ship believed to have something of value on board washes within the Little Inner does money flow into the district, and even then it often comes in the form of mercenaries buying helpers to attack the aides hired by other mercenaries. The flooded houses and taverns around the Little Inner see more life than most of the district, but even here poverty and despair rule the day.

The Siphons: These underground tunnels are dangerous and often flooded. Some connect to the sewer system, some are obsolete and walled-off parts of the sewers, and some are part of a sprawling series of crypts and emergency tunnels. Some criminal elements use the Siphons as a hideout, shoring up walls with heavy bricks and creating elevated doorways to keep their lairs dry, though seepage and the risk of collapse are always problems. One of the best-known residents of the Siphons is Grandmaster Torch, a soft-spoken information broker covered in horrible burn scars.

The Stilt House: Though Puddles is often called "lawless," the district does have its own district guard. Officially named the Muddied Center Reserve Civilian Corps, they are known as the Muckruckers, and often called

much less polite titles. The Muckruckers were formed as a “temporary” measure a decade ago after an earthquake subjected the Puddles to the worst flooding in the district’s history, and have never been disbanded or replaced.

As a wholly volunteer force, the Muckruckers have never been paid. The Civilian Corps is given use of a city-owned building (the Stilt House) to serve as a headquarters, and they receive badges and short swords at the city’s expense, but otherwise the Muckruckers are on their own. For the first few years of their existence, the citizen guards did a fair job maintaining order. As it became clear the rebuilding of Puddles was going to be delayed, the hardest-working families moved out, and the best Muckruckers left with them. The remaining force is as much a thieves’ guild and extortion racket as it is a district guard. But the Muckruckers do keep order, after a fashion, and prevent the problems of Puddles from leaking into nearby districts. Since they do so at no cost to the Grand Council, so far the rulers of Absalom have left their power intact, though they receive no aid from the Grand Council beyond their warrants of authority.

The Stilt House serves as headquarters for the Salvage Guild, which demands a percentage of anything that comes out of the district. It is also a good place to check in with the district nomarch, Haigen Topkick, and to grease his palm to ensure a venture will be well-received. Rumor claims you can also arrange for anything else you might need, from slaves to illegal drugs and even victims for experimentation from Haigen, if the price is right, though all investigation into such claims has been inconclusive.

Westgate

Westgate is a mostly residential region of Absalom, where mid-tier merchants, common shop owners, and independent contractors live and sometimes work. A few businesses, mostly specialty labor, are mixed in together with Westgate’s townhouses and flathouses. The farther west in the district you go, the fewer shops exist, and the more villas and manors are in evidence. Though the wealthiest of the city’s residents generally settle in the Ivy District or Merchants’ Quarter, many of its oldest clans have kept their family manors in Westgate, in some cases having lived on the same blocks for more than a thousand years. This is a source of pride for Westgate residents, who often see themselves as keepers of Absalom’s traditions, and through them the city’s identity.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

Lady Seleenae of House Damaq, the Crescent Star, Nomarch of the Western Council, Head Tax Collector of the Sally Gate, Owner of the Foreign Coin Exchange; **Scion Lord Rogren Sphairo of House Menhemes**, District Seat of the Grand Council, self-proclaimed “Keeper of Ancient Absalom Lore”; **Commander Winton of House Nimz**, Commander of the Kortos Cavalry and Captain of the Sally Guard

The Fierce Stripe: A small wooden shop with a sign shaped and painted like a badger’s head, the Fierce Stripe is a badger-wrangling shop run by House Yuirel. It is currently managed by Chesne of House Yuirel, a lithe gnome woman who splits her time between running the shop and advocating for Absalom to offer greater support to Andoran. However, because of the unusual place badgers hold in Absalom, she often finds herself too busy to do much politicking.

In Absalom it is illegal to kill or export badgers and otters (though exceptions exist for those conjured or controlled by magic). Local legend claims that one of the previous primarchs had a badger on his family seal and passed the law to honor that, but the truth is much simpler: badgers and otters rarely get into stored foods or grains, are excellent at hunting down rats, giant ants, and similar vermin, and even have an affinity for consuming ticks. The badger most common to Absalom is a breed called the tunnel brach; less territorial than most, it is a popular family pet (replacing both cats and dogs in many Absalom homes).

As a result, numerous small businesses cater to badgers and their owners. (Otters are often seen after by the Pilots’ Guild, but tend to live out in the Flotsam Graveyard and have less interaction with Absalom natives.) The main businesses at the Fierce Stripe are building setts (badger burrows) for warehouses and businesses seeking to adopt a badger clan, and training bull (adult male) badgers as guard-animals. Badgers can live happily both in clans of up to 15 individuals or in solitary lives (as is often the case for guard bulls). Badger cubs and trained adults can be bought at the small shop, and specialty gear for badger familiars and companions is also available (including badger barding, tiny strap-on metal claws, and belt pouches).

Since badgers lead legally protected lives, natives also occasionally hire badger-handlers from the Stripe to relocate a clan that has moved in someplace inconvenient. Though the animals are generally well-loved within the city (and credited for keeping the city virtually plague-free despite the extensive influx of diseased sailors and the horrible conditions of people living in Puddles or the Precipice Quarter), when badgers move in to a ship (which then can’t set sail without exporting them), an unused room, or a local garden, paying someone to safely move them to a better location is the only legal option available.

Guild of Wonders: An unassuming building of plaster and wood, there is no sign or mark to call out the Guild of Wonders from the houses and villas around it. Though it is not a secret, this chapterhouse is also not well-advertised. This is perhaps unsurprising, as it is a school and organization for spies, assassins, and saboteurs. Operating for centuries in Absalom, the guild is accepted because its own bylaws forbid the practicing of any of its

arts in Absalom territories without the official sanction of the Grand Council. Thus, while it is hated and reviled by every other nation of the Inner Sea (though also often hired by those same governments), to the Grand Council it is nothing more than a resource to keep an eye on the dozens of factions vying for control of Absalom.

Ownership and ultimate control of the Guild of Wonders belongs to Scion Lord Celedo of House Morilla, but he has no hand in its daily affairs. These are handled by his two oldest nephews (Juartos and Donavar) and his only niece, (Annasendra Varabelle). Juartos handles all financial matters, including negotiating contracts, while Donavar handles the mundane tasks of supplies, repairs, duty rosters, and discipline of students. Annasendra is the primary instructor, teaching stealth, observation, and escape. All three teach fighting techniques, which tend to focus on ranged and/or concealable weapons and the use of poisons. It's clear to everyone, including these three cousins, that whichever of them does best will be selected as Scion of House Morilla when Lord Celedo dies.

In addition to refusing to operate on Absalom soil without Council permission, the guild does not take contracts to kill Taldan nobility, children below the age of majority for their homeland, or priests of Abadar, Asmodeus, or Calistria. They do not discuss why these rules exist, and if pressed, threaten violence to end such discussions. Of course, the guild will happily spy on such individuals, sicken them with weak poisons so as to cause them to be indisposed, and kidnap them for ransom—only killing is out of the question.

The guild also sells Death Pacts, contracts to wealthy and well-placed individuals to have an assassin sent to kill anyone who murders the pact's owner. Also called Grave Daggers, these pacts are designed to allow those with the money to rest assured that if they are killed, their killers will also suffer. Each Death Pact is assigned to one (and only one) guild assassin and one guild spy, who are to work together to fulfill its terms. Should this mission require the two agents to break any of the guild's bylaws, they are required to do so; though this also expels them from the guild and sentences them to death at the hands of their former brethren if they ever set foot on the Isle of Kortos again. If a Death Pact is not fulfilled within a year of its owner's death, the guild places the pact's original fee as a bounty on the still-at-large killer.

Sally Gate: One of the major gates to pass through the walls of Absalom, the Sally Gate is specifically designed for a cavalry unit. It has a ditch in front of the wall, and four massive, 60-foot-wide drawbridges that cross it at different points. The idea is that the forces of the Sally Gate can open one of their ramp gates and unleash a full cavalry charge from the very base of the castle. The inside

is similarly designed for cavalry fighting, with long yards with access to the stables, and wide, gently sloping ramps throughout much of the fortification. From here horses can be ridden up on the main wall of Absalom, and have been used as reserves for many of the more recent sieges of the city.

In addition to serving as the city's only land-based mounted units in times of war (mostly for harassing actions), the Kortos Cavalry patrols Westgate as the Sally Guard. Though the uniforms and command structure are the same, by long-standing tradition the troops are called the Kortos Cavalry on or outside the wall, but called the Sally Guard in the streets of Absalom. The current commander of the Sally Gate, Winton of House Nimz, has shown signs of chafing under the title of mere "guard," and has pressed for the Western Council to acknowledge the unit as the Kortos Cavalry for all official functions. Though the move should be a purely semantic change, the traditionalists of the Western Council have so far refused to accede to the commander's desires.

Statue Street: Absalom is a large city, and its prisons have a tendency to fill up. Facing the prospect of overcrowding and riots, 700 years ago the Office of Prisons (which at the time was run by a wizard named Valtias the Redeemer) proposed a competition to pardon nonviolent offenders such as thieves, addicts, and debtors. These criminals would be released into a barricaded street, with an angry gorgon following them. Those who escaped the gorgon were pardoned; those who failed would remain statues decorating that street. The event was a success and became a popular event with the people of the city. Every year, people gather on rooftops and in upper-story homes to watch the Charge of the Gorgon, and a few more stone relics join those on what is now called Statue Street.

Wise Quarter

The Wise Quarter is to learning and education what the Ivy District is to arts and entertainment, the center of Absalom's contribution to the subject. The greatest scholarly institutions of Absalom are found within the Wise Quarter, and to encourage this growth the Wise Council waives the taxes of any institution dedicated primarily to the preservation or distribution of knowledge. Of course, the Wise Council also charges a small tax on every student in the district, but since schools pass those costs onto their novices, that cost does little to dissuade them from expansion.

Though there are many academies in the Wise Quarter, without a doubt the largest and most prestigious is the Arcanamirium, one of the most famous schools of magic in the Inner Sea. The influence of the Arcanamirium cannot be overstated, and while only a few faculty are on the Wise Council, there is no doubt that if the masters of the largest

school of magic in Absalom want something about the district to change, they are likely to get their way. Of course, the Arcanamirium is also under the ever-watchful eye of Lord Gyr, who is first spell lord of the city, which saves the Wise Council from contending with too many unreasonable or petty requests.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

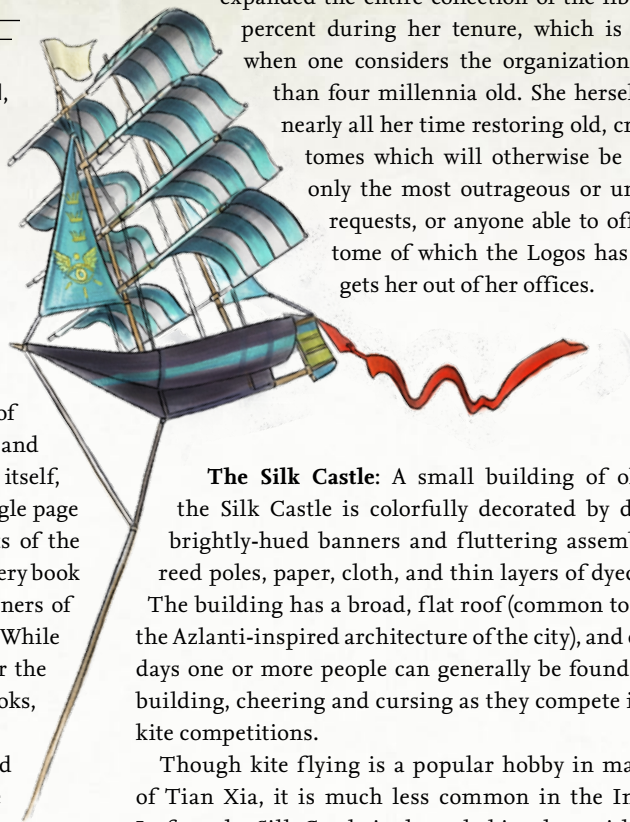
Dhauken Tor, First Speaker of the Wise Council; **Mendhir the Colossus**, Captain of the Learned Guard, Pathfinder venture-captain; **Metadame Vannessir of House Tevinex**, Sergeant-at-Wands of the Arcanamirium; **Brivit Nae of Irrisen**, Council Seat of the Grand Council, Head Librarian of Forae Logos, Guildmaster of the Scrivener's Guild

Forae Logos: Forae Logos, also called the Wise House and the Library of Kortos, is the largest library in Absalom and is known as the greatest source of written knowledge west of the Pit of Gormuz. The books, scrolls, parchments, tablets, and folios of Forae Logos officially belong to Absalom itself, and the Founding Law forbids the removal of a single page without the unanimous blessing of the high seats of the Grand Council. The Grand Council requires that every book brought into the city either be left with the scribes of the Logos to be copied, or be taxed a silver per page. While enforcement of this rule is haphazard at best, over the eons the law has produced extensive copies of books, scrolls, and lore from around the world.

The Forae Logos is important to the Grand Council for two reasons. First, its maintenance is required by Founding Law, and no Grand Council wishes to be the first to ignore that requirement. Second, there have been dozens of occasions in the history of Absalom when some terrible threat was avoided or ended only because lore regarding it was found by some citizen in the stacks in Forae Logos. As a result the Forae Logos is considered neutral territory for arcane, religious, and scholarly debates. Such discussions are welcome here, but anything as much as a raised voice brings the Learned Guard directly down on the violators. In fact, the district guard is housed in buildings around Forae Logos, and their mandate requires them to protect it before the citizens of the district. They are also the only guard unit that requires literacy as a prerequisite for entrance, to ensure all their guards can properly appreciate the value of the words they protect.

It is also home to the Scrivener's Guild, which cares for the tomes of the vast library in return for free use of its building. By long tradition the head of the guild is also the Head Librarian and Conservator of the Logos, and Brivit Nae, the current holder of those titles, is an

excellent example of why. Though she forbids any tome to be removed, and rarely allows originals to even be viewed by outsiders, she does happily make copies of the tomes within through the guild, for a modest fee. Of course she always has two copies made, to ensure the most valued tomes are those with the largest number of back-up copies. She has expanded the entire collection of the library by 2 percent during her tenure, which is amazing when one considers the organization is more than four millennia old. She herself spends nearly all her time restoring old, crumbling tomes which will otherwise be lost, and only the most outrageous or unusual of requests, or anyone able to offer a new tome of which the Logos has no copy, gets her out of her offices.



The Silk Castle: A small building of old stone, the Silk Castle is colorfully decorated by dozens of brightly-hued banners and fluttering assemblages of reed poles, paper, cloth, and thin layers of dyed leather. The building has a broad, flat roof (common to much of the Azlanti-inspired architecture of the city), and on windy days one or more people can generally be found atop the building, cheering and cursing as they compete in battle-kite competitions.

Though kite flying is a popular hobby in many parts of Tian Xia, it is much less common in the Inner Sea. In fact, the Silk Castle is the only kite shop within 1,000 miles of Absalom, as its proprietor, Vittar Corusec, is proud to tell anyone who asks. Though the aisles of the shop are stuffed with glorious kites ready for sale—paper dragons, gossamer fireballs, and even shield-shaped kites with moving illusions of ships, knights, or dancing girls cast upon their faces—these are mostly for tourists and newcomers. The true bulk of Corusec's business comes from enthusiasts and competitors who buy his very expensive raw materials, and in the process receive free advice on their custom kites.

Most kite patrons wish to build elaborate, moving kites that seem too complex and oversized to be held aloft without the aid of magic. While paying top coin for spider-silk twine, dried hollow beach reeds, extraordinarily thin sheets of silk, leather, and paper, and even tiny mithral clamps and gussets, these master-kites show Corusec their designs, ask for guidance to decrease weight or improve lift or handling, and put in special orders for the unique materials that might allow a 1/72 scale reproduction of the final battle of the Siege of

Voradni Voon at Azlant Keep to fly in anything less than hurricane-force winds.

A smaller selection of Corusec's clientele are kite-battlers, who use string impregnated with ground glass, sharpened spars at a kite's edges, and tiny, light blades to cut apart an opponent's kite until only one can fly. Such kites are often much simpler in appearance, but like fighting ships or siege engines have designs that involve complex trade-offs of offensive ability, maneuverability, and durability. Every year the best designs compete in festivals held in local parks on the Gala of Sails (Gozran 27) and Kraken Carnival (Lamashan 15). Once every few years, the competition between two kite-battlers grows to such local prominence (and heavy enough betting) that a special battle is held in the Irorium, often with Corusec hired as the judge.

In addition to these two groups, and visitors who simply want to try flying a kite with little effort or take one home as a gift or souvenir, adventurers occasionally turn to the Silk Castle for unusual solutions to unique problems. It's rumored Corusec has built kites to allow a young wizard's cat familiar to fly, to carry a hook and some bait aloft for adventurers to "fish" for wyverns, to add sails to a vast pirate ship without taking up additional deck space, and to lift baskets able to carry a lightweight gnome skyward to keep a lookout for invading armies. Recently members of the Downrigger Cognate (see the Clockwork Cathedral) have even begun constructing kite golems (mostly to grab onto the tops of walls in lieu of a grappling hook, though the cognate is seeking additional uses for animated bits of flying paper).

The Arcanamirium: The largest and oldest school in Absalom, the Arcanamirium was established by the arclords of Nex as one of their earliest acts, once they had formed a power block after their lord Nex disappeared from mortal affairs. Now the Arcanamirium is the personal province of the first spell lord, the appointed official who handles all questions of magic in the city. The focus of study in the Arcanamirium is "practical magic," the ability to use spells and magic tools to accomplish direct, measurable results in the material world. Specialization is strongly discouraged, though a few diviners and invokers are produced in every class. Illusion and necromancy are not in favor with the school's current faculty, but they certainly aren't forbidden. Unlike many schools of magic in Golarion, any effective method of using magic is not only allowed, but encouraged. Students who work to mix magic with martial skills, stealth, divine rituals, or even mundane talents such as blacksmithing or sailing are welcome.

Once a year, an open exam is held for those interested in being taught at the Arcanamirium. People travel from all over Golarion to take tests, which not only prove the

applicant has arcane talent, but rank him or her as an apprentice, journeyman, maven, or arcansenti (a rank of high spellcasting honor, much sought by senior wizards worldwide). Additionally, docents (professors at the school) sometimes travel to major cities in other lands to see if new students or magic theories should be brought back. Regardless of how a student is tested, some level of magic talent is an absolute requirement to be accepted as a pupil.

An applicant must cover the cost of his or her room, classes, materials, and instructors' fees. Of course, not every potential apprentice can afford the expensive tuition, and other alternatives do exist. Every journeyman student is allowed to grant a small budget of waivers to apprentice students in return for whatever services the journeyman needs. In theory, this allows those apprentices with driving ambition to work hard washing, shopping, scroll-copying, and running errands for journeymen, while taking a few odd waived classes and living cheaply in waived bunks (generally in some journeyman's room) or crashing in the unused closets of the Arcanamirium.

In practice, few students can keep up with the harsh working conditions serving journeymen (who are often willing to abuse the power this gives them over other students, and may threaten to remove their waiver agreements if their every whim is not met) and still learn any significant level of magic. Those that try often find themselves as near-slaves in the school for decades, eventually becoming much older than the young, powerful, rich students they are beholden to. In recent years, a cadre of Osirian journeymen began using their waivers only for Osirian students, who receive very light duties. In return, those apprentices must swear to do the same thing when they become journeymen. This has increased the Osirian presence in the Arcanamirium and annoyed many major houses in Absalom.

Every tenured teaching spellcaster employed by the school is allowed to sponsor one student each year. These students are given basic living quarters and secondhand equipment, but they receive their education free of charge. There is considerable competition for these slots (fewer than one in 10 instructors are tenured), and political pressure, under-the-table bribes, and morally questionable favors are often used (sometimes successfully) to sway instructors.

Finally, a few traveling alumni of the Arcanamirium take it on themselves to pay for promising young spellcasters' educations. They pay in advance, and, if they encounter a powerful but untrained mage during their travels, give them a writ granting a free education. Of course, such students still must make it to Absalom and pass the official Arcanamirium tests.



People

“Are you crazed? Get out of her way! No, don’t look surprised again, it marks you as easy prey. You’re still looking at race or bloodline to determine rank, and that means nothing in Absalom. Look at clothes and gear, you fool! If they wear tight leathers and quality shirts, carrying a sword or axe, they’re hotspurs like myself. Bracers and rings are most likely wizards or priests, though wands are a better giveaway. Patched clothes mean either commoners or assassins, so watch yourself. But robes and huge hats? Huge hats mean money, and that’s always trouble.”

—Donnica Mycelene la-Tep, native hotspur and wearer of a modest, brimmed hat

THE GRAND COUNCIL

Absalom is ruled by a Grand Council, chaired by Lord Gyr of House Gixx, who enjoys the titles of primarch and Defender of Kortos. The Council has 12 high seats (including the primarch’s) and a varying number of low seats. As a result, the 12 high seats are often called the High Council or High Grand Council, and the low seats are known as the Low or Lesser Council.

A high seat is kept as long as the holder can produce one of the city’s 12 cornucopias as the seal of office once a year (see Cornucopias, below), while low seats are voted on by the High Council once a year. Influential religious figures, heads of major households, and powerful merchants generally fill the high seats, though over the centuries adventurers, hermits, vagrants, and pirates have managed to produce a cornucopia and hold their seats for at least a few months. Anyone able to get elected can claim a low seat, although keeping it often involves taking command of arduous administrative tasks, such as the sanitation commission, office of prisons, and the rat-takers. The most powerful, profitable, and respectable positions, including the Exchequer of Taxation, Trade Minister, Sea Lord, Harbormaster, and

First Lord of Laws, fall to the high seats. The ultimate control of Absalom's military, which is small compared to most nations, falls to the primarch as "Defender of Kortos," and very rarely does any other member of the military take a high seat.

Low seats vary in number and importance depending on the will of the high seats. At minimum, each district is guaranteed a single low seat to represent its needs and desires to the Grand Council. A few guilds are automatically allowed a low seat, and Absalom's vassal-cities each also receive two low seats, appointed by their governments. After that, the high seats hand out the low seats to fill whatever duties the senior councilmen believe need representation of some kind. Traditionally a "siege lord" is appointed as a low seat during any military campaign to coordinate the defense of the city, and most major religions in the city have at least one priest with a low seat, but other seats are added and removed regularly. Currently the Absalom Low Council is 49 members strong, making the entire Grand Council a total of 61 seats.

All matters of state are settled by a vote of the Grand Council. The entire council votes on common matters (such as when to hold festivals and what to do about a poor fishing season), while Matters of Note are voted on solely by the high seats. The high seats vote on whether a given issue is a Matter of Note, allowing them to take control of any issue a majority of them wish to rule on. This also means that the high seats can flood the Council with new low seats if they wish to weaken the weight of a single low seat's vote, though this tactic is rarely used unless the Low Council begins to show signs of favoring some outside nation over Absalom itself.

The primarch has a number of additional powers within the Council that allow him to effectively rule without being an absolute monarch. He can veto any political appointment, whether for a high or low seat, or even the creation of another low seat. He also has the sole power to call a Grand Council meeting, allowing him to hold the Council hostage by refusing to allow its members to meet unless they agree to settle issues to his satisfaction. Since the primarch holds his position for life, most primarchs simply try to ensure they don't become such tyrants that their enemies decide to end their reigns at the point of a sword (electing a new primarch is a Matter of Note). The primarch is also traditionally the Sea Lord of Absalom's navy, giving him considerable military might, but Lord Gyr has instead named himself first spell lord, giving himself authority over the magical institutions of Absalom.

Each district also has its own ruling body, a district council. While these councils generally rule their own districts autonomously, their power is entirely subservient to the Grand Council. A district council can be disbanded as a Matter of Note, and the Grand Council

can override any rule of a district council by a common vote. Normally the Grand Council deals with a few city-wide matters and any dealings with foreign powers, and leaves local matters to the local councils most familiar with them, but that arrangement is a preference, not a legal necessity. In fact, the only official limit to the Grand Council's power if its members act in concert is the Founding Law, which was established by Aroden in the early years of the city. The Founding Law establishes the rules that control the Grand Council and the primarch, determines how cornucopias are handled, and ensures a few basic rights for the citizens of Absalom.

District Councils

Each district of the city has its own council, which sees to local needs, collects taxes, funds and commands the district guard, and generally oversees the district as if it were a separate city. District councils cannot override an order from the Grand Council, but are normally allowed to run their sections of the city without interference, as long as they are profitable and peaceful. If an area is constantly having riots, demanding a higher share of taxes than it brings in, or is suffering some serious threat the district council can't handle (such as plague, ghoulish infestation, constant flooding, or runaway crime), the Grand Council may begin to make district-specific edicts, or even disband and replace the district council. When a native speaks of "the council" they almost always mean their local district council, as common citizens rarely have any dealings with the Grand Council.

District councils also determine the jurisdiction of legal cases, to be tried in district courts. Each district has its own court and legal magistrates, who are supposed to deal with crimes taking place within their district or dealing with citizens of their district. While the jurisdiction of such courts is obvious when those involved in a crime are from the same district in which the crime took place (or foreigners, since a foreigner has no right to a "home" district), in cases where citizens from multiple districts are involved, or a crime took place in more than one district (such as a running battle, or a theft of goods from one district to a storage location in another), the councils of the involved districts must decide which courthouse and magistrates are to rule on the case. This is normally a minor matter, with preference given to victims of crimes being allowed their home district courthouse, and courthouses with low caseloads being given overflow from busier jurisdictions, but sometimes politics or personal favors can make the decision more contentious. If a vote of all councilors on all the local councils does not give a clear majority, the question is elevated to the First Lady of Laws, who also oversees the training of all magistrates in Absalom.

Varlokkur

Both as a result of the nature of Absalom criminal codes (focusing on damage done by a crime, rather than the intent of criminals), and because it houses some of the most powerful schools of magic in the known world, Absalom has a group of spellcasting judges and ministers. Known as varlokkur, it is these officials' duty to keep magic from getting out of control within the city, and to hear any case that has a major magical component. This includes any case involving a known spellcaster, revolving around a known magic item, or in which a local court finds reasonable cause to suspect charms or illusions were used during a crime. Varlokkur answer directly to the third spell lord (currently Lord Wycombe of House Monast), but are trained by the First Lady of Laws (currently Lady Neferpatra of House Ahnkamen). For most of the year, varlokkur act as magical detectives, both to aid in the investigation of crimes with a magic element and to ensure magic is not used to alter the outcome of high-profile trials.

Varlokkur also investigate specific spells, as directed by the third spell lord of Absalom. Some spells have been outlawed in Absalom, and casting them is itself an illegal act. This includes spells that do nothing but make a target harder to detect (including all *invisibility* spells and spells like *misdirection* that conceal facts about the true nature of a target, but not spells that conceal thoughts or desires). These spells have been determined to have no legitimate defensive purpose, and thus can only be used to commit crimes. On the other hand, spells which make a target think well of the caster (such as *charm person*) are seen as better defensive options than those that deal damage, and are generally treated in the same way as weapons—legal to use in self-defense or for the general good of the city. (There are exceptions to the legality of charm spells, including love-inducing spells which are treated as criminal acts if used on unwilling targets.) Under Absalom law all spells are considered legal until specifically outlawed, though a varlokkur may decide a new or variant spell is “essentially identical” to an already outlawed spell. The legality of specific spells is announced at a Spell Fete once a year.

Titles

With no royalty, little in the way of true nobility, and a culture that draws from the traditions of a dozen different nations, Absalom has developed many of its own titles. Titles that are earned through hard work and accomplishment are given

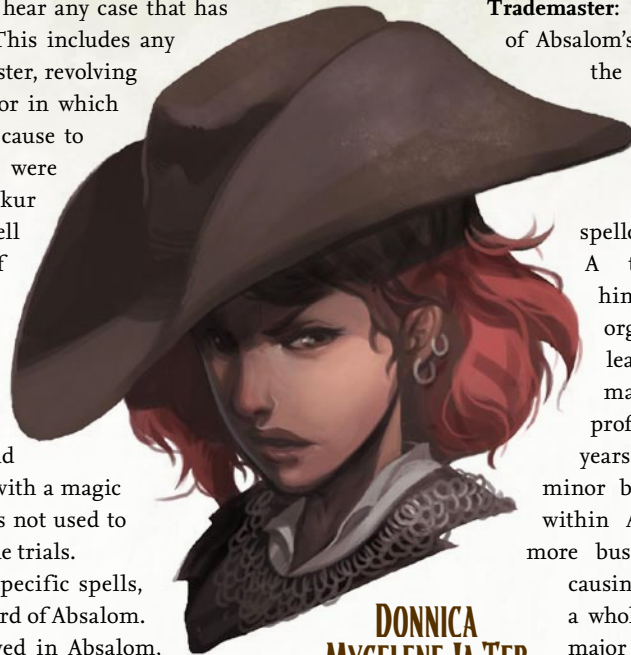
more significance in Absalom than those simply granted as part of some other position, often resulting in scion lords preferring to be called “captain” or “trademaster” if they have earned those titles. Newcomers to Absalom are well advised to learn the most respected titles in the city, for insults to them are seen much as a snub to a member of the nobility is in other lands.

Trademaster: Because trade is the heart of Absalom's wealth, and through that the secret of its independence, those who are experts in trade are given the sort of respect other nations often reserve for powerful spellcasters and warriors. A trademaster must prove himself able to run a financial organization with a budget at least as large as a full-sized manor, and do so legally and profitably for no less than 5 years. Trademasters are granted minor breaks in tariffs and taxes within Absalom, as they transact more business and do so without causing problems for the city as a whole. As a result, nearly every major trade house and business within Absalom is owned, run, or managed by a trademaster.

Only the Grand Council can give out the rank of trademaster, though this is usually a formality that acknowledges a request by an existing trademaster or one of the district councils. There is no formal process for proving the claims of an applicant for trademaster, but no existing trademaster or council is going to risk losing the ear of the Grand Council by knowingly nominating someone unworthy of the honor. The only political force that can pass out the title capriciously is Lord Gyr himself, and he has done so only a handful of times over the past few decades. Some years as many as 30 new trademasters are entitled, and in rare years only one or two are, but in most cases three or four trademasters are given their Writ of Acknowledgment each season.

There is no official badge for trademasters, as the writ itself is just a notification the trademaster's name has been added to the city's tax rolls. However, over the centuries it has become traditional for a trademaster to wear either a beret or a sleeve-ribbon in gold and green, the city's colors.

Bronze, Silver, and Gold Sword: In Absalom, those who have established their ability fight may be introduced as a bronze, silver, or gold sword, and bear a small metal pin



**DONNICA
MYCELENE JA-TEP**

of matching color. These pins are awarded only by those who have fought a given number of judged matches in the Irorium, the fighting arena of the Foreign Quarter. While pin owners are often fighting slaves or professional gladiators, it's not uncommon for guards, mercenaries, adventurers, and even fencing nobles to fight just enough bouts in the Irorium to earn a sword pin as a mark of skill and prestige.

A combatant must win five bouts to earn a bronze sword. While these are by far the most common pins, those wearing them have put their lives on the line at least five times in direct combat, and natives of Absalom respect that willingness to risk and the skill needed to do so successfully. A silver sword requires the wearer to win 10 bouts. A gold sword is only granted to those rare few who win 25 bouts, and the matches must include at least five solo duels, five group melees (at least two teams of four or more combatants each), five battles against monsters, and five battles with 10 or more combatants to a side. The Irorium keeps a list of all those who have earned a sword pin, and commissions a stone bust of anyone earning a gold sword. As a result, it's very uncommon for anyone in Absalom to claim a pin they have not earned, as such honors are easily checked, and many true pin owners become irate with those who falsely bear the awards.

These pins are taken seriously by the social powers of Absalom, and give one the same respect and deference as a minor noble or master craftsman. Someone carrying a gold sword is treated with the deference of a major-general or duke, and rarely has to ask people to clear a path for him in the streets. By contrast, calling someone a "platinum sword" is actually an insult, since no such pins exist, and suggests the insulted target is a braggart who lies about (or at least greatly aggrandizes) earned accomplishments.

Ecclesial: A generic title used rather than "priest" in most of Absalom's laws, ecclesial is not as highly regarded a title as bronze, silver, or gold sword or trademaster, but it's still a useful term in the upper halls of Absalom's political game and a sign of some power among the city's common folk. Anyone can apply to the Chamber of Ecclesials (the District Council of the Ascendant Court) to be granted the title of ecclesial. Normally having a known ecclesial vouch for the applicant is enough, but occasionally it is required that a working knowledge of the applicant's religion or the ability to create holy or unholy water is also required. Being an ecclesial grants no special right or privileges, but does cause city officials (especially varlokkur) to look upon a divine spellcaster less suspiciously.

Primarch-in-Waiting of Absalom: This title dates back to the days of Aroden, and is automatically inherited by whomever is king of Taldor, or the king's declared heir should the king choose to pass the title on while living. While this title has no authority in the current government

system, it is still an acknowledged rank. Should a king of Taldor visit Absalom, he would be treated with respect and deference equal to a high seat of the Grand Council.

Under the Founding Law of Absalom, should there ever be a day when no high seat of the Grand Council appears for the required meeting of the *Starstone* Exaltation, the rule of the city would pass to the primarch-in-waiting. While most Taldans see this as inevitable some day (on the assumption that no city-nation can last forever), natives of Absalom often use the same terminology to refer to something that is redundant or unneeded (such as calling a fourth backup weapon a dagger-in-waiting, or a bad street singer's tip jar a "fortune-in-waiting"). To further complicate matters, it is unclear if the primarch-in-waiting would simply become the new primarch as the title suggests, thus requiring him to establish a new Grand Council and honor the Founding Law, or if rule of Absalom would pass completely into Taldor's hands, to oversee as they wish. Most natives assume the first is true, while the current rulers of Taldor clearly feel the second is a more accurate description of the Founding Law's intent.

Hunting Lodges

In the centuries before the Pathfinder Society became the most famous association of explorers and adventurers based in Absalom, a different tradition of heroic alliance existed within the city—the hunting lodge. The first hunting lodges were simply groups of merchants, trailblazers, and minor nobles who banded together for expeditions into the dangerous interior of the Isle of Kortos. Since they often came from different backgrounds, the members of these bands would select a single building to serve as a group's base of operation and a place to store valued trophies and captured war-banners). These buildings (the earliest use of the term "lodges" in Absalom) often had colorful names, and in time the names became synonymous not only for the buildings themselves, but the allies who met within them.

When Nex attempted to conquer Absalom, the members of many hunting lodges gathered together to fight on the city's walls as units. The image of disparate explorers and daredevils from varied cultures acting together under group names such as the Lodge of the White Hand, the Star Dragons, and the Swords of Sorcery took root in Absalom's subconscious. The hunting lodges became hailed as heroes, their tales told in taverns and their deeds emulated by young adventurers. While other nations often struggled to ensure that all individuals of note were either sworn to defend the nation, or at least personally loyal to its rulers, Absalom culture embraced the idea of hunting lodges as small, independent bands of heroes involving themselves in the major events of the day.



As ages passed, the number of hunting lodges fluctuated from a few dozen during the early centuries of the city, to hundreds during the “golden age” of the hunting lodges (3200–3800 AR), and famously, a single active lodge (the Graven Outriders) by the time of the first Chelish Siege of Absalom. After the Pathfinder Society came into existence in 4307 AR, many of the young and adventurous natives of Absalom turned to it for guidance and potential escapades, and the age of the hunting lodges as worldwide forces ended. However, though the lodges are largely forgotten across the rest of Golarion, tales of their most amazing exploits remain popular within Absalom and Diobel. Songs dedicated to the Raiders of Rovagug’s Hall helping topple the decadent Osirian Pharaoh Menedes XXVI and plays about how the Court of Pyres held a pass against an army of more than a thousand of the Whispering Tyrant’s minions remain popular requests in the city’s streets.

Of the few remaining hunting lodges in Absalom, the one with the greatest pedigree is the Silver Serpents; its members are still dedicated to taming the wilderness of the Isle of Kortos and expanding the influence of the nation of Absalom throughout the Inner Sea. However,

the youngest of the Silver Serpents is 58-year-old Astavel Maeve, a labyrinth of the College of Mysteries, and most natives suspect the lodge will die out soon.

The Band of the Palm

Officially this organization is just a club of like-minded businessmen who gather for informal meetings at barbershops, especially in the Merchants’ Quarter. In fact this is a front for the Bloody Barbers, a broad guild of criminals of nearly every description, including thieves, assassins, poisoners, knee-breakers, spies, smugglers, illicit flesh peddlers, and gamblers (see Chapter Five: Secrets for more information on the Bloody Barbers).

Slaves

Slavery is a complex issue in Absalom. In some past ages it has been both openly allowed and encouraged, and in others banned and punished by death. Sadly, those efforts to prohibit slavery inevitably led to reduced trade through the city, and often saw a rise in slave traders making midnight raids within Absalom itself to cart off exotic travelers from other lands. Even when slavery was outlawed, the punishments for merely owning a slave

(rather than enslaving someone or selling slaves) was kept modest. During the decades of preparation for Aroden's return, most of the Great Houses of Absalom frowned on slavery, and it was once again outlawed.

However, when the world instead suffered a series of disasters and Aroden did not materialize, fear and a desire to ensure coin kept flowing into Absalom drove the Grand Council to legalize slavery once more. This was a contentious issue, as many priests and guilds argued loudly against the move, but powerful forces (particularly those favorable to Cheliox) were willing to argue in favor of slavery—and pay bribes to give their opinions weight. A collection of high priests in the Ascendant Court threatened to block access to the Starstone Cathedral if slaves were bought or sold in the area, and briefly a showdown seemed inevitable.

Eventually a compromise was reached. Owning slaves was allowed within the city, though all slaves to be brought into the Ascendant Court had to be registered with one of the churches there. Buying and selling slaves, however, was allowed only within three-quarters of a mile of the sea. For practical purposes, this means slaves can be bought in the Coins, Docks, Eastgate, Foreign Quarter, Merchants Quarter, Precipice District, and Puddles.

Of course, the wealthiest citizens of Absalom live in the Ivy District, the Petals, and the Wise Quarter, and are rarely willing to trudge down to Misery Row in the Coins to pick out new slaves. As a result, slaves are often “bought” by a middleman in the Coins, brought up to wealthy manors, paraded about, then taken briefly back to the slave pens where they are transferred to a new owner. As long as the slaves are reasonably well-treated during this process, and not flaunted on the streets as living property, this arrangement is normally tolerated. However, should a member of the Grand Council wish to send a serious message, he may free a powerful citizen's slaves (for owning illegally bought slaves more than three-quarters of a mile from the seafront) and fine their former owner. Of course, councilmen are sometimes second-hand slave owners themselves and thus vulnerable to retaliation from such tactics. Skirmishes between two slave-using factions often devolve into tit-for-tat raids on locations where slaves are kept. However, if this begins to attract too much public attention, the primarch puts an end to it. The perception that slavery causes no problems for Absalom and that slaves are well-treated there is good for trade, and Lord Gyr won't allow petty feuds to put that at risk.

Wave Riders

Perhaps the only sea cavalry belonging to a country of landwalkers, the Wave Riders are hippocampus-mounted knights who patrol the waters of Absalom Harbor and the shores of the Isle of Kortos. In most cases they are limited to missions within sight of land, for while the hippocampi can breathe water and sleep at sea, their riders cannot. However, in Escadar there are a few “wave tenders”—fat, round, donut-shaped war-barges with open centers. The “pool” going through each wave tender gives hippocampi access to the open sea, and the sea-horses' riders can rest in the relative comfort of the ships' bunks when not in the saddle.

Though organized as knights, Wave Riders are much more lightly armed and armored than traditional “heavy cavalry.” The leather breastplates issued to all Wave Riders are magically imbued with additional buoyancy, and crossbows and spears are the most common weapons carried. While this reduces a Wave Rider's ability to “lay siege” to a ship at sea, most actually make hit-and-run raids against the bottoms of hulls, snipe at crucial enemy officers, or throw torches and alchemist's fire at ships' rigging. They also make excellent scouts, with a small group able to cover a vast area of sea to pinpoint enemy ships and locate any lost allied vessels. The only time Wave Knights are likely to engage in melee combat is when enemy forces summon or charm sea monsters to attack Absalom ships, in which case the Wave Riders form a defensive cordon to keep these creatures away from the hulls of their own ships.





History

“Oh, that building? It’s a magic shop, sells alchemical reagents and such. Originally built more than four thousand years ago. See the flat roof and strange icons? That’s how you can tell if a building is from the Azlanti era, when Aroden was designing much of the city himself. Of course, the teardrop domes were added much later, when Khiben-Sald, the Great Maharaja, visited the city and declared it the Great Jewel of the Inner Sea. No one is sure when the Twin Statues of Nethys were added. There’s a lot of debate about that, actually. I personally think it must have been during the rule of the Four Pharaohs of Ascension in Osirion, but most scholars think it was during the Oath Wars.”

—Donnica Mycelene la-Tep,
native hotspur and amateur historian

FROM THE FIRST (1–430 AR)

No account exists of Absalom’s first moments, for Aroden was alone when he raised the Isle of Kortos from the depths and placed the *Starstone* where it is now, marking the focus of what was to become the City at the Center of the World. Even in the first centuries of Absalom, when Aroden was a common sight in its halls and on its streets, no one claimed to know how or why Aroden moved the *Starstone*, or created its resting place. Some believe the *Starstone Cathedral* is Aroden’s greatest construction, while others say the *Starstone* itself built the monument that protects it. The cathedral was finished before a single inhabitant arrived in Absalom, though it has continued to grow and expand itself in the centuries since that time. Aroden never answered questions put to him about the cathedral, saying only that any who needed to know of it would find the answers themselves.

Indeed, all records of the first few centuries of Absalom are spotty at best. The Founding Laws of Absalom, the laws which even the Grand Council may not change or remove, were written in stone within Azlanti Keep, but no other original documents survive. Four millennia of mold, accident, and even intentional sabotage have ruined

every book, scroll, and tablet kept before 400 AR. While copies of copies claiming to be true to the original texts can be found throughout the city, even within Forae Logos different editions of texts often disagree with one another. What little is known of the first millennium of Absalom is told as mythology more than strict history.

What is clear is that Aroden established the location of the city when he placed the *Starstone*, and that doing so took a heavy toll on him. Some myths claim the Isle of Kortos belonged to a terrible sea-demon or god of minotaurs, and that Aroden delved into a massive labyrinth to face and defeat that original resident. Other legends place Absalom as an old outpost of the Azlanti, sunken and brought back from the depths by that civilization's last son, and assign that as the reason gillmen continue to live in and around the city. Most natives actually assume Aroden raised the island up from the depths when he recovered the *Starstone*, creating it from the raw rock and kelp of the sea floor, but no record of this version of events can be dated any earlier than 1,450 AR and no evidence of Aroden himself making the claim exists. While this last version of events is official dogma to several churches, many serious scholars discount it.

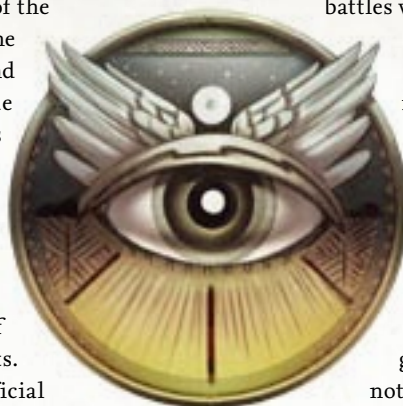
Though even the oldest familial houses have only spotty records on the first centuries of the city, it's clear from such accounts that Aroden himself invited dozens of specific families from all over the Inner Sea to come be the first citizens of a new nation. Though sometimes called the First Primarch, Aroden never actually ruled directly. He did establish the Absalom government, setting down the Founding Laws and swearing all the first citizens of his new city to obey them, but after that he never so much as took a seat on the Grand Council. However, as long as Aroden was a common sight within the city, his will clearly drove the decisions of the early natives of Absalom.

Aroden also took direct action to defend the city against the warlord Voradni Voon, manning the walls of Azlanti Keep and commanding a unit of volunteers, the first guards of Absalom (and forefathers of the First Guard of today). Centuries later Aroden guided the forces of the city against the archmage Nex, but never engaged directly in that longer, more difficult siege. The priesthood of Aroden long held that the Last Azlanti was teaching the city, and through it mortals in general, to survive without him. Since the Death of Aroden that idea has spread widely, but often with curses for the manipulative nature of gods who do such things.

As Absalom became larger, more self-reliant, and successful, Aroden spent less time living within the

city. Though he visited it regularly as long as he walked Golarion, as the centuries passed he was found within Absalom less often. During this period he also spent time in the nation of Taldor, trained a group that would eventually become his priesthood, and sought out other great evils to destroy. Even so, Aroden was the patron power of Absalom and its people assumed he would protect them from any serious threat.

No one can say for certain when Aroden last visited the city, in part because there was no suggestion at the time he would not return. Aroden continued to move and fight for centuries after his last stop in Absalom, but his battles with the Whispering Tyrant and other mighty evils of the era either took up too much of his time or left him not wanting to be tied to a specific location his foes could punish for his actions. His servants continued to maintain the vast building that had been his hall, slowly transforming it into a church. Natives noted his long absences, but were confident he would return if their need was great. But if no one within the city noted exactly when he stopped making personal appearances, certainly his unusually long absence did not go unnoticed elsewhere.



JEWEL OF THE INNER SEA (430–1307 AR)

Once Aroden ceased appearing to directly interact in city affairs, Absalom looked to be a prize gem with little protection. Though powerful forces had laid siege to Absalom before this, common wisdom held that the might of Aroden himself prevented those efforts from succeeding. But as increasingly serious threats came and went with no sign of Aroden, more foreign powers began to think Absalom was vulnerable. To make things worse, the rulers of Absalom didn't take external threats seriously, as they "knew" that if their feeble forces failed, their god would come rescue them. This remained their guiding belief until the Pirate Siege, when a fleet of raiding ships sought to cut Absalom off from other nations and blackmailed the city for protection money.

At first, the city elders expected they needed to hold off the pirates only until Aroden arrived and saved them. Soon, it became clear that while the Last Azlanti would offer aid through his priests and agents, he would no longer take direct part in the battles of Absalom. For the first time in its history, Absalom was on its own, and it was woefully unprepared for that reality. Nearly every able-bodied man, woman, and child was pressed into service manning the walls. Mercenaries were hired from afar, often paid in land and titles rather than raw coin

(many of today's great houses trace their roots back to this time, their ancestors' sellswords and wander-wands paid in trade rights and key buildings).

The Pirate Siege lasted for several years, and cost thousands of lives, but when it was over the pirate fleet was broken apart in the dangerous reef surrounding Absalom's harbor (forming the first few patches of the Flotsam Graveyard). Absalom immediately made building a small sea fleet of its own a priority, and began to offer letters of marque to independent merchants and naval mercenary bands. Piracy was harshly outlawed, and nearby pirate havens hunted down and burned. With the largest band of pirates defeated, Absalom became a popular port, especially for Taldan and Osirian merchants. With that trade came wealth, which in turn led to more trade. As coin and knowledge poured into the city, Absalom found itself struggling to create a cultural identity.

Already one of the last places with a strong Azlanti influence, Absalom was suddenly flooded with a mix of cultures and ideas, and threatened to tear apart under the social strain. However, when the legendary Maharaja Khiben-Sald visited the city in 573 AR, he was delighted by the unique blend of arts, song, food, architecture, and even philosophy developing in the city. He declared it the "Jewel of the Inner Sea," and many Vudrani advisors, merchants, and artists stayed behind when the maharaja left. This both forged a link between Absalom and Vudra (largely through the Isle of Jalmeray) and greatly increased native pride in Absalom. When the first Vudrani merchants began arriving to trade their exotic spices and clothes exclusively in Absalom markets, it quickly became one of the richest cities in the region.

Further developments included the establishment of the Arcanamirium by the arclords of Nex, its eventual assumption by the Grand Council, and the establishment of the district councils to help manage the rapidly growing city. The tradition of citizens of Absalom calling themselves "natives" dates back to this time, as does the official formation of the First Guard. Absalom found its cultural identity as it proved it could defend itself, even without the direct intervention of a god. Many nations of the Inner Sea came to see Absalom as a valued trade partner, but all assumed it would eventually ally itself directly with one or another of the sea's great powers.

CITY AT THE CENTER OF THE WORLD (1308–1999 AR)

In 1308 AR, the *Resplendent Phoenix*, a massive Yixing junk with more than 50 masts, arrived in Absalom for trade in goods, skills, and even ambassadors. While this may

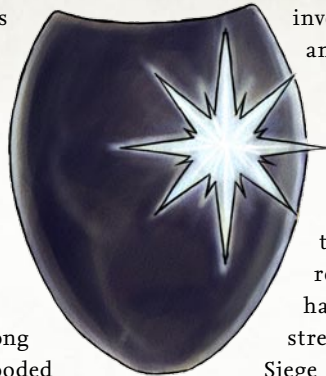
not represent the first contact between the Inner Sea and Tian Xia, it is certainly the first on such a visible level. For some time, everything from that far off land was called Yixi in Absalom, but as trade of scholars and cultural ideas grew, the term Tian Xia replaced Yixi (though the people of Tian Xia themselves tended to shake their heads at either description). While trade with Tian Xia never reached the level of traffic from other nations, it was almost all focused on Absalom. The city continued to gain vast wealth, and a new wave of investors and immigrants formed the basis for an industrious, hard-working society.

However, the rich got richer, and the poor often got poorer, eventually leading to a social tension so great that Absalom suffered its first civil war, the Reborn Rebellion. A bloody internal conflict that killed thousands in a few weeks, the rebellion remains the only time fighting has ever been widespread in Absalom's streets. However, by the time of the Radiant Siege a century and a half later, the Absalom cultural identity was once more strong. That identity included the idea that Absalom was more important than other nations, and this arrogant assumption was in no way weakened when Norgorber became the first mortal since Absalom's founding to pass the Test of the *Starstone* and become a god. Already the center of Aroden's church, Absalom became a major religious site for many pilgrims wishing to see where anyone, even a creature like Norgorber, could ascend to immortality.

CITY OF EXCESS (2000–2849 AR)

More and more, the upper crust of Absalom society saw itself as superior, both to other nations and their own common class. Believing themselves too important to be bothered actually running their city, many council members, including some Grand Council high seats, hired outsiders to perform their legal duties, and even to do their voting for them. While this at first caused a stir, by 1997 AR it was a normal state of affairs. Primarch Willis of House Loranne eventually decided to outlaw any members of the Grand Council from actually performing their own work with the Proxy Laws, which required all city work and decisions to be made by paid professionals. The idea was to free up the "superior" members of Absalom's ruling caste to think about how to improve the city in broad terms, leaving it to hired professionals to carry out those visions. When the city held its millennial celebration in 2000 AR, not a single native was part of the planning.

Proud and rich, Absalom fell far from the golden age of Aroden's guidance and the heights of literature and

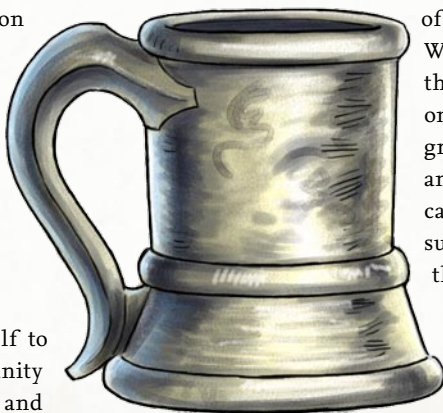


bravery brought about by fighting against numerous foes in sieges that often lasted years. Foreign traders were only too happy to take over the city's daily affairs, and the Grand Council became more a figurehead than a ruling power. While Absalom natives today are proud of their 4,000-year history of independence, for many centuries after the Proxy Laws Absalom was in truth ruled by two factions—the Blue Lords and the Cult of the Hawk. The Blue Lords were minor nobles from Taldor, spreading their wealth and influence by taking numerous seats on the Low Council as “favors” for corrupt and inebriated Absalom natives, then using their positions to channel wealth and power back to Taldor. The Cult of the Hawk was a mysterious merchant organization of Qadiran and Osirian mystics and traders who took positions of power in nearly every commercial venture within Absalom. The sheer size of the city prevented either faction from taking total control, but outside observers agreed it was only a matter of time before one or the other claimed Absalom officially for their masters.

Meanwhile, as long as mead, intoxicating smokes, courtesans, and gladiatorial games were available in copious amounts, none of the ruling class (and, truth be told, few of the poorer citizens) much cared who actually ran the city. Even the great battle of the era, the Siege of Krakens and Kings, was fought between two mercenary companies, both funded by foreign powers. Excess became the rule of the day, and public intoxication, fornication, and even defecation became commonplace. The height of this era came when Cayden Cailean passed the test of the *Starstone* while blind drunk. For decades afterward, orgies and carnivals of intoxication were the order in Absalom, with all restraint seen as pointless at best, and insulting at worst. If being drunk granted godhood, why restrain your cravings for any pleasure?

THE AGE OF BLADES (2850–3640 AR)

With Absalom again showing itself to be weak, enemies took the opportunity to try once more to breach its gates and claim its spoils. In 2850 AR the remaining Arclords of Nex, bitter from the loss of the Isle of Jalmeray to the Vudrani, unleashed the Conjured Siege. Rather than spend the time, coin, and influence needed to raise an army of skilled soldiers, the Arclords attempted to summon, conjure, charm, and even construct forces with magic. Absalom faced one of its darkest hours as all access to the city was cut off, supplies became scarce, and the wine-sotted city military commanders proved to have



no real idea how to fight a war. The foreign powers that had propped up Absalom for centuries decided now was the time to let it fall, and the pieces could be gathered from the Arclords afterward.

But the very size of Absalom saved it, as from its numbers new heroes and leaders arose. Threatened with its destruction, Absalom forced itself to take life seriously once more. Foreign agents suddenly found themselves trying to control not a sleepy city of indulgent hedonists, but a small nation of cornered rats fighting for survival. Anyone unable to explain what they were doing to aid the war effort risked being lynched, and anyone proven to have failed in their duties in previous decades was banished. The unspoken law was that Absalom's survival was of paramount importance, and any sacrifice was acceptable to accomplish that goal.

Fighting was desperate, and many tactics the new Absalom leaders used were dark, at best. To stop the Arclords, the city unleashed assassins, demon-summoners, and mercenaries with long records of rapine and banditry. Of course not all the city's defenders were of questionable moral content—the Ashawar Lancers, a company of Vudrani soldiers, arrived to defeat the Arclords as they had on Jalmeray. But increasingly, the feeling in Absalom was that any means was justified if it meant the survival of the city. This attitude is embodied by the first primarch to reassume the powers granted by the title, Lord Daynce of House Ryeen, who executed the entire Grand Council during the Conjured Siege in order to replace them with warriors loyal to him alone.

This trend was strengthened by word of the return of Tar-Baphon as the Whispering Tyrant, which was seen by the lords of Absalom as the unraveling of one of Aroden's great accomplishments. A grim determination settled over Absalom, and the mood changed from thoughts of carousing or moral high ground to simple survival. Ownership of a blade pin from the Irorium was seen as a requirement of service, and the second spell lord was granted vast military power in addition to overseeing the teaching of magic in Absalom.

The political situation changed further in 2920 AR when earthquakes in Taldor and Qadira killed thousands in those two nations. Already suffering much reduced incomes, attacks by angry natives, and a need to exert themselves to protect the city from other outside forces, many figures within the Blue Lords and the Cult of the Hawk abandoned their plots in Absalom and went to attend matters at home. Most seemed to believe Absalom would be ruined by its

OUTLYING TOWNS

Copperwood: In the early days of Absalom, when construction was ongoing, the unskilled laborers lived outside of the grand city walls, residing in simple huts and tents or else sleeping on the bare ground. Over the centuries, these poor buildings and living conditions slowly improved, and now the town of Copperwood is the source of much of the city's supply of laborers, simple tradesmen, and domestic servants (especially in the Petal District). "Copperheads" often hire themselves as guides or porters for adventurers visiting the isle.

Dawnfoot: Originally a camp for the members of the Starwatch (who house themselves outside the city as part of a pact between them and the First Guard), Dawnfoot has grown into a tightly knit community of military families, some of whom have served in the Watch for 10 generations. The town hall is a converted siege castle.

Shoreline: With the waterfront in Docks taken up by ships and piers, many fisherfolk settled outside the city walls. Over time this settlement acquired Absalom's smellier businesses (such as tanneries and breweries) and grew into a full town of hard-working folk. The people of Shoreline see themselves as better off than those in Puddles, for while they live outside the city walls, at least their homes aren't always flooded.

Westerhold: When Drun Deepkeg built a roadside inn for travelers who reached the city after dark over 2,000 years ago, he had no idea a town would spring up around him. Now, people from this town have a similar attitude to those of Westgate, and many families move between the two, often as a result of feuds or a desire to break from stifling family traditions or taboos. Most dwarves here are related to the Deepkegs and encourage foreign dwarves to settle in Westerhold and marry into the family.

enemies, and could be recaptured at a later date more cheaply than it could be held through political games and manipulations. But the core of Absalom was revealed to be strong, and the city came through the darkest period of its history with the confidence of knowing it could repel any foe, though the cost might be extreme. While slavery was legalized for the first time, the worship of Norgorber increased, and paid assassins became the most common way of settling scores, Absalom survived.

RISING TIDES (3641–4136 AR)

For centuries Absalom was seen as a dark hive of blackguards and necromancers, a deadly city to visit despite being the richest city of the Inner Sea. Many trade captains refused to allow their crews to set foot in Absalom, instead making all deals through porters and intermediaries. But as centuries passed, Absalom came

to creep back from its darkest days, and slowly its most immoral practices were outlawed, or at least suppressed. The Grand Council began to turn its attention outward, seeking to use diplomacy to prevent another era when Absalom would find itself without allies. Aid was given to anyone facing the Whispering Tyrant, who never managed to move directly against Absalom. When Aroden's herald Arazni was killed by the lich, the people of Absalom took it as a personal insult against their patron god. This righteous fervor reached its peak in 3832 AR, when Iomedae passed the Test of the *Starstone* and ascended to godhood. Records claim that half of all the paladins of the Inner Sea between 3830 AR and 3840 AR were trained in Absalom.

A growing power, talk in Absalom began to turn toward expansion. Though the city had a few vassal towns, it was increasingly a popular idea to choose some piece of land lacking strong, righteous rule, and claim it for Absalom. This talk made other nations of the Inner Sea nervous, and eventually led to the first Chelish Siege.

MITHRAL AGE (4137–4605 AR)

Cheliox saw the idea of an expansionist Absalom as a direct threat, and warned the Grand Council that any such effort would be seen as an act of aggression against Cheliox. The Grand Council responded in firm tones that no foreign concern would shape Absalom policy, and negotiations between the two nations became increasingly hostile. Cheliox tried to take Absalom in a massive siege, and did claim the Arch of Aroden, cutting off Absalom's access to the Arcadian Ocean. Though it did not fall to Cheliox, Absalom concluded that any effort to expand its influence would lead to war, and the idea lost popular support.

Instead, Absalom turned itself to putting its own internal affairs in order. Though a strong navy was maintained to ensure Absalom wouldn't fall to foreign forces, most money and effort went to solving internal problems of the city. The city of Escadar was established to ensure it was not dependent on its single harbor to house a navy. Slavery was outlawed within the city, permitting neither sale nor ownership of any sapient creature. Fighting academies and magical universities churned out heroes looking to battle evil all over Golarion. Tempered and strong, Absalom moved back toward its golden age of morality and strength.

As the theoretical Age of Glories approached, the idea that Aroden would return to Absalom spread, and the people began to consider how their patron god would view their city. They supported the causes of justice and freedom throughout the world, despite this policy leading to the Red Siege and the Siege of the Ravenous Raja. Poetry and dance became the favored forms of entertainment in the city, and talk spread of closing the Irorium, which already allowed only bouts between consenting,

“That statue? All we know for sure is that it was built before Cayden Cailean ascended to godhood, because his priests recorded that he dumped his ballast behind the left statue the night before, if you know what I’m saying.

“What? Yes, I said four thousand years ago. A few centuries after the city was founded. Stone doesn’t rot or burn, you know. We still have a lot of the work from the first few eons of the city’s construction, and a lot of it is privately owned. Why, didn’t your homeland exist four thousand years ago?”

—Donnica Mycelene la-Tep, native hotspur and nationalist

free adults. A sense that the hard work of centuries of moral sacrifice was going to reap great rewards became commonplace, and the Grand Council even built a new manor for Aroden to live in upon his return.

STORMY SEAS (4606–4659 AR)

Instead of the Age of Glories, the world saw the death of Aroden, and chaos ruled in Absalom. A series of minor quakes destroyed the manor of Aroden, demoralizing his desperate worshipers who had been clinging to their crippled faith like a lifeline, and the years of stormy seas brought a reduction in trade. The Mendevian Crusade called away many of the best and brightest of Absalom’s upper crust, and few returned. The city’s mood turned dark, and grew worse when a group of soldiers returning from the crusades demanded free access to the city and, when denied, laid in the Siege of Lost Knights. The storms that wracked the Inner Sea for weeks cut deeply into trade profits, and disastrous events in Tian Xia at the same time reduced trade from the far east to a trickle for years to come.

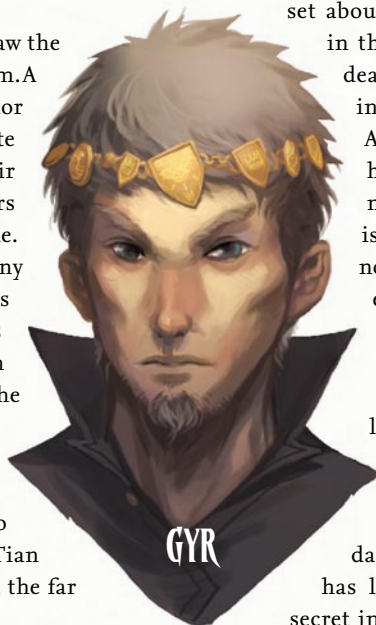
Weakened, cut off, and suffering its first economic shortages in centuries, Absalom fell from the moral high ground in an effort to maintain its previous glories. Agents of the House of Thrune gave the ailing Primarch Seib of House Slavikes extensive loans and support in return for legal and economic concessions, propping up his rule for the decades following the loss of Aroden. As Cheliox made a clear move to take control of Absalom (including purchasing the temple to Aroden in an attempt to cement their position at the former spiritual center of the city), conflicts with other factions broke into open fighting in the streets. Crime spiraled out of control, and while trade began to pick up, much of it was in slaves and illicit drugs. When Primarch Seib died in 4659 AR, his face frozen in terror, the city erupted in riots.

REIGN OF GYR (4660 AR–PRESENT)

Exactly how Lord Gyr knew to return home in 4660 AR, and how he gained so much political power so quickly upon his arrival, remain openly discussed mysteries in Absalom. A wandering adventurer for decades, Gyr quickly gained a high seat on the Grand Council and set about using his own troops to quell rioting in the richest sections of town. Then he cut deals with more than half the other factions in the city, and managed to quiet most of Absalom. Within 6 months of his arrival he was elected primarch, and his rule has not wavered since that day. Though he is neither the puppet Cheliox hoped for, not the reformer many of his supporters expected, all the city’s major factions acknowledge he is better than most of the alternatives.

Under Gyr, Absalom has returned to the largest trade city in the Inner Sea, contact with Tian Xia has been reestablished, and peace has reigned over most of the city, most of the time. His foes dare not move against him directly, which has led to a shadow war of hidden strings, secret influence, and long-term plans. Gyr holds

his position without showing any favoritism to any faction, which increases the city’s current stability, but also points to the likelihood of more riots when Gyr dies. He has the support of the common folk of the city, but only so long as he doesn’t ask too much of them. Even so he is seen as something of a folk hero, and proof that anyone can become primarch if he works for the position and is competent and a little lucky. Increasingly, a rumor suggests Gyr is waiting for a new young hero to rise from Absalom’s lower ranks, to follow his path from student to adventurer to politician and finally primarch, though Gyr himself has never suggested he would ever support a successor. Whoever inherits the office of primarch will face many challenges, and the first of them is living up to Gyr’s legacy.





Secrets

Oh, I assure, this little mystery is nothing. Here in the City, every back alley, belt-purse, and bully is the heart of some grand secret. Why, I myself am the rightful heir of the true throne of Cheliah, on my mother's side, from before the devil-lickers took over. But what difference does that make to the price of mead in the Coins?

—Donnica Mycelene la-Tep,
native hotspur and rightful heir to Cheliah
...on her mother's side

THE SHADOW WAR

Ask six natives of Absalom who rules the city, and you'll get a dozen answers. Clearly the most powerful political force in the city is the primarch, Lord Gyr. Even the primarch must answer to the Grand Council, however, and can only rule so long as he can control that council. The Grand Council is thus often said to rule, though they must leave much of the administration of the city to the larger Low Council. Of course, if the Low Council ever angered the whole Grand Council, their seats could all be stripped. That is, only if the Star Watch supported the Grand Council against the house troops of the Low Council. And even the Star Watch can't fight a battle without supplies brought into the city by aid of the Harbormaster's Grange, control of which is determined by Lord Gyr.

The powerful lords and factions of Absalom are all aware of the complex, interconnected nature of control within the city. Even though no nation is currently besieging Absalom, trade is good, money flows through the city's coffers, and Lord Gyr holds enough power to guarantee no one openly opposes him, it should never be thought that Absalom is at peace, or even safe. There is an ever-raging conflict between the factions that wish

to hold the influence to rule Absalom from behind the scenes. To control Absalom is to control the Inner Sea, and no nation on Golarion or organization within it is ignorant of that fact. Lord Gyr may rule, but his decisions are based on what he believes is necessary to protect the people and wealth of Absalom. If a faction can gain enough agents, spies, saboteurs, allies, and gold to shape what Lord Gyr believes is needful, then it, at least for a time, controls Absalom.

This endless struggle for influence, information, advantage, and power is a well-known aspect of life among the wealthy and powerful natives of the city, and is referred to as the Shadow War or War of Strings. It is a commonplace idea that strings pulled from offstage control the visible faces of action within the city, and it's not unusual for a native to observe that "when a councilman pulls a string, the price of onions doubles." Often, this is just another example of commoners finding a way to complain about their superiors without offending anyone specific. On other occasions, it may turn out the price of onions is crucial to a debate regarding the budget for the Starwatch, and the warehouse where the largest onion-monger normally keeps his stores was the scene of a battle between mask-wearing hotspurs and a gang of wererats that boiled up out of the nearest sewer grate.

To illustrate what kind of danger a character might run into in Absalom, below is an example of how deep the War of Strings can run.

At first blush, Goodman Hugen of House Candren, High Seat of the Grand Council and First Harbormaster, is a firm supporter of Lord Gyr and the unquestioned master of the Harbormaster's Grange (one of Absalom's most powerful city offices). In fact, neither of these things is true.

Goodman Hugen abhors positions of nobility and privilege, which is why he refuses the title of "Lord" granted to any other member of the Grand Council or house scion. Though he supported Lord Gyr in the primarch's early efforts to control and revitalize the city, Hugen now believes Absalom needs newer, younger blood. Lord Gyr earned his rank originally, but in recent years has spent more money and time ensuring his own position than looking after the city. Agents of Andoran approached Hugen years ago and convinced him that maintaining the traditions of Taldor within his family was a mistake. Thus House Candren has swung to be a full supporter of Andoran under Goodman Hugen's guidance, and now works to place Andoran agents in positions of power throughout the city, waiting for Lord Gyr to overstep himself or die. When the city is ready for a new primarch for any reason, Goodman Hugen plans to begin a popular revolt to place power in the hands of the people.

Meanwhile, Hugen is a great power throughout the city largely because of his position as First Harbormaster.

Without the Absalom pilots and the Harbormaster's Grange, Hugen would find himself a secondary player at best, and possibly even lose his position as high seat. As a result, several high and lesser seats of the Grand Council do everything they can to make Hugen look bad, in hopes Lord Gyr will begin moving to replace him. The most effective of these attacks are currently coming from Lady Darchana of House Madinani, the senior low seat on the Grand Council and archdean at the Arcanamirium.

Lady Darchana encourages students of the Arcanamirium to research ways to allow trade in and out of the city without needing the use of ships. While a few *flying carpets* and *horseshoes of water-walking* have come about in recent years, the greatest advances have been in mass teleportation rituals. She has secretly set up more than one permanent *teleport circle* to buildings she owns in far-off cities, and believes soon she will be able to increase trade worldwide, with ships becoming obsolete. While her reach currently exceeds her grasp, she has proved she can bring in expensive goods without Hugen or his agents ever seeing (or taxing) them, thus gaining a reputation as a growing power.

As a direct result of this, Scion Lady Xansippe of House Tevineg has begun making romantic motions toward Lady Darchana, which seem to be fairly welcome. As Lady Darchana instructs at the Arcanamirium, and Scion Lady Tevineg commands the loyalty of the sergeant-at-wands, an alliance between them could bring considerable arcane might to bear against Goodman Hugen, which Xansippe hopes would allow her to replace him with a Chelish agent. However, Lady Darchana serves on the Crier's Table, comprised of members of the Low Council who are responsible for seeing that new Grand Council decrees are relayed throughout Absalom by hiring and equipping criers. As a result she answers directly to Scion Lady Neferpata of House Ahnkamen, the First Lady of Laws. Scion Lady Neferpata abhors the devil-worshipping Chelaxians, causing Lady Darchana to beg off spending time with Xansippe, claiming if Neferpata were gone, the two could be together.

While this does encourage House Tevineg to weaken House Ahnkamen, in fact Lady Darchana has no interest in working with Lady Xansippe, nor does she fear the wrath of Scion Lady Neferpata. Lady Darchana is secure in her support from Lord Gixx, whom she sees as an old fool. She works against Hugen because she wishes to set off the same city-wide riot he does, but in her case she wants to destroy all the high seats of the Grand Council. Then, she will call in a fleet of Taldan ships, and anoint Princess Eutropia as Queen of Absalom by citing the title of primarch-in-waiting of Absalom (which is not explicitly tied to laws of primogeniture), using the city as a base for her to claim all of Taldor and restoring the empire to glory.

CORNUCOPIAS

The 12 cornucopias of Absalom are open secrets. Discussion of their appearance, location, or function is banned by law, but hundreds of people have to be aware of exactly those things to enforce the laws. As the laws themselves are secret, a violator can't be properly tried for his crime without exposing the existence of what is supposed to be kept a secret. They are even referenced in the Founding Law, as the "Twelve Icons of High Office, Known and Maintained by the Council Itself under Its Governing Laws," though the mentioned "Governing Laws" are the only secret Founding Law. As a result, anyone who truly cares how the government of Absalom functions knows of the cornucopias and their different appearances, but such things are never discussed openly.

The cornucopias serve two important functions in Absalom. First, being able to produce one of the magic horns of plenty at the annual *Starstone* Exaltation meeting of the high seats of the Grand Council is the only requirement for holding a high seat. Though those who hold the cornucopias, and thus the high seats, are generally very careful about security of the horns, and often pass them to hand-picked successors upon retirement, in theory if an applicant arrived with a horn that was taken through trickery, fraud, dishonesty, or violence, he would still become a member of the High Council once the meeting began. Realistically, these meetings are among the most clandestine held by the Grand Council, and the location is a closely guarded secret for exactly this reason. Even if an upstart did possess a horn, his chance of finding the meeting where the horn must be presented would be slim, and the title of high seat does not transfer until the meeting starts. At least one primarch in Absalom's past has killed an upstart before declaring the meeting open, then returned the cornucopia to its rightful owner.

No primarch has ever failed to produce his cornucopia, and if one did there would be trouble knowing what to do about it. Without the horn, the primarch would lose his seat on the Grand Council. However, the rank of primarch is granted for life, and is not officially tied to the position on the high seats of the council. There's a fair chance the Grand Council would decide the simplest course of action would be to kill the seatless primarch and elect a new one from those with cornucopias.



In the event that a seat is vacated because no one produces a particular cornucopia, the seat stays open until the first meeting where an applicant produces the horn in question. This has happened a few times in Absalom's history, but not often. If a seat sits open, everyone in the upper reaches of Absalom society scrambles to find the missing horn and ensure the applicant presenting it is a vassal or ally. Because the authority of the Grand Council would vanish if there was ever a *Starstone* Exaltation where no cornucopias were produced, when more than one seat is open the efforts of the town's elite grow exponentially. As the holder of a cornucopia recognizes the other 11 on sight, forgery of these relics is not an option, even though each has a unique appearance.

The second function of the cornucopias is to provide for Absalom when it is under siege. Each of the horns is capable of creating food for thousands of people every day when the ports and roads into Absalom are closed (although the items do nothing when trade flows freely). When all other supplies run short, the Grand Council can feed a core of Absalom's defenders

and a fair fraction of its citizens simply by pouring forth food and drink endlessly from the horns. It is known that each has its own name, though those details are truly secret, as is the security each high seat uses to ensure his own cornucopia is never stolen.

Though it is apocryphal at best, a single epic poem exists describing the nature of one of the 12 horns, which the saga names *Nightbane*. In 50 rhyming verses, the poem claims *Nightbane* is a thinking relic, sleeping for centuries at a time but waking when its homeland is threatened. It also, goes the legend, seeks to prevent an endless night from falling over all Golarion and every few centuries demands its holder use the wealth and power granted him by his position to aid the magic horn in preventing this disaster. The poem is too well known in Absalom for any action to be taken against those repeating it without suggesting the verses are true, though the Grand Council may also ignore it merely because it is entirely fictional.

THE GREEN MIST MURDERS

One of the ongoing threats in the Coins or Puddles is violent crime. Most crimes are driven by anger or pursuit

of profit, but in a city as large as Absalom, some criminals break the law to satisfy their own evil drives. One such killer is the Green Mist Murderer, who brutally slays and mutilates victims on nights when a greenish mist comes off Absalom Harbor, a rare occurrence seen no more than three times a year. The Green Mist Murderer has been active for decades, and though he originally stalked prey only in the Coins, he has now been known to strike in Puddles, the Precipice Quarter, and even the Docks. Most natives assume the killer is a supernatural creature such as a ghoul or vampire, and the green mist is the sign of its actual arrival in Absalom.

The truth is much simpler. The “killer” is actually a deranged family, who decided long ago that the failure of the Age of Glories to arrive means there is no afterlife, and thus mortals suffer no penalty for their actions in life. Though they have no official title, the members of this small clan of 40 or so refer to themselves as House Anguish. Inbred, uneducated, and crafted with a sickness in their heads when the gods made them, members of the house enjoy causing pain and death. Their first true murder took place on a night of the rare Green Mist, and the clan realized that by sticking to this method they could avoid suspicion because everyone “knows” magic of some kind must be involved. With each success the house grows bolder, and at the next Green Mist they have considered seeking 12 victims, one for each high seat of the Grand Council, just to see how the city reacts.

TOMBS OF THE LIVING

One of the Founding Laws of Absalom grants all adult natives of the city (defined as those born on the Isle of Kortos, children of those born there, and anyone who serves the councils or guard units of Absalom for no less than 10 years, and always interpreted to exclude children or slaves) protection from unwilling exile or imprisonment except as punishment upon conviction of a crime. The law maintains that those who continue to move when entombed are excepted from this protection, a clear nod to the possibility of burying still-animate undead. Though these laws are a matter of public record, and carved on the walls of courthouses and monuments to the civilization of Absalom, few natives give the legal protection, or its exception, any serious thought.

However, over 4,000-plus years, the government of Absalom has from time to time found it needs to imprison natives without bringing them to trial. In most cases this is done to protect the citizen, as for those who suffer some mental imbalance or dangerous curse that makes it unsafe for them to live free. Since natives cannot be imprisoned in a dungeon or stockade without a trial, and there is no law against being insane, families of such unfortunates often come to their councilors for advice on how to protect

their more ornery loved ones who resist being restrained for their own sake. Lord Huraes of House Aeronae solved this problem in 1,282 AR with living entombment.

Lord Huraes built the Tombs of the Living, an Osirian-style tomb complex located deep beneath Westgate. Each burial chamber is in fact a small living quarter designed to house a single tenant. The main doors of these chambers are massive stone blocks, too large and heavy for even a strong man to move, but access shafts are also cut into the ceilings to allow acolytes to enter the chambers for “prayers,” which often include bringing new offerings (of food and clothing, for example) to those tenants entombed within. By strictly maintaining all the trappings and ceremonial rites of a tomb, Lord Huraes argued that he wasn’t breaking any laws as no clause stated that those “who continue to move when entombed” had to be dead or undead. Since there was a need for such a facility, the Grand Council concurred and allowed the tombs to continue to operate. To prevent tricky legal questions, the Council also required the tombs to operate secretly and only accept new tenants when directed to do so by the Council. This allowed the Council to aid important families who needed to keep a family member safe, without opening the idea to anyone who wanted to run a prison by another name. Of course, the tombs have been used for less humanitarian purposes many times over the centuries.

SECRET SOCIETIES

Absalom is a vast, ancient, chaotic city constantly in the center of ongoing international conspiracies to control or destroy it. It stands to reason such a location would be rife with secret societies. Some, such as the Great and Powerful Order of the Turtle, are little more than social clubs with exclusive membership (and aren’t actually all that secret). Others, such as the Hellsquires, keep so high a degree of secrecy that they almost never risk taking action of any kind. But a few are active enough to risk notice by those paying attention, and resourceful enough to carry out some operations under the eyes of the vast City at the Center of the World.

Bloody Barbers

This thieves’ guild operates under the front of the Band of the Palm. They are the larger of the two thieves’ guilds that operate throughout Absalom, and nearly every barber in Absalom pays a fee to the Bloody Barbers. Most barbershops in the guild also serve as safe houses for its more shadowy members, as well as fences and dens for illegal narcotics. Though a few of the hair-cutters and groomers in Absalom resent their automatic association with the illegal part of their business, anyone who crosses the Bloody Barbers is likely to receive the “crimson shave”—a slit throat.

Control of the Bloody Barbers is kept in the hands of a few families by both tradition and careful planning on the part of those families. Chelish in descent, they have taken to the new direction of their homeland with ease, and many openly worship devils of all stripes. The barbershops owned directly by the guild act as bases of operation and lending houses, with grim-faced, razor-carrying barbers serving as go-betweens and security. Minor issues are handled by having a barber go in back while a customer waits to get a shave. Major issues (and major loans at huge interest rates) may call for applicants to go in back themselves. Some of these are never seen again.

The Barbers also control numerous junk dealers, who have carts with rusty weapons, old Osirian oil lamps, stained or singed books, rags, and scrap wood for sale. Though the junk men make very little buying, selling, and trading scraps, they do a brisk business in the fencing of stolen goods. Pick-ups and deliveries are handled under cover of junk acquisition, while special orders can be requested and picked up at a local barbershop. The Bloody Barbers also control chimney sweeps, coal-carriers, wheelwrights, limners, and bathhouses throughout Absalom.

Recently they've made a deal with the mysterious Dr. Bensi Skule, an alchemist with a network of street urchins that feed him information and rumors. The doctor provides the Bloody Barbers with alchemical items and disgusting potions that enhance regeneration, while the guild provides him with experimental victims, exotic materials, and connections outside the city.

Harbingers

It is common knowledge that no prophecy has come to pass since 4606 AR, and the foreseen Age of Glory has not materialized. No mortal knows why, and few still struggle with the questions of what might have been had things gone as prophecy claimed they would. The Harbingers of Fate are among those few.

The Harbingers were founded in 4648 AR by Lord Garron, an ousted noble of Chelixa and faithful follower of Aroden. A mercenary and adventurer, Lord Garron discovered the *Book of 1,000 Whispers*, a tome of prophecies predicting events from 4604 AR to 4714 AR. Seeing that those predicted to come to pass before 4605 AR had done so, Lord Garron became convinced that if he could make a prophecy from his book come true, he could re-write fate and bring about the Age of Glory, and possibly even the return of Aroden. He created the Harbingers of Fate, a secret group of believers in the book's veracity, and tasked them with ensuring that one of the destinies outlined within came to pass.

Lord Garron's daughter Lady Arodeth continues his work to this day. Publicly the vapid inheritor of a mercenary company called the Band of Blades, in fact she is a cunning

politician and manipulator who will stop at nothing to force the Age of Glory to arrive, heralded by a prophecy she makes come true. She knows that she has just 6 years left before the *Book of 1,000 Whispers* runs out of predictions, and to make matters more urgent, most of the prophecies in the book are gibberish. Even so, her Harbingers secretly seek out people, places, and things that might, if viewed correctly, meet the terms of some divination written down more than a century ago.

If they find a likely hero of a prophecy, be it "a princess of the north, with one eye of fire and the other emerald," or "a child never born, raised by wolves of the arcane," the Harbingers begin trying

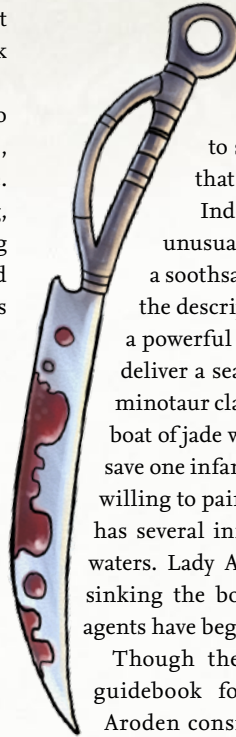
to secretly direct this person into situations that could fulfill an ancient prediction.

Indeed, the Harbingers aren't above making unusual things happen, if doing so might cause a soothsaying to come to pass. If someone matches the description of a person the book says will defeat a powerful minotaur, the Harbingers hire him to deliver a sealed letter containing a deadly insult to a minotaur clan. If it is written that on a particular day a boat of jade will go down in deep water with all hands, save one infant of great importance, the Harbingers are willing to paint numerous boats green and ensure each has several infants to carry on missions to dangerous waters. Lady Arodeth has not yet reached the level of sinking the boats herself, though her more dedicated agents have begun to consider such extreme measures.

Though the *Book of 1,000 Whispers* has been the guidebook for the Harbingers for decades, Lady Aroden considers it only one option. She also sends agents to investigate any rumors of old transcripts of prophecies for the current era, or claims that some spellcaster or sage can predict the future. She maintains the Band of Blades both as a cover for sending her agents abroad and to earn funds for the Harbingers' more expensive efforts. Though the Harbingers often set up targets to act as heroes, thus bringing peace and safety to some small villages and travelers, they have also created villains and hazards just to see if anyone can overcome them in a manner consistent with some prognostication. Such methods are acceptable to Lady Aroden, as she considers the end goal—the arrival of the Age of Glory and the possible resurrection of Aroden—to be worth questionable means.

Smoke Knights

The group known as the Smoke Knights is among the smaller (and much more secretive) of the thieves' guilds to operate in Absalom. Unlike the Bloody Barbers, who are public and deal mostly in street crime, the Smoke Knights are a secret organization that deals only in the most high-



end capers. Their schemes often deal with inheritances, objects of magic power, and vast fortunes such as the cargoes of whole ships or contents of underground vaults. The Smoke Knights see themselves as experts and masters of their trade, in the same league as trademasters, gold swords, and master wizards. They keep their existence a closely guarded secret, and use their association to aid one another in particularly dangerous, complex, and profitable robberies.

The Smoke Knights are organized as a knightly order, with junior members called knights-errant, full members knight captains, and senior members knight lords. A single knight marshal sits in control of the entire guild, though his power is restricted to approving new members and judging members that break the guild's code. A thief gains entry into the order of Smoke Knights only upon selection by an existing member, a series of covert tests (which are often quite hard on candidates, who don't even know they are being tested), and finally an interview with the knight marshal. A candidate must show cunning, combat prowess, expertise in some aspect of burglary, and the ability to maintain a secret. The Smoke Knights believe their success is dependant on their existence never being proven. Their crimes are known, but no authority ever suspects that they are organized by a band of disciplined, organized master thieves.

The current Knight Marshal is Trademaster Horner Shan, though he is known in some circles as "the Gargoyle" for his ability to remain motionless as a statue for hours. Under his direction, the Smoke Knights have pulled off some of the greatest robberies in Absalom's history without anyone ever suspecting their existence. Any new job must be proposed by a knight captain or knight lord, and approved by at least two full members who will gain nothing from its performance. The proposing member then selects a team of experts to commit the crime, often choosing knight-errants so they can gain greater experience. Since there are many aspects to a complex robbery, many Smoke Knights are spellcasters, warriors, and even members of other thieves' guilds, though the Smoke Knights demand an oath of loyalty to their organization above all others.

The Smoke Knights obey a "code of fire," designed to prevent the members and the guild from being "burned." First, no crime is committed that threatens the safety of Absalom itself, as it is the knighthood's home. Second, each crime must have the acquisition of wealth as its primary focus, and use theft as its primary method. The Smoke Knights are willing to use extortion, torture, and blackmail as part of a complex plan, but not as the actual wealth-gathering focus of a crime. They are proud of their thievery, and see other misdeeds as beneath their talents. Finally, each Smoke Knight must vow to take his own life before revealing the existence of the order or the names of any that assisted in a given crime.

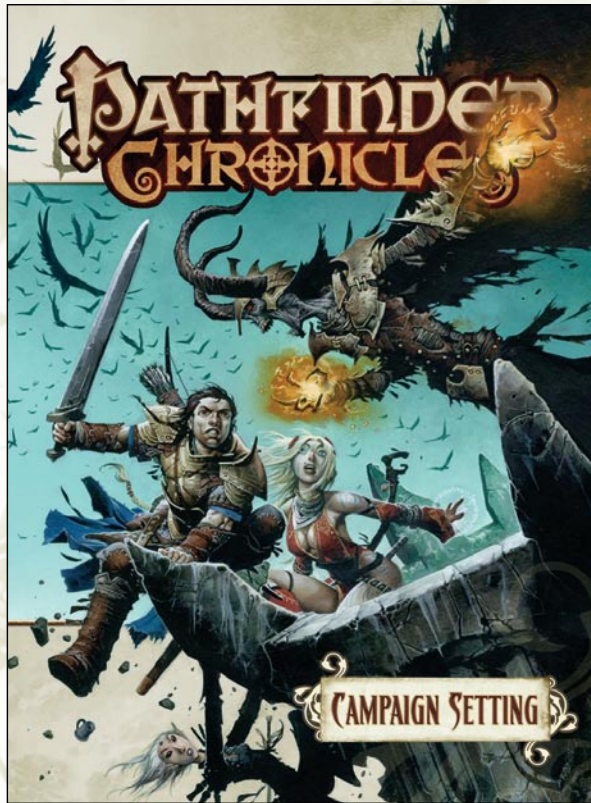
THE SIEGE CASTLES OF ABSALOM

There are many Siege Castles around Absalom, and even a few located elsewhere on the Isle of Kortos where armies tried to establish beachheads to aid in their invasions. Massive strongholds built by enemy armies, the siege castles vary from rotting wooden towers designed to be pulled by elephants, sea-ships drawn up from the ocean and set in stone foundations to serve as quick fortresses, temples raised from stones hauled across the Inner Sea for the greater glory of foreign gods, manufactured mountains built to give catapults range over Absalom's walls, arcane towers to serve powerful wizards building undead armies, and vast tombs where the fallen of a defeated army can be put to eternal rest. They litter the countryside around Absalom, and are often used as strongholds by smugglers, brigands, adventurers, and unspeakable evils. No consolidated effort has been made to map or name all of them, though certainly the largest and most famous are well documented. The inhabitants of Absalom tend to ignore the siege castles, even when new monsters, brigands, or haunts move into one—unless something from a siege castle is making an immediate and noteworthy impact on daily life in city, they just aren't on the minds of the natives.

The numerous armies that have tried to overcome the city have included sorcerers, diabolists, inhuman hosts, cultists, and even demigods. This means that from a campaign perspective, a siege castle is the perfect place to put nearly any site-based dungeon. Almost any dungeon background can be altered to fit as the special project or last-ditch doomsday weapon of some invading army of Absalom's past—giving GMs an endless supply of places to stage adventures not originally written for Golarion. For example, if the dungeon is a prison of an ancient evil, the thing imprisoned there can either be one of the commanders of the attacking forces (punished by its commanders for failing to take the city, or by the spell lords of Absalom for even trying), or a "last-ditch" weapon that was never used or failed when tried. Any abandoned temples may have been built by the mercenary cult employed by an attacker, or even be the headquarters of an attacking nation long since fallen. Dungeons based around undead are easy to work into a vast killing ground where hundreds of thousands have died over millennia of intermittent war.

Finally, any dungeon can be the current incarnation of the Spire of Nex. Less than a day from the city, this infamous siege castle is a pocket dimension created by one of the most powerful spellcasters in the history of the world, constantly changing both its interior and its inhabitants. Pathfinders have been raiding the Spire of Nex for decades, and even when completely cleared out and burned to the ground, it reforms as a new structure within a few seasons.

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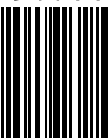
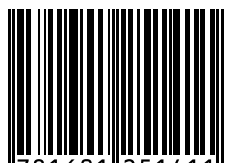
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