

DRAGON COAST ADVENTURER'S GUIDE



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AN ADVENTURER'S GUIDE TO THE HEARTLANDS

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INTRODUCTION

To the east of the Sword Coast is a region known as the Heartlands. Few agree on precisely what lands make up this region, though five nations commonly said to be part of it are: Cormyr, the Dalelands, the Dragon Coast, Sembia, and Turmish.

This guide will take you through each of these lands, as seen through the eyes of those that have visited them. These accounts, while largely accurate, are biased by each person's outlook and assumptions. As with the *Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide*, the details provided here are merely meant to be a starting point for making the Realms your own.

The *Dragon Coast Adventurer's Guide* also contains five new backgrounds for your characters. These backgrounds are: the Feytouched, the Heir to Adventure, the Hired Muscle, the Urban Explorer, and the Westhavian Noble. Each of these backgrounds corresponds loosely to one of the five regions of the Heartlands, though can just as easily suit characters from almost anywhere else.



CORMYR

Cormyr is a land of peace, order and tranquillity. Where other lands these days are plagued by cynicism and greed, Cormyr show us that there is a place for idealism and selflessness. This might sound odd coming from me, considering I'm a member of the Lords' Alliance. However, the Lords' Alliance and Cormyr have worked closely together against the myriad threats to order and civilisation.

Much of Cormyr's peace and prosperity can be ascribed to House Obarskyr, the royal family of Cormyr. Whether due to good breeding or correct upbringing, these rulers have invariably been wise and just. Where some royal families quickly descend into greed and corruption, the Obarskyrs have always been beacons of goodness that show nobility at their very best.

If the royal family are nobility at their best, the noble houses are often seen as nobility at their worst. Their constant scheming, games of political intrigue, and bids for power have caused many commoners to take a dim view of them. Historically, they have occasionally served a useful purpose; steering kings and queens back on the right path on the rare occasions that they've strayed from it.

Keeping the nobles in check are the War Wizards. As well as serving as soldiers, these mages also act as spies, advisors and bodyguards for the royal family. In the past, the War Wizards were free to spy on and read the mind of anyone they wished. However, the wise and just rulers of Cormyr eventually limited how and when they were allowed to use their powers. Despite that, the War Wizards do their best to keep up the appearance of being all-knowing and all-powerful in order to discourage potential enemies of the royal family.

Also aiding in the defence of the realm are the Purple Dragons. This group of knights act as bodyguards, soldiers, guards, and occasionally even elite agents. They are known for their skill, their righteousness, their sense of duty, and their loyalty to the crown. When most folk speak of the classical knight in shining armour, they are speaking of a Purple Dragon.

Together, these forces come together to form a peaceful land. Unfortunately for some, a peaceful land has little call for adventurers. As such, the kingdom doesn't allow well-armed vagabonds to wander around the cities and countryside unchecked. There are a number of laws that more chaotic adventurers may find constraining.

The first is that those entering Cormyr must register with the officials at the border garrison. The second is that adventurers must obtain a charter before operating as a group in Cormyr. The third and final law that primarily affects adventurers is that all weapons must be peace-bound while in major settlements.

The peace and tranquillity of Cormyr has been challenged somewhat in recent times, especially during the war with Sembia. This war saw the rise of Queen Raedra and ended with Sembia being defeated. Many in Cormyr see their victory against Sembia as a sign that nobility and righteousness triumph against barbarity and cruelty.

Since then, Queen Raedra has had her hands full restoring peace. She's pulled back Cormyr's borders to its traditional boundaries, likely seeing from Sembia the futility in needless

expansionism. She also invested a great deal of money in rebuilding damage done by the war and making sure that the common people are protected.

This was all much to the chagrin of the nobility, many of whom would have liked nothing more than for Cormyr to spread its might across Sembia and the Dragon Coast. However, while those lawless lands could definitely benefit from Cormyr's guidance, that is not how Cormyr does things. It is not a nation that teaches others by conquering them; instead it serves as a guide by being an inspiration and an example of what other nations could be.

ARABEL

Arabel, like all Cormyrean cities, is a glorious place. It is a prosperous, walled city that sits on the crossroads of two major trading routes. As such, it has a deserved reputation for being a city of trade, with many travellers and caravans from across the Realms passing through it.

This wealth and the large number of outsiders makes the city slightly rougher and more wild than most Cormyr cities. For example, it is the only major city in Cormyr where adventurers are able to wander around without their weapons peace-bound. This, along with the city's many markets and taverns, makes the city a magnet for adventurers.

Another attraction for adventurers and assorted lowlifes is the Lady's House, a temple of Tymora. During the Time of Troubles, Arabel was visited by Tymora's avatar. Since then, the temple has grown in wealth and influence; transforming from a temple into a glorified gambling den.

Many games of skill and chance can be played at this temple. Many of these games are played with gold and platinum, rather than copper or silver, meaning it only attracts the wealthiest of clientele. Adventurers are especially drawn here, lured in by tales of the ancient treasures and magical items that can be won in the temple's games.

Of course, even at its lowest and most chaotic, Arabel is still a Cormyrean city and, as such, a step above other major cities from across the Realms. Despite some lowlifes and unscrupulous individuals who sometimes pass through it, the city is still amongst the safest and most peaceful cities in the Heartlands.

MARSEMBER

Marsember is Cormyr's busiest port, with visitors coming from all over the Sea of Fallen Stars to visit it. Marsember is highly suited for being Cormyr's naval capital. It is largely made up of canals, docks, and small islands interconnected by a series of bridges. Many goods flow through Marsember, the most notable of which are spices from eastern lands, which wealthy Cormyreans love.

Unfortunately, the many outsiders flowing into Marsember bring crime with them. There is a significant criminal underbelly in Marsember, one based largely around smuggling. While not as bad as criminal underbellies in cities of the Dragon Coast or of Sembia, it is still worse than

much of Cormyr.

Historically, there has also been problems with cults and conspiracies. Supposedly, there are a number of tunnels beneath Marsember that have been inhabited by a number of different creatures over the centuries. Mind flayers, doppelgangers, and kuo-toa, are but some of the creatures said to have lurked down there. While these tunnels have long since been cleared out multiple times by adventurers, there are still rumours of dark and twisted creatures that dwell beneath the city.

Indeed, one of the strangest idiosyncrasies of Marsembian is their obsession with telling dark and implausible tales. Many stories exist of the witches, pirates, ghosts, banshees, and will-o'-the-wisps that are said to inhabit the bogs surrounding the city. Other tales speak of ships that suddenly sank close to shore, and the unpleasant fate that awaits those who are sent to salvage their remains.

SUZAIL

Suzail is the capital of Cormyr. It is a large, beautiful, peaceful city. The streets are patrolled by friendly Purple Dragons, the locals are welcoming, and even outsiders know to behave themselves. All in all, the city is idyllic. If ever there were a perfect city in the Realms, it would be Suzail.

To the north of the city, separated from much of the rest of Suzail by the Promenade (a wide, semicircular street), is the Royal Gardens. At the centre of the Royal Gardens is Castle Obarskyr, a beautiful palace of spires and balconies. The palace is home to the royal family, who oversee the affairs of state from it.

Sitting near Castle Obarskyr is the Royal Court. This structure is a collection of interconnected buildings, said to be riddled with secret passages, forgotten chambers, spies, and assassins. In truth, while it is home to much of the nobles' political intrigue, it is more well-known for being the home of judges, administrators and bureaucrats. It is here that adventuring charters are issued, business and trade licences are requested, and official ceremonies are held.

Beyond the Castle Obarskyr and the Royal Court, there are many places to visit throughout Suzail. Many of these locations sites of historical and cultural import, though most adventurers visiting Suzail prefer to stick to the many taverns, festhalls, and clubhouses. The Society of Stalwart Adventurers is perhaps the most famous of these clubhouses, being home to a great many famous explorers, adventurers, and monster hunters.

WHELOON

In times passed, Wheloon was a busy and wealthy trading hub. It sat astride the Wyvernflow River, with a ferry that carried merchants and travellers from one side to the other. It was a peaceful and pleasant city, with nary a thing wrong with it. Or so everyone assumed, anyway.

Several decades ago, it came to the attention of the king at the time that the majority of the

city's residents were Shar worshippers and potentially Netherese spies. Cormyreans had already had trouble with Netherese and Sembian agents trying to undermine their fair kingdom. As such, the king ordered that the entire city be transformed into a prison for suspected Netherese spies, and that the city's inhabitants be its first inmates.

At the time, the king's decision was seen as prudent, though history has not been kind to him. Queen Raedra, especially, takes a dim view of how the Whelunians were treated. Unfortunately for her, before she had the opportunity to pardon the prison-city's inhabitants, the city was destroyed by an invading Sembian army, with many of its inhabitants either killed or press-ganged into joining the Sembian army.

Over the past few years, Queen Raedra has worked on rebuilding the city. The new city stands as a monument to the Wheloon that was, as well as a reminder of what happens when a nation succumbs to fear and paranoia. With sound investments from the royal purse, the city has grown into a trading hub once more.

The city is something of a symbol for second chances. Many settlers in the new city are those seeking to start a new life, away from the past. While many of these settlers come from Cormyr, others come from Sembia and the Dragon Coast. Despite that, Wheloon is a relatively peaceful and orderly city, with less crime and lawlessness than you might expect.

DALELANDS

The Dalelands are what the rest of the Realms could be, if only they wanted it. It is every Harper's ideal land. It is a place of freedom and independence, tempered with responsibility. It is a land where all people work towards a common good, and no idle kings or greedy merchant lords prosper off the backs of ordinary folk.

Despite what some think, the Dalelands are not a true nation. Instead, they are an alliance of counties known as dales. Each dale has its own culture, customs and outlooks; though with many points of commonality. What unites them above all else is their desire, deep down, to live simple lives, untroubled by outsiders.

This causes some to view the Dalesfolk as unfriendly and suspicious of outsiders. However, the Dalesfolk have earned every right to wary of outsiders, especially considering the amount of conflicts they've had with their neighbours, both in the recent, and distant past. Their heavy focus on community and hard work also means that they don't feel obligated to show courtesy to someone who hasn't shown willingness to contribute to the community.

And, make no mistake, community is what the dales are all about. The Dalesfolk don't feel the need to build themselves large, elaborate, impersonal cities. Instead, they limit themselves to small towns, villages, and hamlets where everyone knows each other. These settlements are, in turn, connected up into relationships that form each dale, which in turn unite together to form the Dalelands.

A big part of this community is communication. If there is a point of tension or lack of cohesion between certain dales, the leaders will get together and discuss it like adults, rather than letting the conflict fester and grow. To this end, every year, during Midwinter, each dale sends a delegate to the Dales Council, where they discuss matters relating to all the dales, such as border disputes and the maintenance of trade routes.

This reliance on communication over needless aggression extends to the Dalelands' relationship with the elves of Cormanthor. To many outsiders, it seems improbable that humans and elves can exist in the same forest, spreading themselves out, without coming into conflict with each other. However, it really is as simple as both sides respecting each other, communicating with each other, and wanting peace and prosperity more than they want war and domination.

ARCHENDALE

Archendale sits on the border of Sembia and, as such, has been forced to take on the role of defender of the dales. It is more militaristic than most; is ruled by a Sword Council, made up of the dale's greatest defenders. The Sword Council not only commands the dale's sizeable army, but also have the power to pronounce quick justice on those working to undermine Archendale from within.

As well as, military might, Archendale is also interested in economic might. It is the main

source of trade between the dales and the lands to the south. While not consumed by the total greed of Sembia, Archendale is a place where folk understand that money is power, and power is necessary to defend the dales.

The capital of Archendale is Archenbridge; a booming metropolis by Dalelands standards, and a small city by everyone else's standards. This is where the majority of trade with outside nations take place. Overlooking the city is Swordpoint, a large and well-defended fortress that sits atop a rocky hill. It is from this fortress that the Sword Council rules.

BATTLEDALE

Battledale is a diverse land made up of folk from all across the Heartlands, and even beyond. Retired merchants from Sembia and Turmish settle here. Refugees fleeing war in Cormyr and Tethyr have settled here in the past. Many retired adventurers have set up home here. The large number of settlers is offset by the large number of children raised in Battledale who experience wanderlust, and who take to a life of travelling and adventuring.

Some mistakenly believe that Battledale's name is indicative of its aggressive nature. Quite the contrary, Battledale is a peaceful and pleasant place. This is most evident in the Belt, a vast region of farmland consisting mainly of small orchards and farms, as well as large expanses used for sheep-grazing. The locals are known for being welcoming and charitable towards outsiders; sharing their bountiful harvest with those who look as though they're in need of food.

Being a largely peaceful place, Battledale has little need for a central government. The closest the dale has to a capital is Ambrose. This small town easily dwarfs any other Battledale settlement in terms of size. The town is built around the Abbey of the Sword, a castle that once served as a temple to Tempus, but now is mostly used as the centre of Battledale's incredibly loose government.

DAGGERDALE

Daggerdale has survived many hardships and likely will survive many more. The dale is located amidst many wooded hills and rocky valleys. These rocky valleys are home to a large number of threats from wild beasts, to monsters, to bandits, to lycanthropes. The dale also has problems with ogres and other assorted creatures that occasionally come down from the Desertsouth Mountains and attack innocent settlements.

As such, Daggerdale is perhaps the dale that is most positively predisposed towards adventurers. They regularly hire adventurers to rescue people or to put an end to certain threats. One of the larger threats, until recently, was the aforementioned lycanthropes. However, when they were defeated, there was a (probably unrelated) upsurge in attacks by hill giants.

The capital of Daggerdale is Dagger Falls. The city gets its name from the nearby waterfall of the same name. The city is surrounded by large, stone walls. It is something of a rough-and-

tumble frontier town, having threats and dangers all around it. As such, most of its residents are typically armed. Commander Mornblade is the ruler of Daggerdale, having assumed control of the dale after the previous ruler, Lord Cormaeril, was torn apart by werewolves without leaving an heir.

DEEPINGDALE

Deepingdale has a reputation for being the most welcoming of all the dales. This is certainly true historically, as the humans of Deepingdale have gotten on so well with the elves of Cormanthor, that half the dale's population are elves or half-elves. Even those who appear human in Deepingdale are rumoured to have a small trace of elven ancestry in them.

However, it's not just elves that those from Deepingdale are willing to embrace. Outsiders who seem good-natured and reliable are often welcomed by the locals. However, those who seem overly cruel or deceitful are often shunned. Those who cause trouble will find out how quickly the pleasant folk of Deepingdale can muster into a militia if they need to.

The capital of Deepingdale is Highmoon. The city is somewhat prosperous, sitting on a trade route connecting Cormyr and Sembia. Deepingdale's elected lord has taken advantage of the large number of adventurers and caravans passing through the city with high taxes, which are used to fund a number of projects that work towards the betterment of the dale.

DUSKDALE

Duskdale, also known as the Dead Dale or the Thirteenth Dale, is a name sometimes given to the remains of Sessrendale. Sessrendale is unique in that it is the only dale destroyed by another dale. Centuries ago, armies from Archendale marched on this land, believing that its leader, the Dusk Lord, was engaged in foul acts of necromancy. The dale was burnt, the buildings looted, the land salted, and the inhabitants were either killed or forced to flee.

Duskdale today is populated solely by the restless dead, such as ghosts, wights, and zombies. Some say the dead can't rest until Archendale either acknowledges or pays for their crimes against Sessrendale. Others say these undead are the result of the Dusk Lord; though whether he was always a necromancer, or turned to necromancy out of desperation against Archendale's invasion, is often disputed.

Speaking of the Dusk Lord, there are rumours that he lives on. Supposedly, as he was performing a ritual to transform himself into a lich, Archendale's army burst into his chamber and slew him; cutting off his head. His ritual interrupted, wild necromantic magic transformed the Dusk Lord into two undead creatures. His body, holding his emotions, was transformed into a rampaging revenant; become the "headless Zhent" of legend, which is said to wander the Dalelands on horseback, laughing maniacally as it beheads those who cross its path. His head, holding his intellect, was transformed into an immobile demilich, which is said to have gone into hiding; some even claiming that it somehow made its way south, to the Vast Swamp.

FEATHERDALE

Featherdale is a simple, peaceful dale that is home to many farmlands. It is known for its patient resistance. In the past, many have tried to conquer it or take control of it and Featherdale has survived simply by persevering and resuming their old way of life when their conqueror has fallen.

Most recently, this happened with Sembia. Powerful Sembian merchants conquered the dale by largely economic means, buying up much of the land and using mercenaries to enforce their law. When their Netherese allies fell, though, there was so much chaos and confusion that they knew they couldn't hold Featherdale; allowing the dale to break free.

Blackbridge is sometimes mistaken for the capital of Featherdale, being its largest settlement. In truth, Featherdale has no capital; lacking anything resembling a formal government. Most citizens are free to do whatever they want, so long as they don't harm anyone else. When justice needs to be meted out, the victim often takes justice into their own hands. However, to prevent cycles of violence from forming, village elders and local retired adventurers are often trusted to settle matters and mediate disputes.

HARROWDALE

Harrowdale is proof that its possible for the dales to focus on trade without becoming consumed by it. Sitting between Cormanthor and the Dragon Reach, Harrowdale sees a lot of commerce flow through it. As such, the dale has grown rich, but not at the expense of its values.

The dale is ruled by the Council of Seven Burghers, the seven wealthiest folk in the dale. Some might see the fact that Harrowdale is a plutocracy as a sign that it has fallen to outside corruption. However, the opposite is true. The fact that the seven burghers rule for life means that they must pursue long-term goals that benefit Harrowdale as a whole, rather than chasing after immediate and short-sighted goals.

The capital of Harrowdale is New Velar, which was formerly known as Harrowdale Town. It is a port city and the centre of Harrowdale's trade with the Dragon Reach and the Sea of Fallen Stars. Unfortunately, being a fairly popular port, it also attracts outside attention. There have been rumours of Red Wizards, Zhentarim agents, Sembian smugglers, and assorted other troublemakers trying to take control of New Velar and transform it into a lawless land of crime and corruption.

HIGHDALE

Highdale (insistently referred to as the High Dale by locals) is nestled deep in a mountain pass in the Thunder Peaks. Many of the farmlands and settlements are located on high plateaus. The folk of this dale are largely independent and self-sufficient; they want for nothing, except to be left alone.

Unfortunately, their desire for peace was disrupted during the war between Cormyr and Sembia. Being in a key strategic location between the two lands, Cormyr and Sembia feuded over it. In the end, Highdale allowed itself to be seized by Cormyr, if only out of a desire to be protected from Sembian aggression. When the Sembians were finally put in their place, Highdale broke free from Cormyr and rejoined the rest of the dales.

The capital of Highdale is Highcastle, a well-defended town that acts as a centre for trade across Highdale. Overlooking the town is the ruined fortress known as High Castle, after which the town is named. From this town, an elected council of six representatives rules over Highdale. Each year, the position of one of the six representatives goes up for election. The councillors, in turn, elect a High Constable who is in charge the dale's law enforcement.

MISTLEDALE

Mistledale is a quiet, peaceful place. Protected from outside threats by surrounding dales, it has become what most dales wish they could be. Most outsiders consider Mistledale to be a boring place, and adventurers only pass through it while heading somewhere with more adventure to be had.

The relative lack of trees in Mistledale is ascribed to a star that is said to have fallen in the region thousands of years ago, ploughing through the land, and scarring it such that no new trees could grow in it. Despite that, the land is fertile and the inhabitants of the many small settlements scattered across it live happy lives without fear of going hungry.

The capital of Mistledale is Ashabenford. It is a modest town, though sizeable compared to the standards of most settlements across the Dalelands. The town is a meeting place for the Council of Six, an informally elected group of representatives from across Mistledale. The Council of Six only gather a few times a years, though elects a high councillor from their number to stay in Mistledale all year round.

MOONDALE

Moondale was once a quiet and peaceful dale. However, over the centuries, they became corrupted by the greed and commerce of Sembia. This eventually led to Moondale's annexation from the rest of the Dalelands. The capital of former Moondale was then renamed Ordulin and transformed into the capital of Sembia.

However, Ordulin was not to last. When the Netherese came, Ordulin was consumed by a swirling vortex of darkness. The vortex of darkness persisted for a century before finally being destroyed. Nothing remains of Ordulin save for a darkened ruin surrounded by a collection of trading posts; a grim reminder of what happens to Dalesfolk who fall prey to greed and corruption.

Moondale's former capital might be gone, but the surrounding villages and farmlands still survive. Recently, some of them have been wondering if they, like Featherdale and Tasseldale, should break free from their Sembian overlords and reclaim their place amongst the dales.

This decision is supported by a number of Dalesfolk, especially the Sword Council of Archendale, who will support any decision that leads to Sembia being weakened.

SCARDALE

Scardale is named after the Scar, a huge gorge that is eighty miles long and over twenty miles wide. Much of Scardale rests within this vast gorge. The other geographic features of note in Scardale are the River Ashaba that runs through it, and the Sea of Fallen Stars to the east.

For a long time, Scardale has been a wild and chaotic place. Much of this chaos can be ascribed to the numerous disasters and attempted conquests. Sembia was one such attempted conqueror. While it didn't officially take control of the dale, as it did with Featherdale and Tassledale, its agents had so much control within Scardale that they might as well have been ruling it.

The nominal capital of Scardale is the town that shares its name with the dale. In truth, the dale has no capital, as it has no true governing body. When the Sembian agents were finally cast out, lawlessness spread across the dale, and each settlement became largely autonomous.

SHADOWDALE

Shadowdale is a quiet, peaceful place. It is made up of rolling hills and thick forests, interspersed with patches of cleared and settled land. Many small farms and hamlets dot the landscape. The people here want nothing more than a simple, peaceful life and can be irritated when something interrupts that peace.

The most recent interruption was from an attempted incursion by the fomorians of the Feywild. Having initially sent in waves of seemingly benevolent fey to assess the defences of Shadowdale, they then began to weave magic to manipulate the minds of the locals. However, a group of novice adventurers managed to stumble upon this plot and expose it, causing the fey to be cast out of Shadowdale and the boundaries between the Feywild and Shadowdale to be fortified.

The only real settlement of note in Shadowdale is the town that shares its name with the dale. The ruler of Shadowdale is typically a "lord", who is chosen by popular acclaim. The present Lord of Shadowdale is Lady Khara Sulwood. She is friendly, intelligent, knowledgeable about all things related to Shadowdale, and is also a capable warrior to boot.

TASSELDALE

Tasseldale shows what happens when one plays with fire. For many decades, the folk of Tasseldale were influenced by Sembia; embraced the nation's mercantile ethos. They regularly traded with Sembia, pursuing short-sighted greed, not realising how much control over them Sembia was gaining. As such, they were completely taken by surprise when Sembia tried to annex their dale.

To their credit, the people of Tasseldale fought back. Much blood was spilled in their resistance, seemingly in vain. However, when the Netherese fell and Sembia was thrown into chaos, the folk of Tasseldale were finally able to repel the Sembian settlers. Since then, they seem to have learnt their lesson, and returned to the simple, tranquil lives that all Dalesfolk should.

The capital of Tasseldale is Tegal's Mark. This “capital” is little more than a small town where heads of various villages get together to discuss matters that affect the dale as a whole. The town is known for its hard-working smiths and artisans (especially swordsmiths) who take great pride in their work. Anything made in Tegal's Mark is said to carry the mark of excellence.

DRAGON COAST

The Dragon Coast is a land of freedom and opportunity. Unlike the rest of the Heartlands, the Dragon Coast is not a nation but a collection of largely independent settlements. Their location has always been a profitable one, sitting between the Inner Sea and the Sword Coast.

However, the presence of all the commerce flowing through the cities, combined with their lack of unified leadership, has also made the Dragon Coast a prime target for bandits. As such, caravans travelling the Dragon Coast have often had to rely on mercenaries in order to keep them safe.

Things were slightly more stable a number of years ago, when Cormyr would lend its forces to help stabilise the region. However, all that stability went away when Queen Raedra assumed the throne and withdrew all of the Cormyrean forces. Predictably, this created a power vacuum, with many brigands struggling to control of the trade routes, while even worse criminals fought bloody battles to control the cities.

This is when we, the Zhentarim, stepped in. We saw that the trade routes being disrupted, causing merchants to travel elsewhere, robbing the Dragon Coast of its much-needed commerce. As such, we offered our services to merchants travelling the Dragon Coast. With our might and our ruthlessness, we were able to quickly send a clear message to the bandits. While they are free to go after merchants not protected by us, attacking those under our protection is a death sentence.

As for the cities, themselves, that was another matter. We knew we had sufficient might to help any of the feuding factions seize power. The question, of course, was which faction. The Zhentarim might seem like simple mercenaries to some, eager to fight for whoever has the most coin, but we do take long-term consequences into considerations. For example, we had to consider who was the most level-headed, who was the most sound-minded, who was most likely to listen to good advice when they heard it. After all, we didn't want to wind up putting a despot or a buffoon on the throne.

After much negotiation, we managed to come to an arrangement with several candidates; and after much fighting, we managed to put them in positions of power. Our close partnership with said candidates has proven to be highly profitable for all involved.

There are some who claim that we now hold the Dragon Coast in an iron grip. This is a gross exaggeration. It's certainly true that our presence has put most other mercenary companies out of business, however there are still some minor mercenary companies who refuse to see reason; refuse to fold their organisations into the Black Network.

As well as that, there's also the issue of the bandits. Admittedly, the presence of bandits isn't an issue; after all, if there were no bandits, there'd be no need for us. However, some bandits still haven't learned their place and insist on attacking Zhentarim-protected caravans. A few are even successful. Such bandits seldom live long enough to reap the rewards, though. We issue bounties on their heads, causing adventurers across the Dragon Coast to hunt them down. This has the twin benefits of, not only discouraging other bandits from attacking us, but also allowing us to scout fresh talent for our organisation.

Lastly, while we do have a strong partnership with several influential people in many settlements, we don't have strong influence over all of them. In time, we would like to rectify that. However, other individuals and organisations are also vying for power. Most notable amongst our rivals are the Cormyrean nobles. Many wish for Cormyr to expand and “tame” the wild Dragon Coast. As such, they use their investments and connections to push back against our hold on certain cities. Their ultimate goal is likely to oust us, causing chaos to descend on the Dragon Coast, and giving Cormyr an excuse to come in and begin re-establishing order once more.

CEDARSPOKE

Cedarspoke is one of the cities that the Zhentarim have never even bothered to claim. It is a small, isolated city in Gulthmere Forest. It sits astride the Cedar River and rarely interacts with the outside world. Some claim that the folk here enjoy living simple, rural lives; away from the hubbub of the major cities of the Dragon Coast. Others claim that they are haughty egotists, who look down on outsiders, while hoarding the wealth of Gulthmere Forest for themselves.

Not helping their reputation is their insistence on always correcting those who mention the city's name. To many outsiders, especially those along the Dragon Coast, the city is called Cedarspoke. However, the locals insist, for some unknown reason, on calling it Cedarspoke. As such, most visiting it simply take to referring to it as the City of Cedar to avoid an argument.

Indeed, the City of Cedar is a fitting name for it. The city's chief exports are high-quality woods and objects crafted from those woods. The large presence of high-quality wood means that, if the city were free to begin large-scale logging, it could quickly prove to be one of the most prosperous cities along the Dragon Coast.

However, the circle of druids that rule over the city and that protect the surrounding forest would never allow that to happen. They insist on maintaining the “balance” between nature and civilisation. These druids contribute to Cedarspoke's reputation as a city of haughty elves and humans. Any who visit Cedarspoke are likely to be warned about the druids that patrol Gulthmere Forest, and the fate that awaits those who cause too much damage to the forest.

That's not to say they turn away anyone looking to enter the forest. In fact, the druids can be almost courteous when they need help from outsiders. Lycanthropes and incursions from the Feywild plague the deepest reaches of the forest. Adventurers sometimes delve into the forest to clear out these monsters, in the vain hope of gaining gratitude from the druids. Other adventurers delve into the forest in the hopes of finding gemstones (which the forest is said to be rich in) and other assorted treasures.

ELVERSULT

Elversult is known for three things. The first and foremost is that it is a wealthy trade city. It sits on the junction between several trade routes; sees many travellers and traders pass through it. As such, the sprawling city is made up of tents, shanties, warehouses, and caravans.

Not all of the wealth reaches everyone equally, though. The poor tend to live in ramshackle huts on the south-east side of the city; while the rich merchant lords live on the opposite side of the city in large, tacky, overdecorated manors.

The second thing the city is known for is Temple Hill. This large, rocky hill sits in the centre of the city. Atop it are several temples to different. One is devoted to Waukeen, another to Asmodeus, another to Helm. Most of the other temples have changed their faith several times in the past few years. Along with the merchant lords, the priests of the temples hold a great deal of power in the city. The priests are expected to help watch over the marketplace located at the base of Temple Hill and to protect its stalls against thieves.

The third and final thing that most folk know about Elversult is the small, spring-fed pools that are scattered across the city. Because of these pools, Elversult is sometimes called the City of Pools. The pools are said to contain treasure and magical properties; each pool having its own stories and superstitions associated with it. Some of these stories may be true, though the locals seem to just use them as a way of conning gullible tourists out of money.

As was previously mentioned, power in Elversult is divided between the merchant lords and the priests of Temple Hill. Naturally, the merchant lords have largely decided to place their trust in the Zhentarim, while the priests of Temple Hill look down on us. For the most part, though, they simply seem to be jealous of us. They know their influence is waning. In a couple of years, their job guarding the marketplace will be handed to us, and all they'll be left with is their temples and their hill.

NATHLEKH

Nathlekh is a city of Shou. This wasn't always the case, of course. I'm told that, sometime back during the Spellplague, a disaster struck it, destroying almost all of it except for the district populated largely by Shou. The Shou rebuilt the city, aided by Shou migrants from surrounding lands, who flocked to the city.

When they rebuilt the city, they made it their own. In theory, it was stylised after Shou Lung, the empire from out east. However, most of the inhabitants had never been to Shou Lung; the city being made up of the descendants of those who had migrated from Shou long ago. As such, the city could be said to more closely resemble a Faerûnian's idea of Shou Lung than Shou Lung itself.

This is, of course, by design. The city presents itself as an oasis of eastern culture in an uncultured land. This, combined with the fact that they insist on limiting non-Shou to the outer city, means that it has an air of exclusivity. And, if there's anything that the wealthy merchants and lords of the Heartlands like to throw their money at, it's the right to experience something that others can't.

Naturally, the walled inner city opens its doors to non-Shou willing and able to pay for the privilege. Those who have visited the inner city speak highly of its "genuine" Shou cuisine; its luxurious spas; its mysterious fortune-tellers; its wondrous, "traditional" Shou magic and medicines; as well as half a dozen other things that may or may not have originate in Shou Lung.

Of course, this is all for show; as is the fact that Nathlekh paints itself as powerful and imperious, despite lacking both an emperor and an empire. The city claims to be the capital of the mighty nation of “Nathlan”, but “Nathlan” consists of naught but Nathlekh and a handful of surrounding farming villages. As for the wise and mysterious emperor who is never seen in public, he's just a non-existent figurehead. Everyone even remotely clued into what's happening in Nathlekh knows that the city is actually ruled over by the Council of Nine.

None of this really matters to most adventurers, though, who likely won't have enough coin to get any further than the outer city. To those planning on sneaking into the inner city, I advise against it. As well as its own guards and Zhentarim mercenaries, the City of Cats is protected by an elite group of weretigers. There are also rumours that the lion statues dotting the inner city are capable of coming to life and attacking intruders of ill intent.

PROSKUR

Proskur is one of several cities that was suddenly cut loose and forced to defend for itself by Queen Raedra. Despite this, many Proskurans still admire Cormyr and think of themselves as Cormyreans. This attitude is encouraged by the small number of Cormyrean nobles who maintain investments in the city.

However, despite how highly Proskurans think of Cormyr, most Cormyreans barely give Proskur a second thought. In Cormyr, Proskur is known as the City of Turnips. Proskurans might say that this is an affectionate term that references the annual Proskuran harvest festival, which predominantly features turnips. In truth, the nickname is derisive; refers to the fact that most Cormyreans think of it as a small, backwater town.

For all the scorn Cormyreans throw at Proskur, though, the city does have a lot going for it. As well as being a trading hub between Cormyr and the Dragon Coast, it is also surrounded by bountiful farmland. As such, it is much more prosperous city than its rustic appearance suggests. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of the Zhentarim, much of the city's wealth still winds up in the pockets of the local Cormyrean elite.

TEZIIR

Teziir is what all cities should be, not just in its willingness to work with the Zhentarim, but in all ways. Teziir is a city that has been built up and burnt down many times but, despite all that, it has somehow persevered. This is likely, in part, due to the tenacity of the Teziirians, who refuse to be tamed or conquered, no matter what.

The City of Mazes has an appropriate nickname. It is a sprawling city that has been built up over time with no architectural cohesion. Buildings are constructed alongside each other with little or no forethought. These buildings are often crammed together, leaving little room for roads. What roads do exist often turn or end abruptly. As such, anyone looking to get anywhere across town in a hurry has to rely on the spiderweb of tunnels and alleyways that reach across the city.

The chaos and confusion also extends to the races you will find here. In truth, this is true for much of the Dragon Coast. Where Cormyreans look down their noses at non-humans, and Sembians try to rob them blind; the Dragon Coast will welcome anyone and everyone willing to add to their strange and eclectic mix.

However, Teziir takes it further than most. As well as welcoming elves, dwarves, goblins, gnomes, kobolds and kenku; it also welcomes more monstrous creatures such as gargoyles, myconids, and minotaurs. Each of these “monstrous” races have found their own niche within Teziir. Gargoyles make excellent sentries; myconids are invaluable sewer workers; and minotaurs, with their excellent sense of direction and intimidating appearance, make the perfect guides through the city.

Speaking of guides, one is advised to be wary while wandering Teziir alone. One downside of such a wild, untamed city is its large amount of crime. Each neighbourhood seems to be riddled with half a dozen different criminal gangs. In theory, the Zhentarim that make up the city's guards are meant to protect against these gangs. However, the Zhentarim are overstretched and are only able to protect those neighbourhoods willing to pay for their protection.

On top of that, the city guard are also hampered a great deal by the city's overly complicated laws. However, things seem to be changing, especially with Lady Azala, a Zhentarim agent, as head of the city. Under her guidance, Teziir has already grown larger and wealthier. In time, it may even begin to rival Westgate in terms of size, wealth and influence.

WESTGATE

Westgate is known as the City of Coin to many. Some say this is because the city is incredibly wealthy, acting as the gateway to the west for commerce flowing through the Sea of Fallen Stars. Others say it's because of the crime and corruption that runs rampant within the city; everyone and everything having their price.

The city is ruled by the Council of Lords, made up of representatives from each of the eight noble houses. From these representatives, one of them was elected to be the First Lord of the city, to act as the first amongst equals on the Council. Until recently, the First Lord of Westgate was Jaundamincar Bleth. However, he was assassinated a few years back. Since then, the Council of Lords has adopted a Waterdhavian attitude, with the identities of each house's representative being a closely guarded secret, even from each other.

However, the nobles operating under cover of secrecy is nothing new. As well as ruling through the Council of Lords, the nobility have also ruled by the Fire Knives. This gang of spies, assassins, extortionists and enforcers controls much of the city's criminal underworld. Various members of the noble families hold high-ranking positions within it, but House Bleth ultimately controls the Fire Knives, giving them leverage over the other houses.

For some time, the Fire Knives were the undisputed masters of the city's criminal underworld. However, that has slowly started to change, with various other criminal factions moving in to seize their portion of the wealth and power in Westgate.

Chief amongst their adversaries are the Night Masks. This pack of vampire criminals used to be the masters of Westgate, before being forced out by the Fire Knives. Some claim that the original Night Masks were completely wiped out, and this group of Night Masks is just a new vampire guild using an old guild's name. Whatever the truth of the matter, though, one can't deny their effectiveness.

Several years back, the Night Masks were caught trying to abduct key members of the major noble families and transform them into vampire spawn under the Night Masks' control. In doing so, they hoped to appropriate the Fire Knives' power. Unfortunately for them, they were exposed and forced to go into hiding. However, their scheme did lead to the dissolution of House Ssem, whose members had been almost completely replaced by vampire spawn.

Another major competitor of the Fire Knives is the Nine Golden Swords. They are a criminal organisation comprised of Shou. Unsurprisingly, they are based in the Shou Quarter, the eastern section of Westgate, where the overwhelming majority of Shou reside. Supposedly, they formed as a means to protect Shou migrants from outside threats but, if that's the case, they quickly devolved into a band of petty extortionists.

Similar in alleged origin to the Swords is the Eye of Justice. This group of worshippers of Torm, Helm and Tyr, supposedly formed to combat crime and corruption in Westgate. However, in fighting against crime and corruption, they often had to dirty their own hands. The organisation now is a corrupted husk of its former selves, fighting for power, and offering hollow platitudes. Rumour has its priests are actually worshippers of Mask, Cyric, and Bhaal. This faction is popular amongst the desperate and the naïve.

One final faction is the pirate kings of the Sea of Fallen Stars. While they don't have much power within the city itself, they have a great degree of naval power. They also know that Westgate is highly prosperous and highly fractured. With all the factions busy fighting one another, some pirate kings are undoubtedly wondering whether now is the time to make their move.

This, naturally, leaves the Zhentarim sitting on the sidelines, wondering who to sell our services to. Each faction is either too strong (and therefore too hard to control) or too weak (and therefore too difficult to get into power). The only faction that strikes a balance between the two extremes is the pirate kings, and history has shown that their rule would be too bloody and chaotic to realistically consider. As such, we sit and wait to see how things unfold before stepping in.

SEMBIA

Sembia is a nation that, until recently, was cloaked in darkness. Netheril ruled the land with an iron fist, using it to make war with Cormyr and the Dalelands. Cormyr and the Dalelands were undeniably wounded during these wars, but none bore the brunt of war more than Sembia.

Few seem to care about this, though. Many choose to remember Sembia as being a willing participant in Netheril's schemes. This, of course, ignores how Netheril had forcibly conquered Sembia. It also ignores how the common folk saw the Netherese; instead focussing on the handful of powerful Sembian merchants and politicians who chose to collaborate with them.

Another thing the anti-Sembian perspective ignores is how complicit Cormyr and the Dalelands were in Sembia getting conquered. It's true that Cormyr eventually lent aid to Sembia, especially when it looked as though Netheril might be turning its attention towards them, but when Sembia was conquered, neither of Sembia's closest neighbours lifted a finger to help them.

Fortunately, Netheril was eventually defeated, and its people were either killed or driven back to the Shadowfell. Naturally, Cormyreans and Dalesfolk like to take credit for this development. Again, this ignores the fact that both their lands would have assuredly been conquered many decades ago if not for the tireless and thankless work of Sembian resistance fighters during the dark rule of Netheril.

When Netheril finally fell, it was once more Sembia that bore the brunt of the consequences. Sembia is now a fractured nation; is little more than a collection of city-states. Each of its five major cities are ruled by their own council. Representatives from each council regularly meet to discuss matters relating to Sembia as a whole.

While it would be nice to end things on an optimistic note by saying these representatives are slowly unifying fractured Sembia, it's worth noting that there is another force that unites Sembia. You recall how I mentioned Netherese collaborators amongst the rich and powerful? Well, while many of them were killed or driven out or rendered powerless when Netheril fell, there were some who used the situation as an opportunity to gain even more wealth and power.

With their wealth and power, they rapidly gained influence over the councils forming across Sembia, weaving agents into positions of power. As such, the real power of Sembia now lies with a dozen or so incredibly wealthy merchants. These merchants have investments in almost all major businesses, and many members of the various councils are indebted to them in some way.

Being the covert masters unifying Sembia, these oligarchs have rebuilt Sembia into a prosperous mercantile nation. Naturally, very little of the wealth flowing into Sembia manages to reach the common folk; instead accumulates at the top. Poverty is unfortunately common in Sembia, especially in smaller towns and villages. The common folk are expected to work hard and tirelessly, just to make ends meet.

As such, it's unsurprising that many of them turn to mercenary work or adventuring in order

to get by. Others, whether out of desperation or selfishness, have also turned to banditry. There are also those that have tried to change things for the better, whether through peaceful means, or by using force against those that extort and exploit the common folk.

For the most part we, the Order of the Gauntlet, are powerless. We can battle tyrants and we can slay dragons, but the situation in Sembia is too complicated for us to properly unravel. As such, we help where we can. We help in small ways, providing a beacon of light in a world of darkness. It's not a lot, not nearly enough, but hopefully it helps make a difference for some.

DAERLUN

Daerlun is a large, fortified city. With the aid of Cormyr, it was able to break free from the control of Netheril and assert its independence long before the rest of Sembia. When Netheril inevitably fell, there was a fear that Cormyr might claim Daerlun for itself. However, Cormyr was weakened by the war with Netheril; knew it couldn't risk being drawn into another conflict with Sembia.

As such, they released their grip on the city. Despite that, Cormyr's influence is still felt within the city. Most Sembian cities are grim, both in terms of architecture and people. The buildings are built with pragmatism in mind, and the people come across as more interested in hard work and making money than enjoying themselves.

This is less true in Daerlun. The people have a cheerful and welcoming attitude to them. With the exception of the remnants of the 500-foot-tall wall surrounding the city, much of the architecture has been built with aesthetics in mind. The people are also more free, and the influence of the Sembian oligarchs isn't felt as strongly here as in other places.

The city's council comprises of those who have performed great deeds for the city. This includes wealthy merchants, high-ranking military personnel, representatives from certain communities, and even retired adventurers. Who gets a place on the council is a complicated matter. Some bought their way onto the council by donating vast sums of money to the city, others gained a position on the council by popular demand, and some were handed power because someone else on the council thought they'd make useful pawns.

SAERLOON

While it would be blame the lawlessness in Saerloon on Netheril, in truth the troubles in the city go back much further. As far back as anyone can remember, this city has been home to intrigue and corruption. The dozens of thieves' guilds, cults, and conspiracies served as fertile ground for rebellion when Netheril ruled the city. However, with Netheril gone, the city's gangs and cults have since turned against each other.

In theory, Saerloon is ruled by a democratically elected council. In practice, though, power rests with a number of shadowy organisations which plague Saerloon. These organisations have influence over everything from the council, to big businesses, to criminal activity. The various organisations feud with each other, competing for power. Some of this feuding takes

the form of complex political conspiracies, while other times it involves something as simple as criminal gangs fighting in the street.

That is not to say that Saerloon is completely chaotic. Much of this scheming is kept behind the scenes, and any overt fighting is limited to poorer neighbourhoods. After all, Saerloon is a Sembian city and, as such, puts profit first. Saerloon tries to present itself as a welcoming port city. However, whether due to the oppressive architecture or the slight tension that hangs in the air, even the most innocent of visitors can tell that there is something off about the city.

SELGAUNT

Selgaunt is the largest and wealthiest city in all of Sembia. Merchants and traders from across the Sea of Fallen Stars come to visit it, as do caravans travelling overland across the Heartlands. It is largely regarded as a friendly and welcoming place to anyone with coin to spend.

So great is the city's love of coin, that only the city's wealthiest citizens can gain a place on the city's council. To become a member of the council, a citizen must prove they have a set amount of assets tied up in Selgaunt. In theory, this is meant to ensure that Selgaunt's rulers place the interests of the city above all else. In practice, though, many council members are agents of foreign powers, such as the Fire Knives of Westgate, or the Red Wizards of Thay.

Much of Selgaunt's wealth is tied up with its rulers, who live in large buildings on the northern side of town. Many of these merchants compete for who can have the largest and mightiest-looking building. As such, the northern edge of the city is dominated by various stone monoliths, each resembling an impregnable fortress.

The southern side of the city and along the docks is where the poorest live. Those that don't live in ramshackle huts tend to live in plain yet functional buildings. Crime is rampant in the poorer communities, with much of the crime being controlled by an elusive thieves' guild known as the Orglym Syndicate.

URMLASPYR

Urmlaspyr is a Sembian city, but perhaps more closely resembles a city of the Dragon Coast. It is a lively and multicultural place, especially compared to the rest of Sembia. This tendency towards multiculturalism and inclusivity is most evident in the colourful temples that dot the city, scattered amidst the otherwise plain, stone buildings.

All faiths are welcome in Urmlaspyr, with almost all gods and pantheons having a temple devoted to them somewhere within the city. All of these temples are relatively new; the older temples having been burnt down when the people of Urmlaspyr tried to resist the Netherese.

Urmlaspyr's defiance of Netheril is greatly remembered and greatly celebrated. The people of Urmlaspyr value freedom highly and vow to never be subjugated by tyrants ever again. This sense of defiance and optimism differentiates them from much of Sembia and draws another

parallel between Urmlaspyr and the Dragon Coast.

The city is run by a council made up of representatives from different temples across the city. How much power each temple holds is dependent on how popular and how prosperous the temple is. A vast temple with many visitors and donors wields a great deal of power; while a smaller and largely forgotten temple holds next to none.

YHAUNN

Yhaunn is a prosperous city built on trade and mining. Before the Second Sundering, the earthmotes that hung above the city came crashing down and, by pure luck, avoided striking the city; instead crashing into the ancient quarry walls that surrounded the city.

Quick-thinking Yhauntans laid claim to the stone of the shattered earthmotes, began selling it off. Seeing how profitable was, other Yhauntans laid claim to the quarry walls surrounding the city; began mining them. This proved profitable as well, causing the stone miners and masons to organise themselves into a sort of proto-guild, in order to prevent unscrupulous merchants from seizing their livelihood out from under them.

During this time, Yhaunn was relatively lawless. The rulers of Yhaunn had lived atop the earthmotes and had perished when they fell. As such, several other organisations rose to fill their place. Most notable amongst these organisations were the self-proclaimed merchant lords, who sought to dominate all commerce and trade in Yhaunn.

In the end, though, it was the Guild of Stone Masons that won out. Determined to protect their claim, they slowly and organically expanded their influence. What was once just a group of friends and allies sticking together for the common good eventually morphed into a vast, bureaucratic engine that steadily took control of the city.

While it would be nice to think that this has made for a far more egalitarian society, where the common folk are ruled by the common folk, that is simply not the case. The guild-appointed council in charge of running the city are uninterested in matters unrelated to the mining, crafting, and exporting of stone. As such, some parts of the city are well-ordered and prosperous, while other parts are chaotic and rundown.

TURMISH

The Realms are home to many wonderful nations and cities. As such, it's understandable why Turmish would so often be overlooked. It is a pleasant and stable nation, therefore lacks much of the wild excitement of other lands.

I suppose you could say that we, the Emerald Enclave, are partially responsible for a lot of this peace. Long ago, we helped teach Turmish the importance of respecting the balance of nature. Since then, they've agreed not to expand their settlements beyond a certain point. While this may make some cities feel a little overcrowded, it also ensures that Turmish doesn't lose touch with its rural roots.

Another organisation that keeps Turmish peaceful is the Assembly of Stars. Every three years, representatives from the population are elected to the Assembly. The Assembly, in turn, elects a leader from its number. The present leader is Lady Argento, who has done wonders with helping Turmish re-establish itself as a nation of trade.

Her job hasn't been easy. During the Spellplague, the water level of the Sea of Fallen Stars fell, causing many cities surrounding it to be hung out to dry. This wasn't a problem for many nations, as they could just build new docks down by the new water level. However, Turmish had promised us that they wouldn't expand their cities beyond a certain point and, as such, could build no new docks.

While certainly tempted to break their agreement with us, they persevered for a century; making do with what they had. Their commitment to their agreement was rewarded during the Second Sundering, when the sea levels again rose. All the mounting tension in Turmish was suddenly undone, as the nation once more began to dominate trade across the waves.

Turmish is a friendly and welcoming place, providing one pays heed to the local customs and traditions. Those that don't are often seen as rude by the locals, and are treated in kind. This has caused some to dismiss Turmians as rude, suspicious and xenophobic.

The most well-known of Turmian tradition is the guest dish. In Turmish, visitors to a residence are expected to bring a delicacy as a gift for their host. Which delicacy you bring says a lot about you. Bringing one too extravagant can make you come across as posturing, while one too plain can make you come across as miserly. A nice, middle-of-the-road delicacy is a skull full of snails (known as a skullcap).

There are, of course, many other customs and traditions. However, many of them are small and easy to learn. Despite what some think, Turmians understand that their customs are seen as strange and exotic by outsiders. However, so long as you look like you're trying to make an effort, Turmians will cut you a lot of slack.

ALAGHÔN

Alaghôn is the capital of Turmish. It is a thriving and colourful port city. Where, a decade ago,

the city was languishing from lack of trade, these days it is home to many shops, stalls and merchants trying to sell their wares. The wares range from the simple (such as seashell ornaments), to the exotic (such as food made from rare and powerful sea monsters), to the highly expensive and sought after (such as ornate, finely crafted armour).

Many who visit Alaghôn for the first time are struck by its unique architecture. Most buildings are made from stone or brick, many of which have been remodelled and expanded multiple times. This has left the city with hundreds of secret passages, cubbyholes and possible hiding places. Children often play hide-and-seek in these places, occasionally discovering long-forgotten sections of buildings.

Further complicating Alaghôn's architecture is the fact that it was built atop the remains of a dwarven settlement. As such, beneath the city is a confusing network of mines and tunnels. The tunnels are said to be populated by all sorts of monsters. No one has bothered to clear them out or fully map them; most Turmians being content to just seal them up. Occasionally, adventurers will delve into the tunnels and return with an ancient, dwarven treasure. More often than not, though, those who delve into the tunnels don't return.

Nonthal

Nonthal is a city that is known for two major things. The first is the stench caused by the numerous slaughterhouses and tanneries that litter the city. The second is that it is the hub for adventuring in Turmish. The locals are largely welcoming towards adventurers, especially if they've got coin to spare. However, tensions can sometimes arise, especially when adventurers get rowdy or bring their own troubles to the city with them.

There are many reasons why Nonthal attracts visitors, from its location (acting as a gateway to inner Turmish), to its proximity to adventuring locales (such as the monster-infested Orsraun Mountains). However, the main reason so many adventurers are drawn to it are the tales of Nonthal's Hold.

Nonthal's Hold is, supposedly, a repository of magic items and arcane lore created by Nonthal, a mighty archmage after whom the city was named. The pathway said to lead to Nonthal's Hold is a sunken path that winds out, away from the city. Powerful translocation magic warps the path. Those who walk down it can gradually feel space warping around them. Those who stray from the path after starting down it are teleported to a distant, and often dangerous, corner of Faerûn.

However, sticking to the pathway is not easy, as many obstacles, traps and illusions have been placed, which attempt to force travellers from the path. Some theorise the winding, space-distorting path has a connection to the Feywild; while others say its effects are the result of magical traps Nonthal placed on the path long ago. Whatever the cause of it, no adventurers have successfully claimed the treasures said to be waiting in Nonthal's Hold, causing some to question whether the legendary repository even exists.

RAVILAR

Ravilar, also known as Ravilar's Cloak, is a mining city nestled in the foothills of the Orsraun Mountains. Unlike the rest of Turmish, which is largely peaceful, Ravilar is known for its rough-and-tumble nature. The city's streets are patrolled by gangs known as "factors", who struggle against each other for control of the city.

Naturally, it is difficult to blame the people of Ravilar for its rough nature. The Orsraun Mountains are overrun with various monstrous creatures (orcs, goblinoids, kobolds, ogres, giants, dragons, etc.). The gangs initially formed as a means of defending the town and its lucrative mines. However, the gangs soon started to turn on each other; began extorting protection money from the locals.

The most powerful factor at present is the Lawbringers. They are led by a sentient magic helmet that calls itself Casco Volante. The magic helmet is powerless while not being worn but, when donned, it can possess its wearer. The helmet has had many different wearers; its followers finding the helmet a new host each time its old one dies.

Where "Casco" came from is a mystery, though some rumours claim that it was found in the Orsraun Mountains over a century ago by some adventurers, who brought back with them to Ravilar. This rumour has the ring of truth to it. After all, many adventurers and treasure hunters pass through Ravilar on their way into the mountains, pursuing tales of lost treasures and forgotten dwarven mines. Some even manage to return, and often unload their recovered treasures on the merchants of Ravilar.

XORHUN

Xorhun is a magical city, literally. Something about either a confluence of druidic forces used in Turmish over the centuries, or its own proximity to the Feywild, has caused it to have caused its citizens to have a number of unusual properties. Many who lived in it experienced longer, healthier lives than most of their kind; creatures associated with the fey (such as gnomes and elves) also experienced heightened fertility rates after spending several years in the city.

These effects, combined with an influx of kobolds from the Orsraun Mountains, brought disaster a decade or so ago. The population of the city just kept growing, forcing the city to build beyond its traditional borders. Ordinarily, the Emerald Enclave would have stepped in to gently remind the Turmians of their agreement to limit urban expansion. Unfortunately, the local leader of the Emerald Enclave at the time had been driven mad by the forces of Shar.

As such, the response was disproportionate. Powerful druidic magic was unleashed against the city, destroying many buildings and killing a sizeable chunk of the population. The folk of Xorhun have since rebuilt, with various races working together to repair the damage done. A bounty was also placed on the heads of the attacking druids, one that has yet to be claimed.

Xorhun today is made up of a mix of humans, elves, gnomes, half-elves, half-orcs, kobolds and more. The city acts as a gateway, connecting Turmish and the lands to the south. As such, it is a frequent rest stop for caravans and adventurers. It is home to many merchants and craftsfolk. Shops and taverns line the wide road that runs down the centre of the city.

BACKGROUNDS

FEYTOUCHED

There are many places said to be connected to the Feywild. The most well-known place is the King's Forest in Cormyr. Travelling on the main roads is fine but, the further one strays from the road, the more likely one is to come across mischievous goblins, greedy gnomes, and capricious fey.

The fey are the most dangerous of the Feywild's inhabitants. They wield strange, powerful magic and can be unpredictable in how they choose to unleash it. While the fey typically stick to the Feywild and areas connected to it, some are known to travel further afield. As such, no one is safe from accidentally encountering a fey creature.

You are someone who has had an encounter of the fey kind. You survived the encounter but were permanently changed as a result. Under what circumstances did you meet the fey? In what way were you changed? Was the change intended as blessing, a curse, or a harmless prank? How did the change affect your life, and do you seek to reverse it?

Skill Proficiencies: Perception, plus one from among Animal Handling, Nature, and Survival

Tool Proficiencies: Any one musical instrument or gaming set of your choice

Languages: One of your choice

Equipment: A set of common clothes, any one musical instrument or gaming set you are proficient with, and a pouch containing 10 gp.

FEATURE: FEY BLESSING

When you encountered the fey, you were changed in some way. Do flowers tumble from your mouth each time you speak the truth? Was your appearance altered in some way (such as gaining the ears of a donkey or the eyes of a snake)? Do you inadvertently soil everything you touch? Work with your DM to come up with the way your encounter with a fey changed you. Any effect of the *druidcraft*, *prestidigitation*, or *thaumaturgy* cantrips would be appropriate.

SUGGESTED CHARACTERISTICS

Use the details for the hermit background in the *Player's Handbook* as the basis for your traits and motivation, modifying the entries when appropriate to suit your identity as a feytouched.

Whether you are aware of it or not, being feytouched can make you come across as strange to others, causing them to treat you differently. Your bond is likely associated with the fey who "blessed" you. Your ideal might relate to why the fey decided to target you, or might be related to how you respond to the changes you've undergone.

HEIR TO ADVENTURE

You are the progeny of a great adventurer. You were raised with tales of the heroic deeds one or both of your parents performed. For some reason, you too have decided to take up the life

of an adventurer. Do you wish to make your parents proud? To get out from under their shadow? To correct a mistake they made in their past? Or is the call to adventure simply in the blood?

Skill Proficiencies: Survival, plus one from among Arcana, History, Nature, and Religion

Tool Proficiencies: Any one musical instrument or gaming set of your choice

Languages: Any one of your choice

Equipment: A set of traveller's clothes, a family keepsake (a simple weapon, an amulet, a gaming set, a musical instrument), and a pouch containing 15 gp

FEATURE: FAMILY REPUTATION

During their adventuring days, one or both of your parents did great things for many people. Those people hope to pay them back by assisting you where they can. Wherever you go, you can find people from all walks of life willing to give you a small piece of assistance, whether it's giving you a place to hide or rest, or sharing some information with you. They are friendly and accommodating but won't risk their lives for you.

SUGGESTED CHARACTERISTICS

Use the details for the folk hero background in the *Player's Handbook* as the basis for your traits and motivation, modifying the entries when appropriate to suit your identity as an heir to adventure.

Being raised with tales of adventure, you likely have an unusual view of what it means to be an adventurer. Your bond might be related to your parents, or someone from their adventuring days. Your ideal is likely influenced by the tales you've heard about your parents.

HIRED MUSCLE

Many words describe you (thug, goon, enforcer, etc.), but to many of your employers you are simply some hired, expendable muscle. Whether hired for legitimate or illegitimate business, your job usually involved hurting people for money. Were you a mercenary? A debt collector? A bodyguard? A criminal? What led to you becoming an adventurer? Did you cross someone you shouldn't have? Were you tired of being nothing more than expendable muscle? Or is being an adventurer just another job for you?

Skill Proficiencies: Athletics, Intimidation

Tool Proficiencies: One type of gaming set, vehicles (land)

Equipment: A set of common clothes, an object looted from a fallen enemy (a dagger, a signet ring, a cloak), a set of bone dice or deck of playing cards, and a pouch containing 10 gp

FEATURE: THUG SWAGGER

Thanks to your years working as hired muscle, you know how to carry yourself in an intimidating manner. When walking through a crowded street or area, people automatically move aside for you. Additionally, others from a similar background to yours will recognise you

as one of their own, and treat you as a member of the same social sphere.

SUGGESTED CHARACTERISTICS

Use the details for the criminal background in the *Player's Handbook* as the basis for your traits and motivation, modifying the entries when appropriate to suit your identity as hired muscle.

Your bond could be related to someone who hired you in the past, or someone you were hired to oppose. Your ideal likely relates to the work you used to do and whether you embrace or reject your former life.

URBAN EXPLORER

You grew up in a large city, home to many forgotten buildings. Whether for sport or survival, you began exploring the hidden nooks and crannies of the city, occasionally stumbling across lost and forgotten treasures. One of these treasures may have even been what prompted you to turn to a life of adventuring.

Skill Proficiencies: Acrobatics, Athletics

Tool Proficiencies: One type of gaming set, thieves' tools

Equipment: Your great find, a set of common clothes, a crowbar, and a pouch containing 15 gp

FEATURE: GREAT FIND

During your exploration, you came across a treasure. The treasure has little or no monetary value, but is of great importance to you. Do you keep it for sentimental reasons or is it more valuable than it appears? Did you stumble across it accidentally or did you seek it out? Choose or randomly determine your treasure from the trinket table (see "Trinkets" in chapter 5 of the *Player's Handbook*), and work with your DM to come up with a way in which your treasure is special.

SUGGESTED CHARACTERISTICS

Use the tables for the criminal background in the *Player's Handbook* as the basis for your traits and motivations, modifying the entries when appropriate to suit your identity as an urban explorer.

For instance, your bond might involve a partner you had during your time as an urban explorer, or someone related to your great find. Your ideal might be related to your love of exploration or to what you intend to do with your great find.

WESTHAVIAN NOBLE

You are the scion of one of the treacherous noble families of Westgate. Known for their love of wealth and power, the unscrupulous Westhavian families have an infamous reputation. Even

those that don't know the exact details of your family's ties to the Fire Knives, many across the Heartlands will treat you differently when they learn of your heritage. Whether they treat you with quiet suspicion, open disdain, or with shameless sycophancy depends on the individual.

As a noble of Westgate, you may have many reasons for adventuring. Are you the family rebel trying to escape your family's games of petty intrigue? Are you an exile, cast out for a crime you committed or, more likely, a crime that a rival framed you for? Are you an agent of the Fire Knives, acting as the eyes and ears for your family's far-reaching schemes.

There are eight different noble houses in Westgate, each with their own sigil. The houses (and their sigils) are: Athagdal (russet weighing scales), Bleth (seven suns), Guldar (a black hawk), Malavhan (red sun), Thalavar (green feather), Thorsar (blue hand holding corn), Urdo (yellow eye), and Vhammos (steel open hand). There is also House Ssemm, which had an ivory bird claw as its sigil. The house was dissolved after most of its members were transformed into vampire spawn, but a handful of its scions still remain.

Each of the houses are engaged with a wide variety of businesses throughout Westgate and the Heartlands, some of which are even legal. Many members of the different houses make up the ranks of the Fire Knives, some acting as spies, some acting as assassins, and some being in charge of dispensing orders instead of carrying them out.

Skill Proficiencies: Choose two from among Deception, Insight, Persuasion, and Stealth

Tool Proficiencies: Choose two from among forgery kit, poisoner's kit, and thieves' tools

Equipment: A set of fine clothes, a signet ring or brooch, a scroll of pedigree, and a purse containing 25 gp

FEATURE: EYE FOR INTRIGUE

Having grown up immersed in conspiracies and criminal organisations; understand the way they think and operate. As such, no matter what settlement you visit, you can read the subtle clues, which signpost you to a representative of a local criminal organisation. The representative is likely low-ranking and, unless given sufficient reason to do otherwise, regards you with a neutral disposition.

SUGGESTED CHARACTERISTICS

Use the tables for the noble background in the *Player's Handbook* as the basis for your traits and motivations, modifying the entries when appropriate to suit your identity as a member of a Westhavian family.

Like other nobles, you were born into a world of politics and intrigue. Unlike most other nobles, though, there was a palpable sense of ruthlessness and danger that surrounded you as you were raised. Paranoia, dishonesty and cunning are key to getting by in Westgate. Your bond might be associated with your family alone, with another family, or with the Fire Knives. Your ideal depends largely on how much you've accepted or rejected your family's way of thinking.