

Criminal Organizations of Aden



Not so long ago, Aden was a world at peace, blessed with ample resources and a keen interest in both the arcane and the scientific. In the wake of the Darkfall, of course, political, theological, and military conflicts abound, not to mention the ongoing loss of life stemming from the never-ending battle against the nocturnal hordes spawned by that event. Despite all that, there are some things that have not changed in the wake of so many extensive differences between what was and what is. One of those things is the existence of those individuals and organizations whose only concern beyond survival, is profit.

Criminal organizations have existed throughout Aden's history. Ironically, they tended to fare more poorly prior to the Darkfall, when nations could devote superior amounts of resources to rooting them out and combating their efforts. Since the Darkfall, criminal organizations have been free to operate with greater impunity than ever before. Some, the more scrupulous among them, have utilized this opportunity to profit while still maintaining some semblance of loyalty to their fellow survivors. Others, however, have completely embraced their extralegal existence and take every opportunity to seize power and profit, no matter who suffers as a result.

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- ARASTEEN - THE UNDERGROUND

The nation of Arasteen has always been one dominated by virtuous men and women, beginning with the first monarch and increasing significantly with the creation of the Radiant Order some years later. This emphasis on virtuous behavior, while responsible for the nation's prosperity, has always stifled some of its citizens placing greater emphasis on individual freedoms. As a result, there have always been smugglers, thieves, forgers, and other various sort of scoundrels operating within the nation's boundaries, much to the Radiant Order's chagrin. However, these groups tended to operate individually, with only tangential contact with one another, until late in the seventh century, when a powerful merchant captain with an unconventional mindset saw an opportunity and seized it.

Marit Poulson was a woman with vision, and given the nature of her business, she had significant contact with different criminal organizations in her different ports of call. She approached these groups with a proposal, one that suggested working together as one large organization to improve profits for all parties involved. Marit was willing to invest her own resources to make this happen, and her resources were considerable. A few joined at first, and then more when they saw how successful she and her allies were. Some resisted, but Poulson's brother was a member of the Radiant Order, and a few whispered words about groups she had encountered in her travels were sufficient to ensure that her opponents suffered misfortune or were eliminated outright. The Underground, which was what Poulson named her enterprise, was the most powerful criminal organization in Arasteen by the late eighth century, when Poulson's successor, her daughter Inge Poulson, encountered a threat that her mother had never considered: the King of Arasteen.

King Oldarus was both the head of the Radiant Order and the head of the Radiant Path, the religion associated with the order. At that time, both were a single organization that would be separated after his rule was over. Oldarus was a zealous lunatic who proceeded to impose a series of increasingly draconian laws regulating the behavior of his people. The citizens chafed under the rule, but Oldarus's iron grip on the Radiant Order meant that they enforced his rules without question. Inge Poulson, very much her mother's daughter, valued profits but valued freedom much more, and committed the Underground to stand against this tyranny. Under her direction, those who most vocally supported Oldarus among the Radiant Order began to die of mysterious ailments and accidents, culminating some years later with a tragic hunting accident that cost the lives of both Oldarus and his Paladin. A Templar named Henrik Poulson, Inge's cousin, took control amid the chaos and restored order, eventually becoming a beloved king who privately thanked his cousin for what he suspected was her role in saving their nation.

Since that time, the people of Arasteen regard the Underground as something akin to folk heroes, those who are criminals but not evil, who seek their fortune without sacrificing their honor. They flout rules and convention, but rarely go so far as violence, and never against innocent citizens of Arasteen. The attitude the Radiant Order has toward the Underground is somewhat less forgiving and variable, depending on the political climate. Most members of the order and even those among the Templar Council see the Underground as a necessary evil, understanding that crime is inevitable and can never be completely stamped out; if there must be crime, then the Underground is the least among the possible evils. This does not prevent some more zealous members of the order from attempting to crush every cell of the Underground that they can, although they are rarely successful on anything more than a local level.

The Underground is controlled by a group called the Chromatic Circle, which is made up of ten individuals who use colors as their names in order to create a bit of a mystique around themselves. Some members believe this was inspired by the similar practice of the Veiled Council in Yzeem and suggested by an expatriate member from that region. Others think it was merely a coincidence, but both groups find the entire affair terribly amusing. The most prominent member of the Chromatic Council, and the one most considered the leader of the Underground, if one can be said to lead the entire organization, is a mysterious young woman called Violet. Violet controls all Underground activities throughout the capital city of Sea Reach, and does so directly under the nose of her King and the Radiant Order. Known as a particularly flamboyant and audacious individual, most assume that she is part of the Poulson family line, but there is no evidence to corroborate such a claim.

The Underground is divided into individual cells or guilds, most of which operate on a local level. Each settlement of sufficient size has its own guild, while smaller villages may have only a single Underground operative there. Each guild operates on its own, and while there is contact between them, no one outside an individual guild has any significant information on how that guild operates, save perhaps members of the Chromatic Circle. This ensures that, if a single guild is compromised, there is not sufficient information to threaten others, and those that can be identified by the compromised guild can be ferried away to safety in a timely manner.

The Underground's most central activity is smuggling and controlling the black market. There is some degree of theft and perhaps even a little extortion, generally directed at other criminals rather than innocents. The organization has only rarely dealt in violence, and then only against deserving targets, such as they did during the reign of King Oldarus. The Underground also has a rather militant stance against Urbana, which is a common stance in Arasteen, and delights in profiting off the violation of the Iron Tyrant's rigid laws whenever possible, whether it be purchasing stolen goods from Urbanan criminals or peddling their own smuggled merchandise in Urbanan settlements.

- KYAN - THE COLONY

There are few who would dispute that Kyan is the strangest nation of Aden, with the odd symbiosis that exists between its people, indeed its entire society, and the insects that are the dominant wildlife within the vast Crawling Jungle that makes up most of Kyan. Like the insects that are part of their life, the people of Kyan are divided carefully by caste and function, each serving a specific purpose within their society. It all works together like a carefully constructed machine, and those who do not contribute have little purpose, typically eking out a miserable and solitary existence within the jungle or, at best, the lowest levels of the hive cities. But like any other society comprised of humans, elves, dwarves, and the like, Kyan has political strife and intrigue within its ranks, and when those things are present, there is opportunity.

The art of entomancy is one that rarely allows its practitioners to fall into the aforementioned lower strata of Kyanite society. It is considered a noble art, and like many arcane endeavors, requires years of devotion to master; the outcast and impoverished rarely have the resources necessary to indulge in such labors. There are occasions, however, when such individuals display a natural affinity that removes the need for such training and can become self-made entomancers. Aarav Deol was one such man. Born into poverty, spending his childhood on the literal lowest level of High Hive, Aarav did not realize until he was nearly ten that others did not hear the whispers of insects the same way that he

did; until that point, most considered him simple-minded. Having been overlooked his entire life, no one recognized how dangerously intelligent Aarav was, which he quickly realized was a distinct advantage.

Aarav spent the entirety of his teenage years honing his magical gifts. He also worked as a servant in the homes and institutions of more affluent Kyanites, and in particular deliberately sought out opportunities to observe the labors and workspaces of other entomancers. He devoured all available information on cultivating new species of insects and altering dominant traits over the course of generations, which of course took mere months even to a human like himself. By the time he reached twenty years of age, Aarav was a highly skilled entomancer and had developed several new species of insects to serve his purposes. The most important, according to his long-term plans, was a particularly intelligent species of mite.

The mites in question were by no means truly intelligent but had developed a much more complex nervous system than any other species of their kind. While still an incredibly primitive creature, these mites had sufficient sensory organs and awareness that Aarav could use his magic to access their minds and see and hear everything around them. If they existed in sufficient numbers, it was even possible for him to cast spells through them, allowing him access to use his magic in places he could never gain entry to in person. The possibilities that this afforded him were significant, but rather than risk his person via theft or violence, Aarav determined to begin his endeavors with a slightly more discreet activity: information brokering.

The aforementioned political intrigue present in Kyan granted Aarav all the potential targets and clients he needed, and his status as a servant gave him access to other servants, individuals to whom he could introduce his mites and gain eyes and ears throughout the highest levels of High Hive, even though the others were ignorant of his involvement. His mites could even establish colonies in locations instead of on individuals, allowing him permanent access. Invariably his mites would eventually be expunged, either through vigorous personal hygiene, thorough cleansing, or predation by other species of insect, but reestablishing colonies was a relatively trivial matter. So it was that Aarav accumulated a vast repository of information and then, cautiously, began offering choice bits for sale to individuals who had rivals or opponents that were proving problematic.

The practice proved incredibly lucrative. Within short order, Aarav became an incredibly wealthy man, and surrounded himself with comfort and luxury. He did not, however, abandon his obscurity, recognizing it as one of his most important defenses. Very few know of his name; most of his business is conducted by correspondence and utilizes the name he has chosen for his enterprise: the Colony. Over twenty years of operation, he has become the single most powerful information broker in Kyan and has on occasion branched out into theft and assassination, but only when the money is extremely good and when he agrees with the purpose behind it. Aarav is not a virtuous man, but he does keep his operations out of matters pertaining to national security and limits any gathering at the highest levels to satiate his personal curiosity; that information is never for sale.

Over the course of his twenty-year career, Aarav has built the Colony into a remarkably small and efficient organization. He has discovered four additional natural entomancers like himself, and has taken them on as apprentices, teaching them only what they need to know in order to remain useful to him. He also has several dozen servants that work in various estates and institutions, all of whom he refers to as his "carriers." There are others, but they are unaware of their role in the Colony's criminal enterprise.

- YZEEM - THE RIVER PRINCES

The so-called River Princes are very nearly as old as the nation of Yzeem itself, but have changed form and operations with such frequency that it is probably more accurate to describe the current cartel's operations in terms of a century or two at most. The precursor organization existed during the time that the pirates and criminals of Rook's Roost, among others, ruled the nation of Yzeem in all but name, bribing, extorting, blackmailing, or otherwise controlling the merchant princes who ruled the city of Balaquim. Ironically, the more powerful criminal organizations that could afford to change the laws as they deemed necessary were more ruthless and merciless when dealing with other criminals, wanting to permit no one to threaten their enterprise. When the city's ruling council began the transition to become the Veiled Council, the larger cartels began to lose influence, and as a result many smaller criminal groups threw whatever resources they could behind the change, hoping to level the playing field and open up new opportunities for themselves. Against all odds, the gambit worked.

The River Princes are a loose alliance of merchant captain and merchant patrons who are more interested in profitability than they are in following the rather extensive system of laws put into place by the Veiled Council. Those who prove themselves in the organization's criminal endeavors and managed to earn enough profit for all members are elevated to the rank of Prince, which grants them certain rights and responsibilities, not least of which is the profit-sharing arrangement that ensures all members aid one another toward mutual success. The Princes do not limit one another in terms of the sort of criminal activities they choose to conduct, meaning that there is a wide variety among them. Some are relatively honorable men who choose to make their living smuggling goods to the black market, while others readily embrace violence and extortion as means to make a profit. Each Prince, the exact number of which is unclear, maintains his or her own organization. This may be as small as a merchant ship's crew or it may involve dozens or hundreds of enforcers seeing their will enacted. Obviously, while all Princes are considered of equal rank, those with larger organizations command superior resources and influence within the cartel.

There is a rumor among the rank and file of this organization that a hidden figure sits above the Princes in rank, the so-called River King. Allegedly, this individual has ultimate power over everything that goes on within the cartel, and his or her existence is confirmed only when an individual is promoted to the rank of Prince. The Princes deny this, of course, sometimes violently, but the rumors persist, just as do the rumors that many of the Princes are allied with different members of the Veiled Council to ensure the prosperity of all citizens of Balaquim. Most versions of this latter rumor involve the Red Councilor or the Yellow Councilor, as they are the two most likely associated with the vast sums of money and shipping that take place as part of the River Prince operations.

New Trait

Criminal Entrepreneur: You have devoted yourself to a life of profit at the expense of your other endeavors. There may be a line you will not cross, or there may not, but regardless, there is a great deal you will do to make money in the easiest, most direct way possible. Choose one rogue talent or ninja trick that requires a save. Saves made against that talent or trick are at +1 DC.

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