

COILS BELOW

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SNAKETONGUE CULTISTS are humans suborned by the doctrine of Zehir, the evil god of darkness, poison, and assassins. The cultists have fallen prey to the core tenants of the Coiled One, and as such they delight in the use of poison, adore snakes of every scale hue and size (especially yuan-ti), and kill in their god's name, offering each death as a sacrifice in long rituals or quick murders. Snake-tongue cultists are so fevered in their worship that Zehir and allied yuan-ti reward them with ritual transformations, bestowing upon the cultists minor reptilian traits, which only increases their fanaticism and zeal to die in service to their god.

What if one cell of snaketongue cultists learned a degree of outward moderation in their devotion thanks to the schemes of a canny snaketongue high priest? What if this leader expanded his flock through deception rather than intimidation in an effort to gain so many converts that even officials of the local city were partly converted? Perhaps a PC's initial exposure to the "new faith" seems positive on its surface. Imagine still further that this faux-moderation was concocted as part of an effort to unbury an ancient relic below the city—a relic of interest to more than just snaketongue cultists. When confronted with the true doctrine behind the false, how do the heroes react?

This scenario is suitable for a group of 11th-level PCs.



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CHAPEL OF THE GOLDEN PATH

The Chapel of the Golden Path is rumored to lie beneath the city, and its location is a close-kept secret to all except those who've taken the doctrine of the golden path into their hearts.

In truth, the Chapel of the Golden Path is the name of merely the topmost series of chambers that is part of a much more massive temple buried below the city for an epoch or more. "Golden Path" is a name chosen merely to entice the uninitiated—the snake-tongue cultists who inhabit it and who continuously dig to unearth the chambers deeper down refer to the entire edifice as the Fane of Ophan.

Ophan is rumored to be one of the ancient primordials who opposed the gods when the world was new. The Fane served as one of her strongholds, where she marshaled ancient armies and launched devastating counterattacks against her divine foes. It was also where she eventually fell. It became her tomb, or so some lore tells. Those even aware of the structure's existence believe fantastic relics can be had within it, including the enigmatic Fang of Ophan.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

The snaketongue cultists continue to preach their sham called the "Golden Path" philosophy. At the same time they secretly steal away victims as part of their actual vile rituals. Eventually, people in the city are bound to notice, one way or the other.

Meanwhile, lesser treasures unearthed in the ongoing dig by the cultists are being sold in the city. Some nobles who fancy themselves as collectors of ancient art are in a tizzy to find more of these riches.

Coils Below is an adventure that can occur in any city, including the city of Fallcrest, which is described in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Alternatively you can use a city from the FORGOTTEN REALMS or EBERRON, or a city from your own campaign.

Church of the Golden Path: A peaceful sect of preachers has set themselves up in a small building somewhere in the city. Daily services are held there by hooded adherents who speak of inner peace, satisfaction, and happiness, which they believe comes about by the act of giving to others. No one in the city has heard of the Church of the Golden Path before, and a few of the more established churches have become annoyed after losing some of their wealthier church-goers to the newcomers. Perhaps one of the PCs is drawn to the new philosophy, finding it fresh and resonant. If not, then a friend or relative of one of the PCs might embrace it.

Disappeared: Several people, more than the normal number for a city this size, have gone missing. These missing people would have probably gone unnoticed by the wider populace, but for Janathar Hubbard's disappearance, too. Janathar is a local priest of Pelor popular for his rousing, if impromptu services. Janathar's family is offering a reward for information that leads to his discovery.

Baron Karond's Collection: The wealthy collector Baron Karond has an entire wing of his mansion set aside for various collections, which include ancient texts scribed in Draconic, tapestries of fallen Nerath, and Arkhosian sculpture. Recently, Karond snapped up a volume bound in snake scales with words penned in dried poison from a bookseller. The tome describes several particular ancient historical events, possibly referring to one or two ancient battles where god and primordial fought. Karond wants to discover where the volume originated, and moreover, if any sister tomes survive that he can add to his collection.

Explorers: Everyone in the city knows tunnels run beneath the city. Over the years, the tunnels have alternately hosted goblins, criminals, and for a brief time, a drow outpost. Vestiges of all these remain, and adventurers looking to make a name for themselves

sometimes search for them, and for the Nerath Vault rumored to also lie below the city. These stories also claim that the vault has remained unopened since the fall of the empire of Nerath.

INVESTIGATION

Based on the hook used, the PCs can look into the problem in a variety of ways. For some of these, skill challenges help simulate investigation.

CHURCH OF THE GOLDEN PATH

Those curious about the new philosophy taking the city by storm find it easy enough to find where the sect of preachers has set up (DC 10 Streetwise). A few hooded brothers are always around and willingly answer questions or give a quick sermon on how inner peace, satisfaction, and happiness can be found in giving to others. The hooded brothers in the rented surface temple are all true believers, recruited from the populace.

If a player attends more than a couple of sermons and displays real interest in learning more about the Golden Path, he or she is eventually invited to visit the main church: the Chapel. If a character accepts, he or she receives a map to the hidden temple and is told to ask for High Priest Nopaltzin upon arrival. Characters who follow the map plunge into one of the tunnels below the city; see *Beneath the City Encounters* for potential trouble along the way.

DISAPPEARED PEOPLE

Clues are scattered about the city, telling the tale of Janathar's Hubbard's disappearance—if you can fit them together.

The PCs are looking for Janathar Hubbard, a popular figure in town. If they can find out what happened to Hubbard, the PCs can find a route to the Chapel (which is where Hubbard ultimately ended up). This

skill challenge could take hours or even a few days in the game world.

Setup: To figure out what happened to Hubbard, PCs must go to places where Hubbard lived and was seen. Then they can question, examine, and investigate each lead or location thoroughly.

Level: Equal to the level of the party.

Complexity: 5 (requires 12 successes before 3 failures).

Primary Skills: Acrobatics or Athletics, Bluff, Perception, Streetwise, Insight.

Acrobatics or Athletics (moderate DCs): You slip into a back window in the structure that the Golden Path disciples are using for their services, with the intent to spy on the proceedings or otherwise gather secret intelligence. This skill use contributes up to one success to the challenge.

Bluff or Diplomacy (moderate DCs): You talk to the disciples and preachers at the rented structure where Golden Path sermons are given, and you convince them you are truly interested in learning more about the philosophy. You might also learn that Hubbard came here often, apparently curious to see if the Golden Path was an offshoot of Peloran mythology. However, none of the disciples know where Hubbard disappeared. This skill use contributes up to two successes to the challenge.

Perception (moderate DCs): You find that Hubbard's home bears no sign of forced entry or violence. Indeed, it shows signs of someone who purposefully and tidily packed up as if for a trip that he or she expected to last a few days. You find nothing odd or alarming in the structure rented by the disciples of the Golden Path, regardless of whether examining the main chamber or the back offices (after having slipped in using Acrobatics or Athletics). This skill use contributes up to three successes to the challenge.

Streetwise (moderate DCs): You find out where Hubbard was most often seen (his own church),

where he lived (a modest apartment not far from his church), and the strangest place he was seen (attending a Golden Path service uptown). This skill use contributes up to three successes to the challenge.

Insight (moderate DCs): If talking with Golden Path disciples about the whereabouts of Janathar Hubbard, you learn that the disciples are not telling the whole truth when they say they have no idea where Hubbard might be. If you reveal this insight, the disciples break down and indicate that wherever Hubbard has gone to, he went of his own free will. After this, they say nothing more. This skill use contributes one success.



Religion, Intelligence, or Wisdom (moderate DCs): If it's true that Hubbard packed himself, or if he went somewhere of his own accord, he must have left some evidence behind regarding where he was going. Probably someone at his temple might know something. Even if PCs have talked to priests at the Pelor temple before now, they believe it might be worth a return trip. This skill use contributes one success.

Success: If PCs piece together the various clues, they not only learn that Hubbard chose to leave, but indeed he left behind a document in the temple. The junior minister who has it can be convinced by the PCs to give up a scroll case, which has a quickly scrawled document inside in Janathar's hand. The document provides rough directions to the Chapel of the Golden Path below the city, but it also indicates that the directions should not be given out to anybody. See *Beneath the City Encounters*.

Failure: The PCs suspect, from references the disciples let slip, that a great Chapel is somewhere below the city, but they gain no directions or map to help them find this place, which might contain Janathar. See *Beneath the City Encounters*.

BARON KAROND'S COLLECTION

The PCs are contacted by Baron Karond regarding a text he recently purchased. Titled *Ophan and the God Of Light*, the tome describes, in gruesome detail, a fight between a snake-scaled primordial named Ophan, and a proto-deity merely referred to as the Bright One.

Karond tells the PCs he purchased the tome from a bookseller called Radaur. From Radaur, the baron learned a group of adventurers calling themselves the Daggerhall Explorers sold him the book. Karond can't locate the Daggerhall Explorers—they're back under the city on some other adventure.

See the *Daggerhall Explorers* entry below if PCs want to look for this group on behalf of Karond.

DAGGERHALL EXPLORERS

PCs who want to explore for likely dungeons below the city soon learn of the local “celebrity dungeoneers” called the Daggerhall Explorers, and their leader, Maze the Enchantress. Maze and her fellow adventures live in a decadent mansion called Daggerhall (DC 10 Streetwise). On the other hand, PCs might be told of the Explorers by Karond.

Anyone who wants to explore below the city can seek out the advice of the group that has been doing it for years. The Explorers sell knowledge of entrances into the tunnels below the city they’ve found in their own forays for a tiny finder’s fee.

PCs who visit the Daggerhall discover the group has been gone for approximately one week, with no scheduled time of return known. Their home is locked tight.

Use the previous examples and the entry on skill challenges in the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* to design one of your challenges if PCs want to break into Daggerhall and discover where exactly in the miles of tunnel below the city the Explorers believe contains the best likelihood of treasure (or from where they found the tome Karond loves so much). A map in a secret safe in Daggerhall shows a route underground leading to something called “Ancient Snake Temple.”

BENEATH THE CITY ENCOUNTERS

Venturing below the city while seeking the Chapel of the Golden Path or the “Ancient Snake Temple” could lead to several encounters. One way to handle the PCs’ progress toward their goal is a simple skill challenge that can lead to encounters, and, eventually to the Chapel/Ophan’s Fane.

While adventuring below the city, PCs might meet Maze the Enchantress and the rest of the Daggerhall Explorers; see her NPC entry under Important Characters.

You enter one of the many tunnels that run below the city, your eyes wide for any clues or trails that can lead you more easily to your goal.

Setup: The PCs must make their way below the city to find the Chapel of the Golden Path.

Level: Equal to the level of the party.

Complexity: 1 (requires 4 successes before 3 failures).

Primary Skills: Perception.

Perception (hard DCs): You try to follow twists and turns, rumors of the temple’s location, and occasional tracks of previous creatures who have traveled to and from the Chapel. Four successes lead you to the old ziggurat, but a failure causes you to go off track and triggers an encounter with the Daggerhall Explorers.

Special: If the PCs have a map or written directions from any source showing the location of the “snake temple” or the Chapel of the Golden Path, they gain a +5 bonus to all skill checks.

Success: PCs discover the Chapel of the Golden Path after a few hours of travel.

Failure: The PCs go off track and run into trouble. Once PCs deal with the combat encounter described below, they can attempt the skill challenge again to discover their true goal.

Each additional failure doesn’t necessarily indicate a new encounter, though it could at your option (pull something out of the *Monster Manual* of a level appropriate to the PCs). However, each failure means the PCs spend another day traveling the tunnels beneath the city.

Combat Encounter: The first time PCs go off track and fail the skill challenge to find the Chapel, they run into trouble.

Daggerhall Deviants: The PCs encounter the Daggerhall Explorers . . . who are not nearly so nice as their PR suggests. Below the city where no laws exist, they see other adventuring groups as fair game. However, before any combat begins, they present the guise of fellow humanoid explorers below the city. Maze initially appears as a female human, the vampire lord as a human rogue, and the hobgoblin hand of Bane as an armor-encased (including helm) cleric of Avandra. See the suggested social encounter described under Maze the Enchantress’s entry below.

Regardless of how well the PCs are getting along with Maze and her crew, either the PCs notice a few too many beetles or fangs, or Maze finally attacks them (unless you determine you’d rather keep up this charade for a while, allowing the PCs to meet Maze later in other circumstances).

Level 12 Encounter (XP 3,300)

- ◆ 1 Maze, lamia (level 12 elite controller)
- ◆ 1 vampire lord, human rogue (level 11 elite skirmisher)
- ◆ 1 hobgoblin hand of Bane (level 8 elite soldier)

In addition to the abilities each creature noted above can access, Maze possesses a ring of *freedom of movement* and can call upon the daily power the ring provides. She uses this ring or her ability to slip through cracks only large enough for Small creatures to squeeze through (a nearby crevice in the tunnels) if things look dire for her band.

FANE OF OPHAN ENCOUNTERS

Once PCs reach the Chapel of the Golden Path, also known as the Fane of Ophan, they find an external step-pyramid style structure. Only the top five or six “steps” are visible above the earth in a large vault; the lower levels are yet buried. Inside this buried structure, pretty much anything goes for terrain types you might choose for maps.

If characters have come to the Chapel of the Golden Path because they want to be inducted into the organization, they must pass beyond the strangely hooded guardian priests on the upper edge of the stepped pyramid (this might require a Bluff check for PCs who are not being truthful, or a Diplomacy check for those who are).

If PCs come upon the Fane cold, unless they immediately attack the temple guards, they are also passed inward for a meeting with the high priest.

If PCs failed to meet the Daggerhall Explorers on their way into the Fane, they might very well meet them on their way out, where the Explorers linger just beyond the temple, eager to fall upon PCs they judge too weak to any longer defend themselves.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

The PCs can interact with both High Priest Nopaltzin and Maze the Enchantress, while they adventure in or near the Fane of Ophan.

HIGH PRIEST NOPALTZIN

Nopaltzin (level 13 elite controller; Bluff +13) is a mummy lord, which means that even for a snake-tongue cultist, his beliefs are unchanging. Each time new seekers of the Golden Path make their way down to the Chapel, Nopaltzin greets them, wearing full robes and regalia to hide his true nature.

Social Encounter: The high priest doesn’t immediately seize would-be practitioners of the Golden

Path and prepare them for sacrifice (or even those who’ve stumbled upon the temple for another reason). No, instead the high priest interviews pilgrims and learns what positions they hold in the city above, their abilities, and their relative importance in the wider world. If Nopaltzin determines a particular individual might further his efforts to unearth more portions of the buried fane, he continues to play the part of a pious Golden Path proselytizer (even if that means introducing the concept for the first time for PCs who found the temple without the benefit of the fake preachers in the city above).

In such an instance, he attempts to send the petitioner back on his or her way after a sham-ceremony that welcomes the newcomer to the inner sanctum and promises greater knowledge to come.

The PCs can either play along with this charade or become difficult.

Combat Encounter: If Nopaltzin decides the PCs do not bring additional value to his enterprise (or if PCs become difficult), he orders his nearby snake-tongue acolytes to prepare the PCs for their sacrifice to the Coiled One!

Sacrificial Victims: Once combat begins, Nopaltzin begins to chant in a dead voice, describing how each blow he and his celebrants strike against the PCs are dedicated to Zehir, and how each death, too, will be dedicated to the god of Poison, and possibly, each soul so liberated!

Level 18 Encounter (XP 10,300)

- ◆ 1 Nopaltzin, mummy lord (level 13 elite controller)
 - ◆ 1 yuan-ti malison sharp eye (level 13 artillery)
 - ◆ 1 snaketongue cultist assassin (level 9 lurker)
 - ◆ 1 snaketongue cultist celebrant (level 11 controller)
 - ◆ 2 snaketongue cultist warriors (level 8 brute)
- Nopaltzin uses *plague of doom* first, then stays close to a snaketongue cultist while making *shielding mace*

attacks, focusing on PCs who are targeting him with fire or radiant attacks. Once bloodied, Nopaltzin spends his action point to use *second wind*. If bloodied again, he uses the new power *poison burst*, noted below (not described in the *Monster Manual* but unique to Nopaltzin), then attempts to escape deeper into the dig.

The cultists attack the PCs with joyful abandon, and they also attempt to aid Nopaltzin whenever possible. They willingly sacrifice themselves to ensure Nopaltzin’s safety as much as possible.

Poison Burst

Nopaltzin’s Extra Power

Nopaltzin screams out, “Zehir, take these heathens!” Poisonous green light answers Nopaltzin’s entreaty, encompassing foes in venomous fury.

Encounter ◆ Arcane, Poison

Standard Action Area burst 2 within 20 squares

Target: Each enemy in burst

Attack: Constitution vs. Fortitude

Hit: 3d6 + Constitution modifier poison damage, and the target is blinded until the end of Nopaltzin’s next turn.

MAZE THE ENCHANTRESS

Maze leads a veteran band of adventurers who've walked many leagues below the city. In their time they've fought goblins, drow, and worse. Maze has a mercenary's heart and she doesn't waste a power, a kind word, or even a breath on those who can do her no good.

Social Encounter: When PCs first meet Maze, they are likely to see her in the lawless environment beneath the city. Maze immediately attempts to determine if the band of adventurers make a good target for larceny. At first, Maze and her compatriots are all smiles and laughs, apparently happy to run across fellow ruin raiders below the streets of the city.

During the course of the conversation, Maze asks a few questions about what PCs are up to, if they've discovered anything interesting of late, and if possible, what their strengths are. At the same time, Maze is careful to avoid describing any specifics regarding the Daggerhall Explorers' abilities or recent forays, though she speaks in generalities.

PCs who convey to Maze that they are particularly tough (possibly through Intimidate or Bluff if they are not of average higher level) are left alone and sent on their way with a hearty goodbye. Those who are less convincing are attacked, revealing the Explorers as nothing more than tunnel bandits with expensive cloaks.

Combat Encounter: Use the combat encounter already described under Beneath the City Encounters. When combat begins, Maze and her compatriots reveal their true guises.

CUSTOMIZATION

The fane's surface and its buried level can serve as hooks for DMs. The snaketongue cult, fane, and treasures mentioned here (poison-penned tomes and the Fang of Ophan) can be fleshed out and easily dropped into a dungeon of your own design. Of course, you can also change any part of this text to your liking. The whole scenario is assumed to be for 9th- or 10th-level characters.

Depending on how central the city is to your own campaign, you could slowly introduce the Golden Path, beginning with the appearance of a few broadsheets, followed by the adoption of the philosophy by one or two of the city's nobility, and proceeding to the PCs' personal introduction.

What if Baron Karond is toying with the idea of becoming a member? What if someone of even higher level in the city is a member, all unknowing of the Golden Path's true nature? Even if PCs knew the truth, they might make themselves public enemy number one by attacking the fane—a delicate situation to be sure. ☹

About the Authors

Bruce Cordell is a D&D designer, but during his twelve years in the game industry, he has dabbled in miniatures, board games, collectible card games, d20 games, and more. Bruce has over sixty listed credits to his name, including the *Expanded Psionics Handbook*, *Libris Mortis*, and *Expedition to Castle Ravenloft*. His body of work also includes three published *Forgotten Realms* novels (*Lady of Poison*, *Darkvision*, and *Stardeep*), with more on the way.

