



Chapter 32: URBAN CAMPAIGNS

An urban campaign is very different from a typical campaign in which the player characters move all around the continent, traversing the wilderness as well as stopping in settlements. This chapter gives a brief overview of some things to keep in mind as you plan and run a campaign set in Ptolus.



Running an urban campaign offers some unique challenges compared with running, say, a dungeon campaign or one set in the wilderness. The sections that follow describe those challenges and offer suggestions on how best to conduct a campaign set in a city like Ptolus.

THE URBAN ADVENTURE

Although Ptolus offers plenty of opportunities for dungeon forays, truly urban adventures have a flavor unique unto themselves. The dungeon adventure is primarily an exploratory affair of venturing into the unknown. Urban adventures aren't usually about exploration, because the environment isn't unknown—a trip to the Warrens being a notable exception.

The typical **urban adventure** involves a **mystery** of some kind, either a straightforward one (Who killed the constable?) or a more convoluted puzzle (What's the connection between **Blackstock Printing** and the **Shadow Eyes**?). This typical type of scenario may involve a fair amount of interaction with NPCs (Diplomacy and Gather Information checks along with some Bluff and Sense Motive, and maybe even Intimidate), some study and investigation (Knowledge checks, research in libraries, consultation with sages), and likely ends with a big fight.

Another way to look at the difference between urban adventures and other types is to outline them. One could sum up a typical dungeon adventure in this way:

Exploration ⇒ small fight ⇒ exploration ⇒ small fight ⇒ exploration ⇒ big fight

One could break down an urban adventure like this:

Interaction/investigation ⇒ interaction/investigation ⇒ interaction/investigation ⇒ big fight

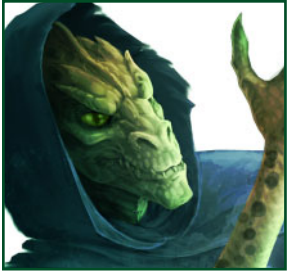
Of course, “interaction/investigation” can cover a lot of territory. It can mean a simple Diplomacy or Gather Information check or something as complex as tailing a suspect, casing a building, or searching an entire house for clues. And course, some of those latter activities might lead to combat: It's not hard to sprinkle a few small fights into the urban adventure flow.

One way to break out of this pattern is to **vary the outline** a bit. Have a brand-new adventure start off with action: The player characters are attacked by a powerful force. They win the fight, but they still don't know why they were attacked. The quintessential beginning for such an adventure in Ptolus is to have the PCs attacked by **Vai assassins**. When the characters survive, they still have to figure out who hired the assassins and

Never underestimate the value of combining the typical urban adventure with a typical dungeon adventure. The availability of both scenario types is, after all, one of Ptolus' strong suits. The characters' investigations might reveal that they have to go down below the city to get at the heart of their mystery. A clue in the Dungeon could send them up to the city to interact with people who can give them important information.

*Blackstock Printing, page 353
Shadow Eyes, page 349*

Vai assassins, page 140



Durant, page 122
Kevris Killraven, page 121

Longfingers Guild, page 128

House Rau, page 93



Some mysterious villains in the streets and alleyways of Ptolus wear masks while they commit their crimes.

The Sorn, page 137
House Vladaam, page 96

The Forsaken, page 112

Hammersong Vaults, page 322

deal with him, so they don't keep facing more attempts on their lives.

Urban adventures can be very reactive: An NPC does something, and the player characters react. It doesn't have to be that way, however. DMs can **encourage the PCs to be proactive**. Proactive characters pick a goal and then figure out how to reach it. For example, the PCs might decide they want to start their own thieves' guild. This requires them to find a headquarters, recruit members, and deal with the existing thieves' guild, the **Longfingers**. Rather than wait for the existing guild to act upon them, however, the characters could attempt to put it out of business somehow—maybe by putting its leaders to the sword, if they're particularly ruthless, or perhaps just by doing what they can to destroy the relationship between the Longfingers Guild and its benefactor, **House Rau**.

BALANCING URBAN ADVENTURES

DMs should remember that Encounter Levels are balanced with the idea that the group can handle four encounters of an EL equal to the average party level in a day (assuming four player characters). The typical urban adventure's **combat encounters are more spread out** than in other types of adventure, however. This fact, coupled with the close proximity of healing resources and other types of assistance in the city, means the PCs should be able to handle much more difficult encounters. Do not be afraid to have the adventurers face an encounter two levels higher than their own in a city adventure, particularly if it's the only such encounter they'll have that day. An important, climactic encounter might be three or even four levels above their own, if you think they can handle it.

However, keep in mind that this approach to balance runs a **greater risk of PC fatality**. Encounters in general will become more touch-and-go, more outright challenging. Rather than a number of moderate encounters, player characters will run up against fights that they decisively win or that soundly trounce them. This kind of campaign truly tests their mettle, encouraging them to use their resources differently than they would in a non-urban campaign. In other words, if you're going to have only one combat encounter today, there's no reason not to cast your best spells in that encounter.

STORY ARCS, PLOT WEAVING, AND ONGOING THREATS

Urban adventures lend themselves to **story arcs** rather than brief encounters or single-session adventures. In other words, something of import will happen, which leads to something else, which leads to something more. For example, in breaking up a fight in a tavern, the player characters might discover that one of the combatants dropped a map with some notes. Some investigation and study the next day confirms it as a map of **Hammersong Vaults**,

and the notes suggest that someone is planning to break in. The PCs turn the papers over to a grateful Ollam Hammersong, who suspects it's from a criminal gang led by a troglodyte named **Durant**. He offers the characters a reward if they'll break up the gang. The PCs ask around, find Durant, and go after him. Of course, Durant is a lieutenant of **Kevris Killraven**, so the adventurers end up making some powerful enemies. . . .

Sometimes, a DM will **weave two urban adventures together**. That's not to say that they are at all related, but the player characters have to deal with them at the same time. A pair of woven adventures might look like this:

Interaction/investigation A ⇒ interaction/investigation B ⇒ interaction/investigation A ⇒ big fight A ⇒ interaction/investigation B ⇒ big fight B

The encounters are staggered in time, so the player characters can deal with one plot and then the other. Of course, the PCs should have some say over which thread of the woven adventures they deal with, but it's easy for the DM to put up a roadblock in one story arc and present them with new avenues to follow in another. Avoid doing this too much, however, or the players may feel like the campaign is nothing but a dozen or more unresolved plot threads.

As the Hammersong Vaults example shows, it's often more difficult in an urban adventure to tell when the adventure is actually over. The **story arc can just keep going** and going. Sure, if it's a mystery and the mystery is solved, that's obvious. But on the other hand, if the opposition is a group of **Sorn** sorcerer-assassins, it's next to impossible to kill all of them—it's not like being able to "clear" a dungeon full of orcs. The PCs' conflict with the Sorn may come back to haunt them weeks or months in the future. Occasionally, though, it's good to **provide the characters with some closure**. If they have been fending off attacks from agents of **House Vladaam** for weeks, have the Vladaams obviously turn their attention elsewhere, or present the PCs with the opportunity to either bring down House Vladaam once and for all (a drastic step!) or negotiate some kind of détente with them.

Remember that permanently eliminating a threat to the PCs—like the **Forsaken**, the Killraven Crime League, or House Vladaam—only serves to cut off a source of future campaign plots. **Try to achieve closure without ridding Ptolus of all the bad guys**. Bringing down one powerful evil organization like that should be the culmination of an entire campaign and serve as a fitting climactic encounter. In addition, it offers the characters a unique reward: the satisfaction that they made an important difference in the city.

Another thing you can weave into your adventures is some of the **scenario ideas** presented throughout this book. These scenarios tie together with locations, groups, or individuals described in



the various chapters. Perhaps the best way to utilize these scenario ideas in creating your urban campaign is in a spontaneous fashion. Don't feel you have to plan to use them ahead of time, but if in the course of the regular campaign the characters go to a particular place or meet a certain person, you can use the scenario in response.

For instance, take the scenario involving the **Smoke Shop** in the North Market. If the PCs get involved with the staff there, plug the scenario into your campaign then. In this way, the player characters never feel they're being led to adventures, but that adventure waits for them wherever they go.

That said, some of the scenarios do require a bit of planning, such as the one involving escorting **Lady Nagel** to the **Prison**, as presented in the "Nagel Estate" section of Chapter 12. So, as you plan your story arcs and multiple plotlines, don't neglect the opportunities presented by the scenario nuggets in locale, organization, and character descriptions.

URBAN REWARDS

Magic items, gold, and other typical treasures are of great value in an urban adventure, just as in any other scenario. But don't overlook another potential reward: **the respect of a powerful individual or organization**. For example, slaying a mighty vampire can earn the admiration of the undead-fighting **Keepers of the Veil**. That admiration could turn into assistance, healing, or free information later on, when it's needed.

Over the long term, **becoming a known entity in the city** can also reward a group's accomplishments. A good reputation can get a person more than free drinks in the tavern—it can lead to job offers from wealthy clients or such special boons as a **thoughtstone**. Eventually, these kinds of rewards can turn into positions of authority. A PC might be invited to join the **Twelve Commanders**, for example.

"**Treasure items**" can take on a different meaning in a Ptolus adventure as well. Imagine the value of a ledger showing the names and addresses of an **Inverted Pyramid** mage's contacts in the city, or a map showing all the Sorn cells' headquarters.

ALLIES, AID, AND HEALING

In a city like Ptolus, the player characters enjoy **nearby resources** that they don't have while exploring a remote jungle or delving deep into a dungeon. First and foremost, the remedy for virtually any wound or malady is readily available to those who can pay for it—from blindness to negative levels to ability score damage. So no condition is going to be lasting, even if dealing with it would normally be beyond the PCs' level. Six negative levels and all ability scores down to 1? No problem—the Temple District can deal with all of that and have the party back into the adventure in an hour or two. This is both a boon and a bane to the campaign. On the one hand, the whole adventure isn't derailed if a player character fails an important saving throw. On the other, debilitating conditions

The Company of the Black Lantern from the original Ptolus Campaign (from left): Gaerioth Shadowhand, Sercian Lorenci, Vexander Sangreal, and Tellian Riverborn.

*Thoughtstones, page 166
Twelve Commanders, page 148*

Inverted Pyramid, page 115

Smoke Shop, page 310

*Lady Nagel, page 93
The Prison, page 436*



Keepers of the Veil, page 119