

# The Gutter Maze

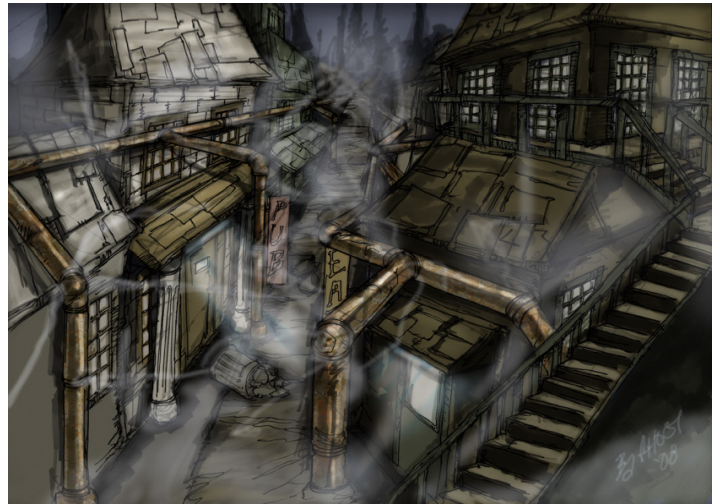
It is Tan Dorra's guilty pleasure, her perverted and passionate affair, her chocolate tart and whiskey binge. It is Arius's largest and most rampant den of sin. It is a world ruled by the primitive laws of anarchy, by the cruel and the charismatic. When it shines, a flood of merchants inundates the narrow streets. The smell of charbroiled lamb mingles with that of foreign perfumes and oxen excrement. Lithe orphans race and wrestle for a few scattered coins dropped by a careless drunkard. A platoon of heavily armored soldiers sweats under metallic plate as they protect valuable cargo crawling through the crowd. An amateur arcanist repeats a clumsy *levitation* routine to any that will watch; his hat holds barely enough for supper. When it pours, the streetwalkers huddle in piles of filth in back alleys and under the overhangs of pubs that cannot afford to remove them. A barfight spills out onto the street and ends when a man is kicked to death. His corpse will be thrown out the way in the morning and eventually removed by city guards working a disciplinary rotation. The runoff water from wealthier districts, full of toxins and trash, meanders through the streets. A sick stray dog laps from a puddle. In the dark, when the soul of this place emerges, brothels light up and thieves go to work. Nothing that moves is innocent. An intricate web of deceit and debauchery plays out, a twisted entertainment for its homeless audience. But even as the drama unfolds, it remains confined to these back alleys. Tan Dorra is careful to keep her lowlifes on the streets, where they cannot tarnish her international reputation. For the denizens of these slums, there is hope of power and riches, but there is none of exodus. One can play, and even win, but one can never leave. Socioeconomics makes a stronger prison than an iron cage. Welcome to this place, a labyrinth of corruption, pleasure, and adrenalin. Welcome to where the id of man runs free. Welcome to the gutter maze.

## Sid Steelworth

Saying the name is like taking a hit. He was born here, as one of us, destined to become a stabbed corpse or hair fiend. If he was lucky he would end up somebody's bitch, cleaning vomit or digging ditches. Instead, he built an empire, starting from the humblest and riskiest of services but the most needed in the Maze: the hair dealer. By offering cheap, reliable powder, Steelworth gained the impossible trust of his early patrons. He stayed in the good graces of the city by helping their lawmen – yes, this was dangerous, but somehow he managed to sacrifice only the best or the worst of us. He gave them the bullies and the self-righteous; the ones that we were better off without anyway. Steelworth spared the anonymous man, and in his business we felt safe. We paid for that safety, and Steelworth got rich. Some curse him as a sellout, but everyone admires how smart he was.

Yet Sid Steelworth is a gambling kingpin, not a drug

“Socioeconomics makes a stronger prison than an iron cage.”



*A haze sits over the drug-infested streets of the Maze*

lord. Dealing hair is at best a temporary job; even the most meticulous can't avoid bad luck forever. He saved money for fifteen years to invest in the Citadel, which at the time was an underfunded project in the north end of the Maze about to go bankrupt. Big surprise. The bandits were already fighting for squatting rights on the turf. The noblemen refused to believe that something as base as an establishment for scorpion fighting was worthy of their coin, but Steelworth saw its potential. What other than violence, besides sex and drugs, would capture the excitement of simple-minded thugs? After the Citadel's

wild success, Steelworth muscled his way to top dog and left behind a wake of assassinations, bribery, and blackmail. The Citadel today rivals the entire hair trade of the city for cash flow, and one man sits firmly as its emperor. The rumors say that more money is owed to Steelworth than the Tan Dorra government has in its coffers.

Truly, Sid Steelworth has accomplished what we have long accepted as impossible. He escaped the Maze. He tears us apart in our hearts because he inspires us, gives us hope for what we cannot dare to dream of, is living proof that a pissed-on gutter boy can grow up and become one of the wealthiest, most powerful names we recognize, and he can do it with nothing but his own determination and a sense of survival. And yet, we hate him because he used his power to exploit the Maze rather than give back to it, and because we know we would do the same. We despise him because secretly, we know that the only thing that separates his success from our failures is that he was better than us. ■

## People of the Maze

**The Lieutenant**, the largest of the bullies, has managed to inspire many of the extremist gangs into a dangerously cohesive rebellion with his militant, “take-no-shit” attitude. His agenda is wildly chaotic and seems to be a result of his developing influence over constituent parties. Last month the call to arms was human supremacy (despite the abundance of govaughn under his influence). The month before that, the Lieutenant’s army raped and killed a cleric in the name of religious freedom. When her brother came for revenge, they beat him to within an inch of his life and tied him, naked, to a church steeple. The month before that, the Lieutenant chased a well-liked fruit vendor out of the Maze for refusing to give him a discount. A variety of merchants and establishments are beginning to pay the Lieutenant to leave them alone.

**The Unseen Sorceress**, a woman whose real name is widely unknown, runs the Sanctum – a combination orphanage and brothel. She picks abandoned children off the street, gives them food and shelter, and trains them to eventually work in her prostitution service. Most become sex workers, though a select few provide martial protection and some are sold off as slaves to wealthy noblemen in other Tan Dorra districts. The Sanctum has borne the assault of several crusades for freedom, but

the establishment can provide money and pleasure to enough powerful agents that all such pushes have been thwarted. Within the Maze, the Sorceress is known for her elusiveness, always appearing masked, as well as her fierce loyalty to both house and clientele. Her blacklist for patrons that mistreat her employees (even sold slaves) is taken seriously by many and is regarded as a mark of shame.

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**Gyorgi Arbor** runs the only clean tavern in town. Strictly free of hair in any form, Gyorgi’s has become a haven for the foreigners, travelers, and the honest laborers who want to get hammered in relative peace. Brawls are relatively rare here; in addition to keeping the unruly out, Gyorgi keeps a tight fist. Rumors are that the burly friss will take you outside first in order to keep the place clean. Blood stains are bad for this niche. Thieves flock to Gyorgi’s to flaunt their fenced goods without the drowning presence of the hair trade, and many of Arbor’s patrons are indeed more wealthy enthusiasts seeking the rare gem or the right artwork for their fireplace – all for prices unbeatable in legitimate markets. Gyorgi gets a rake and everybody is happy.

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**Cairn Ridgeknight** is perhaps the only real arcanist in the Maze. He quietly keeps a library on the intersection of two terribly bloody streets, and yet no one with a half a brain dare touch him or trespass on his property. Of course people have tried, but the sizzling smell of a high-energy glyph discharging onto skin is enough to keep most at bay. Some say that Cairn – almost certainly not the aging librarian’s birth name – was formerly a League agent that hid from his career enemies by hiding in the most dangerous place he could find. Cairn purportedly sells expensive alchemical supplies; his primary market being those investing in quality hair purification. ■

*Artwork courtesy of, respectively, AsheGHOST and BenWootten via deviantart.com*

Dear Magistrate Gertrude,

I must protest the recent decision to induct Mr. Steelworth into the Council. I understand that the man has done much to further our goals, but with all due respect, I remind you that the Council was created and maintained for the very purpose of keeping men like Steelworth in their rightful place, and us in ours. In these times of economic and social turmoil, we of nobility must keep vigilant and work together to maintain our rightly social stature. Introducing a gutter born cutthroat into our ranks is the very antithesis of what we work for: a more pure and gentlemanly Arius. We stand for honest work, for the familial institution, and for fair coin. Steelworth is a symbol of the perverted, of the corrupt, of those that lack the inner moral compass that has set them apart from us for generations.

Steelworth is an ally, no doubt, but his wealth is ample reward for what he has accomplished. The Council is not just about money. It is about intrinsic character, something that Steelworth was born without. He may hide it with crowns, he may hand pick a noblewoman bride, he may live amongst us, but he is simply not one of us and he will never be. No one on the Council would argue that fact.

I do not wish to mar your evening with disdain for a man that has, for all of his evil, ultimately helped our cause. I only ask that we remember who we are, why we are here and not in the gutters, and the steps we must take to preserve what we have for our children. I ask that we remember that we were ones that first called it the Gutter Maze, and that there was nothing proud in the name. Admitting Steelworth into our fold is a mistake and I urge you to reconsider it.

Sincerely,

Tiberius Bale

## Our Story Begins Here

Precious few people have seen the back rooms of the Citadel. Depending on your situation, you might find it a privilege or a curse. Sid Steelworth stares absentmindedly at a precious oil painting on the wall of the plush office, a worried scowl plastered over his face. Finally, he looks at you and says, "Somebody wants to fuck with me. I need a few insurgents with low profiles to get the job done."

A quiet aide closes the door and locks it while Steelworth grinds his teeth. The muffled roar of a thousand people erupts from above. Two scorpions desperately dueled for their lives, oblivious that a million crowns would change hands tonight based on the victor. Steelworth seems as happy about where he was as the arthropods. "They kidnapped my daughter," he finally spits, "and told me I was to wait for further instructions. You're going to get her back."

He gives you no choice, and he's right – you have none. Whatever your contract is, whatever circumstances led you to owe Steelworth a favor, it is irrefutable. Perhaps you lost more money than you could afford betting on an underdog. Maybe Steelworth was an angel investor in your dying family business. Maybe Steelworth bought you from the Sorceress herself. No matter what brought you here, it's clear that Steelworth expects no less than success. ■



The Edge of the Maze