

The Gilded Conspiracy

A D&D 5th Edition Urban Adventure for Characters Level 6-8

Adventure Background

In the magnificent city of Aurelius, where golden spires pierce the clouds and merchant princes live like kings, all is not as gilded as it appears. Beneath the opulent surface, a sinister conspiracy threatens to tear the city apart from within. What begins as a simple investigation into missing persons soon unveils a web of corruption, forbidden magic, and political intrigue that reaches into the highest echelons of power.

The party finds themselves caught between rival factions: the established nobility who cling to traditional power, the rising merchant guilds who seek to reshape the city through commerce, and a mysterious cult that promises transcendence through the fusion of flesh and gold. As the conspiracy unfolds, the characters must navigate treacherous political waters, uncover ancient secrets buried beneath the city's foundations, and prevent a catastrophe that could transform every citizen into something inhuman.

The Central Mystery: People from the lower districts have been disappearing, only to return weeks later as eerily perfect versions of themselves—beautiful, wealthy, and completely loyal to the city's elite. But these "improved" citizens are no longer entirely human, and their transformation is just the beginning of a plan that will remake Aurelius entirely.

Adventure Hooks

- **The Desperate Commission:** A wealthy merchant hires the party to find his missing daughter, who vanished from the lower districts and returned as a cold, perfect stranger
- **Guild Politics:** The party becomes involved in tensions between the Merchants' Coalition and the established Noble Houses
- **Personal Stakes:** A party member's contact or ally has undergone the mysterious transformation
- **Official Investigation:** City Watch Captain Valdris recruits the party to investigate the disappearances through unofficial channels

Chapter 1: Aurelius - The Golden City

City Overview

Aurelius rises from the confluence of three rivers, its districts arranged in concentric rings around the central Golden Citadel. The city's architecture blends classical marble with newer developments featuring actual veins of gold worked into the stone. Bridges span the waterways

like jeweled necklaces, and the constant sound of commerce fills the air—vendors hawking wares, coins changing hands, and the rumble of cargo wagons.

Population: Approximately 800,000 souls **Government:** Council of Nine (five noble houses, four merchant guild representatives) **Notable Features:** Golden Citadel, Floating Markets, Underground Aqueduct System, Academy of Arts & Sciences

The Five Districts

The Aureate Crown (Central District) The seat of power, dominated by the Golden Citadel where the Council of Nine meets. Here stand the greatest temples, the Academy, and the estates of the most powerful families. Streets are paved with marble inlaid with golden designs, and every building competes to display the most ostentatious wealth.

Key Locations:

- **Golden Citadel:** Massive palace/government complex with golden dome visible from anywhere in the city
- **Temple of Prosperity:** Dedicated to Waukeen, goddess of trade and wealth
- **Academy of Arts & Sciences:** Prestigious institution where the elite send their children
- **The Gilded Garden:** Exclusive social club for the most powerful citizens

The Merchant Quarter (Second Ring) The economic heart of Aurelius, where great trading houses conduct business worth kingdoms. Warehouses, guildhalls, and counting houses line wide boulevards designed for heavy commercial traffic. The famous Floating Markets operate here, with barges and boats creating a constantly shifting marketplace on the rivers.

Key Locations:

- **The Grand Exchange:** Massive building where commodities and currencies are traded
- **Guildhall Row:** Ornate buildings housing the various trade guilds
- **The Floating Markets:** River-based marketplace that changes location daily
- **Warehouse District:** Maze of storage facilities and shipping offices

The Artisan Wards (Third Ring) Home to skilled craftspeople, minor merchants, and the professional classes. Well-maintained but not ostentatious, these districts house the backbone of the city's economy. Workshops, studios, and small shops create a bustling but orderly atmosphere.

Key Locations:

- **Craftsman's Circle:** Central plaza surrounded by the finest workshops
- **The Ink & Quill District:** Home to scribes, scholars, and book dealers
- **Healer's Row:** Medical district with temples, apothecaries, and hospitals
- **The Theater Quarter:** Entertainment district with playhouses and music halls

The Commons (Fourth Ring) Where the majority of Aurelius's citizens live and work. Crowded but not squalid, these neighborhoods house dock workers, servants, guards, and laborers. The architecture is functional rather than beautiful, but the areas are generally safe and well-patrolled.

Key Locations:

- **The Great Market:** Large public market serving the common folk
- **Riverside Docks:** Major shipping and fishing operations
- **Barracks Quarter:** Housing for city watch and military personnel
- **Worker's Halls:** Meeting places for labor organizations

The Shadowed Reach (Outer Ring) The poorest district, built in the shadows of the great city walls. Here, refugees, criminals, and the desperate eke out precarious livings. It's also where the missing persons cases have been most frequent, though few in the inner districts pay attention to problems here.

Key Locations:

- **The Tangle:** Maze of narrow alleys and ramshackle buildings
- **Beggar's Bridge:** Shantytown built on and around an old stone bridge
- **The Pits:** Underground fighting rings and illegal gambling dens
- **Sanctuary House:** Temple-run shelter for the destitute

Chapter 2: The Investigation Begins

Initial Encounters and Information Gathering

Meeting Captain Valdris (City Watch Captain)

- AC 18 (Plate), HP 52, Speed 30 ft.
- **Appearance:** Grizzled veteran in his fifties, missing left eye from old battle. Wears practical armor rather than ceremonial gear.
- **Manner:** Direct, suspicious of politics, genuinely cares about the city's people.

Location: City Watch headquarters in the Commons

Initial Briefing: *"Forty-three people missing from the Shadowed Reach over the past six months. But here's the strange part—twenty-one of them have returned. Their families should be celebrating, but instead they come to us with complaints. 'She's not the same,' they say. 'He doesn't remember things he should, knows things he shouldn't.' Officially, missing persons who return aren't our concern. Unofficially... something's very wrong."*

Information Captain Valdris Provides:

- Missing persons all from the poorest district, aged 16-35, healthy before disappearance

- Those who return are physically perfect—no scars, blemishes, or old injuries
- Returnees display increased wealth but can't explain its source
- Families report personality changes—less emotional, more focused on "improvement"
- Official investigation was shut down by order of Councilor Aurelius Vex

Marcus Coinwright (Worried Father)

- AC 10, HP 4, Speed 30 ft.
- **Appearance:** Middle-aged dock worker, calloused hands, worried expression permanently etched on his face.
- **Manner:** Desperate, protective, suspicious of authority figures.

Location: Small apartment in the Commons

Marcus's Story: *"My daughter Lyra disappeared three months ago. Vanished on her way home from work at the textile shop. We searched everywhere, posted notices, begged the Watch for help. Then one morning, she's back. But it's not her—not really. She looks perfect, like some artist's idea of what Lyra should be. No more freckles, no scar on her chin from when she fell as a child. She speaks differently, acts differently. And the gold... she came back with a purse full of gold coins, wearing clothes worth more than I make in a year."*

Key Information from Marcus:

- Lyra now lives in the Merchant Quarter and rarely visits family
- She claims to work for "beneficial organizations" but won't elaborate
- She's tried to convince other family members to "seek improvement"
- Marcus has seen other transformed individuals meeting in groups

Dr. Helena Brightwater (Academy Scholar)

- AC 12, HP 22, Speed 30 ft.
- **Appearance:** Brilliant woman in her forties, prematurely gray hair, ink-stained fingers from constant note-taking.
- **Manner:** Intensely curious, speaks rapidly when excited, frustrated by official stonewalling.

Location: Academy of Arts & Sciences

Dr. Brightwater's Research: *"I've been studying the phenomenon from an anthropological perspective. The returned individuals display remarkable consistency in their behavioral changes: increased focus on personal advancement, reduced emotional attachments to family, obsession with what they call 'optimization.' Most intriguingly, they all use identical phrases when describing their experiences—'I have been improved,' 'The process was illuminating,' 'Everyone should have this opportunity.'"*

Key Information from Dr. Brightwater:

- She's identified patterns suggesting systematic indoctrination
- Returned individuals all attend weekly "improvement sessions" at various locations
- She's traced connections to several legitimate businesses that may be fronts
- Her official research was defunded after Councilor Vex's intervention

Following the Trail

The Silk & Gold Emporium (Front Business) A high-end clothing store in the Merchant Quarter that employs several "returned" individuals.

Store Description: An elegant shop with floor-to-ceiling windows displaying the finest fabrics and jewelry. Everything gleams with subtle golden accents, and the staff moves with eerie synchronization. Customers are attended to with professional perfection that feels almost inhuman.

Key Staff:

- **Lyra Coinwright** (Transformed): Marcus's daughter, now a perfect saleswoman
- **Thomas Ashford** (Transformed): Former street orphan, now assistant manager
- **Madame Evangeline** (Store Owner): Mysterious woman who claims to "help people reach their potential"

Investigation Results:

- *Insight DC 15:* Staff members show signs of having their personalities artificially altered
- *Investigation DC 16:* Back room contains detailed files on dozens of "candidates for improvement"
- *Persuasion DC 18:* Transformed employees will admit to attending "enlightenment sessions"
- *Stealth DC 14:* Observing the store reveals a hidden entrance used after closing

The Enlightenment Sessions Following transformed individuals leads to various meeting locations throughout the city.

Session Locations:

- Basement of the Silk & Gold Emporium
- Private rooms at the Gilded Garden social club
- Hidden chambers beneath the Temple of Prosperity
- Abandoned warehouse in the Merchant Quarter

Session Description: Twenty to thirty people sit in perfect circles, their eyes closed as a robed figure speaks in soothing tones about "transcending human limitations" and "achieving perfect form." The air shimmers with faint magical energy, and golden symbols glow on the walls. Participants respond in unison to specific phrases, their voices harmonizing unnaturally.

Observation Results:

- *Arcana DC 17*: The ritual involves enchantment magic combined with something else—transmutation
- *Religion DC 15*: The symbols aren't from any recognized deity or philosophy
- *Perception DC 18*: Some participants show physical changes—skin with golden undertones, eyes that reflect light differently
- *Investigation DC 20*: The rituals follow a progression, with participants gradually becoming less human

Chapter 3: The Conspiracy Unveiled

The Golden Transformation

The Alchemical Process: Through investigation, the party discovers that the "improvement" process involves a sophisticated combination of alchemy, enchantment magic, and extraplanar influence. Subjects are gradually transformed over weeks of treatment, their bodies infused with golden essence that makes them stronger, more beautiful, but less human.

The Golden Essence: A mysterious substance that appears to be liquid gold but radiates magical energy. When consumed or injected, it begins reshaping the subject's body and mind according to a predetermined template of "perfection."

Physical Changes:

- Flawless skin with subtle golden undertones
- Enhanced physical capabilities (increased Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution)
- Resistance to disease and aging
- Eyes that reflect light like polished metal

Mental Changes:

- Reduced emotional range and empathy
- Obsessive focus on self-improvement and efficiency
- Absolute loyalty to the organization providing the transformation
- Gradual loss of personal memories and attachments

The True Masterminds

Councilor Aurelius Vex (Noble/Mastermind)

- AC 17 (Natural Armor), HP 112, Speed 30 ft.
- **Appearance:** Tall, imposing figure with golden skin and eyes like molten metal. Wears elaborate robes that seem to be woven from actual gold thread.
- **Manner:** Charismatic, speaks of grand visions for humanity's future, genuinely believes he's saving people.

Background: Originally human, Vex was the first successful subject of the golden transformation. He now leads the conspiracy, believing that converting all of humanity will create a perfect society free from the weaknesses of mortal flesh.

Vex's Philosophy: *"Look at this city—corruption, poverty, suffering. All caused by the fundamental flaws in human nature. Greed, fear, irrationality, the weakness of flesh. We offer something better: perfection, purpose, freedom from the petty concerns that plague ordinary existence. Yes, some individuality is lost, but what is individual suffering compared to collective perfection?"*

The Gilded Hierarchs (Inner Circle) Five other highly transformed individuals who help lead the conspiracy:

- **Seraphina Goldweaver:** Former merchant prince, now oversees the financial operations
- **Brother Aurelius:** Corrupted priest who perverts religious doctrine to support the cause
- **Dr. Midas Korren:** Alchemist who perfected the transformation process
- **Lady Chrysanthia:** Noble who recruits from high society
- **The Broker:** Mysterious figure who handles "acquisitions" and eliminates obstacles

The Grand Plan

Phase 1: Recruitment and Testing (Current) Target the desperate and forgotten from the lower districts. Perfect the transformation process and build a loyal core of converted followers.

Phase 2: Infiltration (In Progress) Place converted agents in key positions throughout the city's government, guilds, and institutions. Gradually influence policy to support the conspiracy's goals.

Phase 3: Mass Conversion (Planned) Introduce the golden essence into the city's water supply during the annual Prosperity Festival, when the entire population gathers for celebration. Transform everyone simultaneously to prevent resistance.

Phase 4: Expansion (Ultimate Goal) Use Aurelius as a base to spread the "gift" of transformation to other cities and eventually the entire world.

Chapter 4: Key Locations and Set Pieces

The Hidden Laboratory

Location: Deep beneath the Temple of Prosperity, accessed through secret passages

Laboratory Description: A vast underground complex filled with alchemical equipment, holding cells, and surgical tables. Golden veins run through the walls like living metal, pulsing with inner light. The air smells of ozone and melted gold. Dozens of subjects in various stages of transformation are kept here, some willing, others not.

Key Areas:

- **Transformation Chambers:** Where the golden essence is administered
- **Essence Refinement:** Where raw materials are processed into the transformative substance
- **Subject Holding:** Cells containing people in various stages of conversion
- **Research Archive:** Documents detailing the process and future plans
- **Vex's Sanctum:** The leader's private quarters and strategic planning center

Laboratory Encounters:

- **Golden Guardians:** Completely transformed guards with enhanced combat abilities
- **Unstable Subjects:** Partially transformed individuals driven mad by the process
- **Alchemical Hazards:** Spilled essence that causes random transmutation effects
- **Extraction Teams:** Groups sent to retrieve "candidates" for transformation

The Prosperity Festival

The Annual Celebration: Aurelius's greatest festival celebrates the city's wealth and success. All citizens receive free food and drink, culminating in the "Golden Toast" where everyone drinks from ceremonial cups at midnight.

Festival Events:

- **Merchant Parade:** Elaborate floats displaying the city's prosperity
- **Cultural Exhibitions:** Art, music, and performances throughout the districts
- **Public Feasts:** Free meals provided in every district
- **Golden Toast:** Midnight ceremony where all citizens drink together

The Conspiracy's Plan: The ceremonial cups for the Golden Toast have been prepared with golden essence. When the entire city drinks simultaneously, the mass transformation will begin. The party has until midnight to prevent this catastrophe.

Festival Complications:

- Massive crowds make movement and investigation difficult
- Increased security around key locations
- Multiple simultaneous events require the party to split their attention
- Converted agents use the festival chaos to eliminate threats

The Gilded Garden Confrontation

The Social Club: An exclusive establishment where the city's elite gather, now serving as the conspiracy's command center during the festival.

Building Description: A magnificent mansion with gardens that literally grow golden flowers and trees with metallic leaves. The interior combines luxury with subtle wrongness—too-perfect symmetry, staff that move in eerie coordination, artwork that depicts transformation as transcendence.

The Final Confrontation: The climactic battle takes place in the Garden's ballroom as the Golden Toast approaches. Councilor Vex and his Hierarchs make their final stand while their converted followers attempt to ensure the plan succeeds.

Environmental Features:

- **Golden Fountains:** Flowing essence that heals transformed enemies
- **Conversion Pools:** Stepping in causes Constitution saves or temporary transformation
- **Mirror Maze:** Reflective surfaces that confuse and disorient
- **Elevated Balconies:** Tactical positioning for ranged combat

Chapter 5: NPC Interactions and Faction Play

The Noble Houses

House Argentum (Opposition Faction) Led by **Lady Silviana Argentum**, this house suspects the conspiracy but lacks concrete evidence. They represent traditional noble values and resist the merchant guilds' growing influence.

Lady Silviana Argentum (Noble)

- AC 15 (Studded Leather), HP 32, Speed 30 ft.
- **Appearance:** Elegant woman in her sixties, silver hair, sharp eyes that miss nothing.
- **Manner:** Politically savvy, speaks in careful phrases, values tradition and stability.

Potential Alliance: *"Something is rotten in our golden city. The merchant guilds grow too powerful, and there are whispers of strange practices among the new elite. If you can provide proof of wrongdoing, House Argentum will support you—but we must proceed carefully. One does not lightly accuse a sitting councilor."*

House Argentum Resources:

- Political influence to protect the party from official retaliation
- Access to high society events and information
- Well-trained house guards for backup
- Connections with other noble houses

The Merchant Guilds

The Honest Traders Coalition Not all merchant guilds are part of the conspiracy. The Coalition, led by **Guildmaster Henrik Stormwind**, represents traditional merchants who've noticed their competitors' suspicious success.

Guildmaster Henrik Stormwind (Guild Leader)

- AC 14 (Leather Armor), HP 45, Speed 30 ft.
- **Appearance:** Robust man in his forties, weathered from years of travel, practical clothes but well-made.
- **Manner:** Straightforward, values honest dealing, increasingly frustrated by unfair competition.

Henrik's Concerns: *"My guild has traded honestly for three generations, but lately we can't compete. New merchants appear overnight with perfect products, unlimited capital, and customers who seem enchanted—literally enchanted. They're destroying legitimate businesses through supernatural means."*

Coalition Resources:

- Shipping and transportation throughout the city
- Information about suspicious business practices
- Loyal workers who can serve as scouts and messengers
- Financial support for the investigation

The Undercity

The Beggar's Network The poorest citizens have organized their own information network, led by **"King" Matthias Crowley**, a former noble who lost everything and now lives in the Shadowed Reach.

"King" Matthias Crowley (Information Broker)

- AC 12, HP 28, Speed 30 ft.
- **Appearance:** Once-handsome man in his thirties, now scarred and weathered, wears tattered finery with dignity.
- **Manner:** Speaks like nobility despite circumstances, fiercely protective of the forgotten, bitter about society's inequities.

Matthias's Deal: *"You want to know about the disappeared? I can tell you everything—who was taken, when, from where. I can show you the patterns, the safe houses, the recruitment methods. But in exchange, I want assurance that when this ends, the forgotten won't be forgotten again. Promise me that."*

Beggar's Network Resources:

- Complete intelligence on disappearances and returns

- Access to hidden paths through the city
- Reconnaissance from people who are invisible to the wealthy
- Safe houses in the Shadowed Reach

Chapter 6: Combat Encounters and Challenges

Encounter 1: The Silk & Gold Ambush

Setup: When the party investigates too deeply, converted agents attempt to capture them for "improvement."

Enemies:

- 4 **Golden Cultists** (use Cult Fanatic stats with golden appearance)
- 2 **Partially Transformed Guards** (use Veteran stats with minor transmutation abilities)
- 1 **Conversion Specialist** (use Mage stats with enchantment focus)

Tactics:

- Specialists attempt to subdue rather than kill
- Use of *sleep*, *hold person*, and *charm* spells to capture party members
- Golden cultists coordinate attacks with supernatural precision
- Retreat if the battle goes poorly to report back

Environmental Features:

- Clothing racks that can be toppled for cover or obstacles
- Bolts of silk that can entangle opponents
- Glass displays that create difficult terrain when shattered
- Hidden passages for escape routes

Encounter 2: Laboratory Infiltration

Setup: Rescuing captured civilians or gathering evidence from the hidden laboratory.

Enemies:

- 6 **Golden Guardians** (use Knight stats with resistance to charm effects)
- 1 **Unstable Subject** (use Flesh Golem stats, represents failed transformation)
- **Dr. Midas Korren** (use Archmage stats with transmutation specialization)

Environmental Hazards:

- **Golden Essence Spills:** DC 16 Constitution save or gain 1 level of exhaustion from partial transformation
- **Alchemical Vapors:** DC 14 Constitution save or become poisoned for 1 hour

- **Conversion Chambers:** Stepping inside triggers transformation process (multiple saves required)
- **Unstable Magic:** Wild magic surges from experimental procedures

Rescue Objectives:

- Free 2d6 civilians in various stages of transformation
- Gather research documents proving the conspiracy
- Destroy essence production equipment
- Escape before reinforcements arrive

Encounter 3: Festival Chase Sequence

Setup: Racing through the crowded festival to prevent the mass conversion.

Challenge Elements:

- **Crowd Navigation:** DC 15 Acrobatics or Athletics to move quickly through crowds
- **Pursuit:** Golden agents give chase using rooftops and alleys
- **Time Pressure:** Only 30 minutes until the Golden Toast
- **Multiple Objectives:** Securing the ceremonial cups, warning the population, confronting leaders

Chase Complications (Roll d6 each round):

1. Parade float blocks path - requires Acrobatics DC 17 to navigate
2. Converted guards attempt to intercept - combat encounter
3. Crowd panic causes stampede - Dexterity save DC 15 or take damage
4. Golden essence spill creates hazardous area
5. Friendly NPC needs rescue from converted agents
6. Shortcut available through ally's territory

Encounter 4: The Gilded Garden Finale

Setup: Final confrontation with Councilor Vex and the Hierarchs.

Phase 1 - The Hierarchs:

- **Seraphina Goldweaver** (Noble with charm abilities)
- **Brother Aurelius** (Priest with corrupted divine magic)
- **Dr. Midas Korren** (if he survived earlier encounter)
- **Lady Chrysanthia** (Assassin with golden weapons)

Phase 2 - Councilor Vex: Aurelius Vex, The Golden Herald

- AC 19 (Natural Armor), HP 165, Speed 40 ft.

- **Legendary Actions:** 3 per turn
- **Golden Form:** Immunity to charm, resistance to physical damage
- **Transmutation Magic:** Can alter the battlefield and opponents
- **Mass Suggestion:** Attempt to convert party members mid-combat

Environmental Features:

- **Golden Garden:** Provides healing to transformed enemies
- **Essence Fountains:** Can be destroyed to deny enemy healing
- **Mirror Maze:** Creates duplicates and illusions
- **Conversion Pools:** Falling in requires saves against transformation

Victory Conditions:

- Defeat Councilor Vex and the surviving Hierarchs
- Prevent the Golden Toast from occurring
- Expose the conspiracy to the city's population
- Destroy the essence production facilities

Chapter 7: Multiple Endings and Consequences

Ending 1: Complete Victory

Requirements: Party defeats all conspirators, prevents mass conversion, and exposes the plot with evidence.

Resolution: The conspiracy is completely unraveled. Vex and surviving Hierarchs are captured or killed. The transformed citizens gradually return to normal over several months with proper treatment. The city implements reforms to prevent future infiltration.

Rewards: 800 gp each, noble titles or guild memberships, permanent allies throughout the city, reputation as heroes of Aurelius.

Long-term Impact: Aurelius becomes more democratic, with better representation for all districts. The party gains a powerful base of operations and network of contacts.

Ending 2: Partial Success

Requirements: Party prevents mass conversion but some conspirators escape, or stops the conspiracy but with significant collateral damage.

Resolution: The immediate threat is ended, but some transformed individuals remain, and parts of the conspiracy survive to potentially regroup. The city is saved but scarred by the experience.

Rewards: 600 gp each, recognition from official authorities, some ongoing allies but also some enemies.

Long-term Impact: Sets up future adventures dealing with conspiracy remnants. Political tensions remain high between various factions.

Ending 3: Pyrrhic Victory

Requirements: Party succeeds but at great cost—major allies die, significant city damage, or moral compromises made.

Resolution: The conspiracy is stopped, but the price paid causes lasting trauma for both the party and the city. Some question whether the cure was worth the cost.

Rewards: 400 gp each, mixed reputation—some see them as heroes, others as dangerous loose cannons.

Long-term Impact: The party must deal with the consequences of their methods. The city rebuilds but with lasting scars.

Ending 4: The Golden Dawn

Requirements: Party fails to prevent the mass conversion or is themselves converted.

Resolution: The conspiracy succeeds. Aurelius becomes a city of golden perfection, free from human weaknesses but also from human warmth. The transformed population believes they have achieved paradise.

Consequences: If party members are converted, they become NPCs serving the new order. If they escape, they must live with their failure and plan to either reverse the transformation or fight the spreading golden infection.

Long-term Impact: Sets up a campaign where the party must find a way to restore humanity to the transformed or fight against an expanding empire of golden perfection.

Chapter 8: Extended City Guide

Daily Life in Aurelius

Commerce and Trade: The city operates on a complex economy mixing traditional coin with sophisticated banking, letters of credit, and commodity trading. The three rivers provide transportation, water power for mills, and fresh fish. Major trade routes connect to dozens of other cities, making Aurelius a hub of international commerce.

Social Structure:

- **The Council of Nine:** Ultimate authority, five nobles and four guild representatives
- **Established Nobility:** Old families with hereditary wealth and titles
- **Merchant Princes:** New money from successful trade and industry

- **Professional Classes:** Skilled artisans, scholars, priests, and bureaucrats
- **Common Citizens:** Laborers, servants, guards, and small shop owners
- **The Forgotten:** Unemployed, refugees, criminals, and outcasts

Cultural Life: Aurelius prides itself on sophistication. The Academy promotes learning and arts, while theaters and concert halls provide entertainment. The city hosts numerous festivals throughout the year, with the Prosperity Festival being the grandest.

Districts in Detail

Hidden Locations Throughout the City:

The Old Sewers (Beneath all districts): Ancient aqueduct system now serves as sewers, but contains hidden chambers and forgotten passages. Some areas have been converted to secret meeting places, smuggler routes, and emergency shelters.

The Floating Gardens (Merchant Quarter): Artificial islands in the rivers where exotic plants and alchemical herbs are grown. Some gardens are legitimate businesses, others are fronts for producing ingredients for the golden essence.

The Marble Quarries (Outside city walls): Source of the city's building stone, now mostly played out but containing vast underground networks. The conspiracy uses some chambers for advanced transformation procedures.

Aurelius University (Academy District): Beyond the main Academy buildings, the University maintains libraries, laboratories, and research facilities. Some professors are unwitting allies, others active conspiracy members.

Important NPCs Beyond the Main Cast

Captain Isabella "Iron Eyes" Corelli (Harbor Master)

- AC 16, HP 68, Speed 30 ft.
- Controls all river traffic, knows about suspicious shipments
- Honest but can be convinced to look the other way for sufficient payment
- Commands loyalty of dock workers and river pilots

Master Tomas Goldweaver (Artisan Guild Leader)

- AC 12, HP 32, Speed 30 ft.
- Seraphina's brother, unaware of her transformation
- Represents legitimate craftsmen threatened by conspiracy's supernatural production
- Can provide information about changes in his sister's behavior

Sister Mercy (Sanctuary House Director)

- AC 11, HP 18, Speed 30 ft.
- Runs shelter for the poor, notices patterns in disappearances
- Deeply religious, strongly opposes the conspiracy's methods
- Provides safe haven and healing for the party

"Lucky" Pietro Sandoval (Information Broker)

- AC 14, HP 45, Speed 30 ft.
- Operates from the Theater Quarter, sells information to all sides
- Neutral party interested primarily in profit
- Knows secrets about everyone in the city

Chapter 9: Adventure Scaling and Customization

For Level 4-6 Parties

Reduced Opposition:

- Fewer transformed guards in encounters
- Councilor Vex uses **Mage** stats instead of custom stat block
- Laboratory encounter involves escaping rather than fighting
- Some Hierarchs are not present for final battle

Simplified Politics:

- Focus on one or two major factions instead of all of them
- Reduce number of investigation leads to prevent overwhelming new players
- Make conspiracy motivations more straightforward

For Level 8-10 Parties

Enhanced Challenges:

- Add more Hierarchs with unique abilities
- Include extraplanar elements—the golden essence comes from the Plane of Earth
- Councilor Vex has been in contact with powerful outsiders
- Mass conversion affects magical infrastructure of the city

Complex Politics:

- International implications as other cities send investigators
- Multiple competing conspiracies beyond the golden transformation
- Ancient history reveals this has happened before in other locations

Urban Adventure Hooks for Ongoing Campaigns

Short-term Consequences:

- Cleaning up remaining conspiracy cells
- Helping transformed citizens readjust to normal life
- Dealing with power vacuum left by removed officials
- Managing economic disruption from exposed corruption

Long-term Campaign Elements:

- The conspiracy was part of a larger supernatural organization
- Other cities are experiencing similar problems
- The party's reputation draws them into other urban mysteries
- Political allies and enemies from this adventure affect future plots

Appendix A: Quick Reference Materials

District Quick Facts

- **Aureate Crown:** Population 25,000, mostly nobles and clergy
- **Merchant Quarter:** Population 180,000, commercial heart
- **Artisan Wards:** Population 220,000, skilled workers
- **The Commons:** Population 300,000, majority of citizens
- **Shadowed Reach:** Population 75,000, poorest district

Investigation DC Guidelines

- **Easy Information** (DC 10-12): Basic facts, obvious clues
- **Moderate Discovery** (DC 13-15): Important connections, hidden details
- **Difficult Investigation** (DC 16-18): Crucial evidence, well-hidden secrets
- **Expert Revelation** (DC 19-20): Master-level deduction, perfect execution

Random City Encounters (Roll d12)

1. Street performer drawing crowds with golden illusions
2. Pickpocket attempts to steal from party member
3. Merchant offers to buy party's equipment at inflated prices
4. City Watch patrol asks about party's business
5. Transformed individual recognizes party member from somewhere
6. Beggar provides useful information in exchange for food
7. Noble's carriage causes traffic jam and angry crowds
8. Rival adventuring party investigating similar leads
9. Festival preparation creates opportunities or obstacles
10. Religious procession blocks major thoroughfare
11. Guild demonstration affects party's movement
12. Mysterious benefactor leaves cryptic message for party

Key NPCs Attitude Tracker

- **Captain Valdris:** Helpful → Very Cooperative → Permanent Ally
- **Marcus Coinwright:** Desperate → Grateful → Loyal Contact
- **Dr. Brightwater:** Curious → Collaborative → Research Partner
- **Lady Silviana:** Cautious → Supportive → Political Ally
- **Henrik Stormwind:** Suspicious → Trusting → Guild Patron
- **"King" Matthias:** Hostile → Neutral → Valuable Informant

Appendix B: Handouts and Props

Handout 1: Missing Persons Report

Official City Watch Document - Restricted

Missing Persons Summary - Shadowed Reach District *Reporting Period: Last 6 Months*

Currently Missing (22 individuals):

- Elena Vasquez, 19, seamstress - Missing 2 weeks
- Jakob Ironhand, 27, blacksmith's apprentice - Missing 3 weeks
- Maria Santos, 23, tavern worker - Missing 1 month
- [Additional names continue...]

Returned Individuals (21 cases):

- Lyra Coinwright, 20, textile worker - Returned after 3 months
- Thomas Ashford, 18, former orphan - Returned after 2 months
- Samuel Reed, 25, dock worker - Returned after 4 months
- [Additional names continue...]

Note: All returned individuals exhibit similar behavioral changes. Families report concerns about personality alterations and unexplained wealth acquisition.

Handout 2: Dr. Brightwater's Research Notes

Academy of Arts & Sciences - Anthropological Study

Behavioral Analysis of "Returned" Individuals

Common Phrases Observed:

- "I have been improved beyond my former limitations"
- "The process was illuminating and necessary"
- "Everyone deserves this opportunity for betterment"
- "My previous concerns were symptoms of flawed thinking"

Physical Observations:

- Enhanced physical appearance (removal of scars, blemishes)
- Improved posture and coordination
- Unusual eye reflection in certain lighting
- Skin with subtle golden undertones

Social Changes:

- Decreased emotional responsiveness to family
- Obsessive focus on "optimization" and "improvement"
- Weekly attendance at unspecified "sessions"
- Attempts to recruit family members for similar "opportunities"

Research funding discontinued by order of Councilor Vex - H.B.

Handout 3: Intercepted Correspondence

Letter found in Silk & Gold Emporium

"To All Enlightened Brothers and Sisters,

The Great Work proceeds according to schedule. Phase Two infiltration has exceeded expectations - we now have assets in seven guild leadership positions and three noble house administrations.

The Prosperity Festival approaches, and all preparations for the Golden Dawn must be completed. Each district coordinator must confirm their ceremonial cup allocations by the new moon.

Remember: we are not destroying humanity, we are perfecting it. Those who resist simply haven't yet understood the gift we offer.

The Herald's blessing upon you all, S.G., Fifth Circle

P.S. - Increase surveillance on the foreign investigators. The Herald believes they may pose a threat to the timeline."

Handout 4: Alchemical Formula Fragment

Recovered from laboratory raid

Golden Essence Preparation - Stage VII Concentration: *0.3 parts pure aurum to 1 part prepared base*

Required Components:

- Distilled gold (alchemically pure)
- Essence of Earth Elemental
- Tears of the Willing (freely given)
- Powdered pearl (for binding)
- [Remainder of page damaged/illegible]

Administration Protocol: *Subject must consent to initial treatment. Subsequent doses can be administered without explicit permission once neural pathways have been established. Full conversion requires 7-12 treatments over 4-6 weeks.*

WARNING: *Premature termination of process results in subject madness or death. No reversal method currently known.*

Handout 5: Festival Schedule

Official Program - Prosperity Festival

DAY OF GOLDEN CELEBRATION

Dawn to Midday: Merchant Parade through all five districts **Midday to Evening:** Cultural exhibitions and public feasts **Evening to Midnight:** Grand performances at Golden Citadel **MIDNIGHT: The Golden Toast** - All citizens gather for ceremonial cup blessing

"Join your fellow citizens in celebrating another year of Aurelius prosperity! The traditional Golden Toast unites our community in gratitude for our shared success."

Ceremonial cups provided by the Aurelius Municipal Authority Blessed beverages courtesy of the Temple of Prosperity

Appendix C: Expanded Combat Encounters

Encounter: The Warehouse Ambush

Setup: Party investigates suspicious warehouse activity and discovers conversion facility.

Read-Aloud Text: *"The warehouse appears abandoned from the outside, but golden light seeps through cracks in the boarded windows. As you approach, you hear a low humming sound, almost like chanting, mixed with the clink of metal on metal. The air itself seems to shimmer with an oily, golden residue."*

Encounter Map Features:

- **Loading Dock:** Elevated platform providing high ground
- **Conversion Vats:** Large containers of golden essence (hazardous if damaged)
- **Storage Crates:** Provide cover but can be destroyed
- **Hidden Passages:** Secret exits for enemy reinforcements

- **Pulley System:** Can be used to drop heavy objects or create zip lines

Enemies:

- **2 Golden Enforcers** (use Gladiator stats with golden weapons)
- **4 Partially Converted Workers** (use Thug stats with minor charm resistance)
- **1 Conversion Overseer** (use Priest stats with transmutation spells)

Special Mechanics:

- **Golden Mist:** Broken vats create difficult terrain and require Constitution saves
- **Conversion in Progress:** 1d4 civilians are being transformed and need rescue
- **Alarm System:** If triggered, brings reinforcements in 3 rounds

Encounter: Rooftop Chase

Setup: Pursuit across the rooftops of the Merchant Quarter during festival chaos.

Chase Mechanics:

- Each round, characters move 1-3 segments based on movement choices
- **Dashing:** Move 3 segments but make DC 15 Acrobatics check or fall
- **Careful Movement:** Move 1 segment automatically with no risk
- **Normal Movement:** Move 2 segments, DC 12 Acrobatics check or lose 1 segment

Chase Obstacles (Roll d8 each round):

1. **Clothesline:** DC 13 Dex save or become entangled for 1 round
2. **Chimney Smoke:** DC 12 Con save or gain 1 level of exhaustion
3. **Loose Tiles:** DC 15 Acrobatics or fall 10 feet to lower roof
4. **Pigeon Coop:** Disturbed birds grant advantage on Stealth checks
5. **Bell Tower:** Loud chiming causes DC 14 Con save or become deafened
6. **Market Stall:** Can leap down to escape but take 1d6 damage
7. **Guard Patrol:** Must make DC 16 Stealth check or alert city watch
8. **Golden Agent:** Combat encounter on the rooftops

Victory Conditions:

- Escape pursuit after 10 segments
- Capture or defeat all pursuing golden agents
- Reach safe house before being cornered

Encounter: The Golden Garden Maze

Setup: Final approach to Councilor Vex requires navigating the transformed garden.

Maze Features:

- **Mirror Corridors:** Create illusions and duplicates
- **Golden Fountains:** Heal transformed creatures for 2d6 HP per round
- **Conversion Pools:** DC 17 Constitution save or begin transformation process
- **Living Statues:** Attack if party moves too quickly or loudly
- **Scrying Flowers:** Alert defenders to party's position

Navigation Challenge:

- **Intelligence (Investigation) DC 15:** Find correct path through maze
- **Wisdom (Perception) DC 13:** Notice hidden passages
- **Charisma (Deception) DC 16:** Convince golden servants you belong there

Maze Encounters:

- **Golden Sphinx:** Riddle guardian blocking main path
- **Converted Gardeners:** 6 former humans now tending impossible plants
- **Mirror Duplicates:** Illusory copies of party members that fight them

Appendix D: Urban Adventure Guidelines

Running City Adventures

Pacing Considerations:

- Cities offer many distractions; keep plot hooks clear and compelling
- Use time pressure to prevent endless investigation
- Balance social interaction with action sequences
- Allow for player creativity in urban environments

Information Management:

- Provide multiple paths to same information
- Use different NPC perspectives to create complete picture
- Allow expertise in different skills to reveal different aspects
- Reward thorough investigation but don't punish direct approaches

Social Dynamics:

- NPCs have their own agendas beyond helping the party
- Political considerations affect every interaction
- Reputation matters more in cities than wilderness
- Money and connections open doors that force cannot

City Resources and Services

Available Services:

- **Temples:** Healing, divine magic, sanctuary
- **Guilds:** Specialized equipment, expert knowledge, allies
- **Merchants:** Unusual items, information, transportation
- **Taverns:** Rumors, meetings, hired help
- **Libraries:** Research, historical knowledge, maps

Urban Hazards:

- **Crowds:** Difficult movement, easy concealment, potential stampedes
- **Politics:** Actions have consequences with multiple factions
- **Crime:** Pickpockets, extortion, gang territory
- **Disease:** Closer quarters, contaminated water, poor sanitation
- **Fire:** Wooden buildings, limited firefighting, rapid spread

Long-term Urban Campaigns

Building Relationships:

- Maintain ongoing connections with helpful NPCs
- Track reputation with different factions and organizations
- Create personal stakes through friends, allies, and enemies
- Allow player actions to change city's political landscape

Economic Considerations:

- Cities offer opportunities for investment and business ventures
- Property ownership provides base of operations
- Guild membership offers ongoing benefits and obligations
- Political appointments carry prestige and responsibility

Recurring Threats:

- Cult activity hidden within legitimate organizations
- Political conspiracies involving multiple factions
- Criminal organizations with supernatural backing
- Planar incursions through urban magical infrastructure

Adventure Credits

- **Design:** Urban conspiracy adventure with political intrigue and body horror elements
- **Estimated Play Time:** 8-12 hours across multiple sessions
- **Recommended Party Size:** 4-6 characters

- **Level Range:** 6-8 (scalable)

DM's Notes: This adventure emphasizes investigation, social interaction, and political maneuvering. Encourage players to use their backgrounds and skills creatively. The transformation theme can be disturbing—adjust horror elements based on your group's comfort level. The conspiracy should feel vast but not overwhelming, with clear action steps for the party to take. Remember that cities are living environments where NPC actions continue whether the party is present or not.