

# HELLFROST LAND OF FIRE

• REALM GUIDE #22 •

## THE KINGDOMS OF THE SPHINXES

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### INTRODUCTION

Other races and cultures boast greater antiquity, but at 1,900 years, the Kingdoms of the Sphinxes is the oldest nation still officially in existence. Within 400 years, the single empire, a nation that had weathered assaults by the fierce legions of Hekata, splintered into its current form. Within its borders, the sphinxes are absolute rulers of their domains, elevated above the masses they lord over by dint of their supposed divine ancestry or blessings. Many sphinxes consider themselves enlightened beings, but many see them as theological despots and tyrants. After centuries of being downtrodden, the other races sense the time for rebellion is nigh—many of the cities are beset with problems, and the sphinxes' attentions are diverted.

The first part covers the Kingdoms as a whole, and details only general facts or areas of interest not within the boundaries of one of the eight great cities. Each great city has its own unique section, providing specific information to that territory. This supplement expands on material found in *Hellfrost: Land of Fire*. While not essential, *Realm Guides* #19 and #20 respectively detail the core tenets of the Devoted and Faithful creeds.

### WHERE DO ALL THE PEOPLE LIVE?

The population of the seven great cities and the territories they directly control accounts for 50% of the total population. With nomads numbering a further 10%, that leaves just under one million souls unaccounted for. The great majority live in villages and towns along the rivers and coasts, with smaller pockets clustered around wells, springs, and oases in what city-dwellers ignorantly refer to as the "wilderness." Except in the case of those governed by nomads, these settlements are lorded over by noble sphinxes.

### Geography

The northern coast has a colder, wetter climate than the rest of the Kingdoms, and greater and more varied amounts of vegetation grow here. Despite higher rainfall and rivers that rarely run dry, the region is under threat from the desert, which continues to advance each year from the west and south. In winter, the exposed northern cities take the full force of icy winds howling across the sea from Rassilon. Sea blizzards wrack the coast and smother the cities, while snowfall blankets the northern face of the Prophecy Hills.

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## RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in the whole of the Kingdoms of the Sphinxes unless superseded elsewhere.

\* **Education:** Unless a character has Smarts d8+, the Rich Edge, or an Arcane Background, he *must* take the Illiterate Hindrance during character generation. The character can elect to take this in addition to his normal allotment of Hindrances. If he chooses it as an additional Hindrance, he gains 1 extra skill point to spend on any skill except Fighting, Investigation, Shooting, and Throwing. Most Knowledge skills can be learned by word of mouth and practical experience, and thus are not expressly forbidden.

A character who meets the above requirements is deemed to have attended school and *must* choose Sphinx as one of his initial languages.

\* **Food:** Even cities that export food endure shortages in the markets. Food prices, including rations, are double normal prices.

\* **Magic:** Mages must have a license. This costs 200 dinars per year and a separate license is required for each city.

\* **Religion:** Though the Kingdoms is predominantly Faithful, characters are free to pick their faith. Those who chose to be Devoted may be from an old family that migrated here after the slave exodus, former slaves, recent settlers, or going against family tradition.

\* **Social Order:** Non-sphinxes rarely rise to positions of authority in the cities, and those awarded honor titles are rarely adventurers. Native heroes cannot take the Noble Edge unless they are nomads.

\* **Temperature:** The temperature in Alak Paret is Warm along the north and east coast (and for 25-30 miles inland), and Hot in Jizah, Mizdah, and inland regions. At night, the temperature in the coastal cities drops 1d2-1 levels.

\* **Transport Hub:** Save for Jizah, the great cities are major coastal ports. Characters who make a successful Streetwise roll can locate a ship departing for one of the other coastal cities in the Kingdoms in the next 1d6 days. On a raise, the ship is leaving in half that time. With a suitable bribe (200 dinars per point of the ship's Toughness), the ship can be made ready to sail on the next tide (assume the next morning or evening for ease).

Caravans take much longer to assemble. A successful Streetwise roll locates one ready to depart in 2d8 days, or 1d8 days on a raise.

Hiring a ship costs 50 dinars per point of Toughness per week or part thereof if the captain is allowed to trade on the voyage, or 200 dinars per point of Toughness per week or part thereof if not. Allowing the captain to conduct trade is cheaper, but it trebles the journey time unless the characters are heading to the next port anyway.

Icebergs, while still uncommon, pose an ever-increasing hazard to shipping.

The green coastal belt has shrunk by as much as 75% in places, sand having swallowed forest and farmland alike. Scrub grass suitable for grazing sheep and goats has survived, but these flocks are not enough to sate the appetites of the local communities, forcing them to look to the sea for more of their dietary requirements. Within a decade, the desert and sea will meet where the gap is narrowest. A few decades more, and the coastal belt will effectively cease to exist. Elsewhere, sand prevails, save for a green belt following the course of the River Harad, and even that is under threat from the encroaching sands.

Though the sphinxes collectively claim the land up to the eastern border, there is little to interest them. Reluctance to be seen as expansionistic or to risk weakening armies has allowed orcs to increase their strength in the mountains. Between the rivers and along the Sphinx Road live several Bedu tribes.

## Social Hierarchy

Society is divided into two distinct groups—sphinxes and non-sphinxes. Power rests in the hands, or paws, of the former, and only rarely does a member of the latter rise above the faceless masses. Blood ties (even fictitious ones like those claimed as fact by the pharaohs) are extremely important to sphinxes.

Among the sphinxes, those of royal descent rank highest. The descendants of Hamapta's seven children and rightful heirs to the kingdom (at least on paper and in verse), the pharaohs are the absolute spiritual and temporal rulers of their domain. As divine representatives of their chosen deity, they are infallible and unquestionable in their authority.

Unlike the emirs of the other great cities, the seven pharaohs do not see their peers as social equals. Each is a pretender to the throne, a rival whose presence must be tolerated. Such is the ill-feeling between them, that the pharaohs do not even engage in political niceties with each other. Instead, they openly ignore their rivals while simultaneously spying on their every move. Down the ages, many pharaohs have refused to even use the title when referring to other city leaders.

Similarly, while the title of pharaoh is equal to that of Caliph and Sultan, no sphinx would ever consider a lesser race to be his equal. Even the lowliest hakar would treat the Caliph or Sultan as beneath his station to deal with directly. This is one of many traits that has failed to endear sphinxes to the other races,

All the direct relatives of a pharaoh are titled iry-paht (prince/princess). This title is wielded so long as the sphinx lives, even if his branch of the family loses the throne. In essence, every royal sphinx who is not a pharaoh is automatically a prince or princess. In the event a new family takes the throne, members of the previous house lose all titles (and frequently their lives).

# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

Despite this seeming equality, a strict pecking order exists. Children outrank grandchildren, grandchildren outrank great grandchildren, and so on. Uncles, aunts, and cousins of the pharaoh are always ranked lower than the pharaoh's issues. Fortunately, sphinxes do not have large families—they breed late in life (usually after their 100th birthday) and produce only one or two children in their lifetimes.

Beneath the seven royal houses are the nobles houses. With no blood ties to Hamapta, they are considered a lower order of sphinx, albeit ones divinely blessed and far above other races. The noble houses are divided into two camps—those who answer directly to a pharaoh and those who do not. The former are considered to hold the higher station, for they bask in the pharaoh's presence and have his ear at court.

The division arose during the great civil war. Some houses curried favor with one of Hamapta's seven children, and swore fealty to them. Others chose to remain neutral, either because they had no interest in politics and war, or because their holdings were far from the centers of power. In the latter case, picking the wrong side may have cost them their titles. When the pharaohs retreated to their cities to consolidate their power, these noble houses became the absolute rulers of the few settlements beyond the city's direct sphere of influence.

Large or small, each noble family is ruled by a *sar-nesu*. His children hold the title *imy-er*, while lower generations and offshoots are always *hakars*. As always, direct blood lines from the *sar-nesu* count higher. Thus, the brother of a *sar-nesu* is outranked by his nieces and nephews, not to mention their children, and their children's children. Should the position of *sar-nesu* switch to a different branch of the family, titles are gained or lost accordingly.

Except in a few very rare cases, no non-sphinx has ever achieved high office. Nothing prevents a member of a lesser race becoming a military officer, cleric, judge, or bureaucrat, but he will rarely rise far. Those few given a degree of power are frequently awarded honor titles as a mark of favor and are regarded as *mak-shabrum*. Naturally, no matter the title they are awarded, they still rank beneath the lowest sphinx socially.

On the few times non-sphinxes have reached high office, it has led to situations sphinxes find most disagreeable. For instance, in -302 CJ, during the last war against Hekata, a human was appointed general of the armies of Jizah. Serving beneath him were several sphinx nobles. Among other races, such events are not uncommon, but sphinxes are arrogant and conceited. One can almost imagine their teeth grating as they accepted orders from a human military protocol demanded they address as "my lord."

With sphinxes claiming all the jobs with any degree of authority save one, the *shabrum* stratum is occupied by those whose rank or occupation would normally warrant a lower standing in other cities. For example, middle-ranking bureaucrats and military officers fall into this social class. Elsewhere, society is pretty much unchanged.

## SPHINX NAMES

Naming follows a rigid tradition. First comes a sphinx's noble title. This is followed by any other titles, such as military rank or clerical title. Then comes the sphinxes given name. No matter his status, a sphinx only has a single personal name. Except for pharaoh, whose noble title is enough to identify him, sphinxes always add "of House X" after their given name when formally introducing themselves. This is a means of stating their lineage and avoiding confusion with sphinxes with the same name.

Many sphinxes have adopted unofficial titles in the style of the pharaohs, both as a means of further individualism and to appease their ravenous egos. While a sphinx can pick any title he wants, he faces ridicule from his peers if he cannot live up to his boasts. These are always placed at the very end of the name.

Sphinx names are unisex.

## SAMPLE NAMES

Achoris, Ahmoses, Amenemhat, Anzti, Ashmenhotep, Busiris, Chephren, Djedefra, Hamanth, Hesiara, Hetephras, Illahun, Imyremeshaw, Khaba, Khasekhem, Khentamenti, Mentuhotep, Merenra, Merikara, Merneith, Naharina, Nikara, Nynetjer, Nyuserre, Pianki, Qakare, Rekhmara, Sahura, Sakir-Har, Sekhemkhet, Sekenenra, Senebmiu, Senedj, Serdab, Shashank, Shemai, Shepseskaf, Siptah, Taharka, Tefnakht, Thesh, Tushratta, Userkaf, Userhotep, Wahanakha, Wepmaat, Zazat.

The sole exception to sphinxes and authority is imams. The few sphinxes that have converted to the Devoted creed have been stripped of their titles and cast out into the wilderness. Thus, even the senior iman in a city is a non-sphinx. However, with the Kingdoms officially being Faithful, imams are held in low esteem by the rulers, and count as *jaleepa*.

## Education

Although non-sphinxes are no longer seen as slaves, they have no basic entitlement to education. Even basic education costs money, resulting in a population that is largely illiterate. The sphinxes aren't stupid, though—the cities require bureaucrats, clerics, and military officers, not to mention judges, merchants, and scholars, and there are simply too many posts to be held by sphinxes alone. Children are rigorously tested at the age of five. Those who show intelligence are given a basic education at the state's expense.

For most, childhood is spent learning common knowl-



edge from elders, clerics or imams, and storytellers, playing with one's peers, and learning a practical skill the family can use to make money from an early age.

Those who achieve an education and excel have the option of attending university. Again, higher education comes at a price beyond most families. Scholarships are available, but places are very limited and the entrance exams notoriously difficult.

More on universities and how they can be utilized during by characters during play can be found in *Realm Guide #19*. Typically, player characters cannot pick up most Knowledge skills without some form of advanced education or extensive traveling. Either way, it has taken them time. For each die in an arcane or Knowledge skill, a character should be one year older than the typical starting age (around 16, the age of adulthood).

In terms of languages, Sphinx is the language of the temples, military, bureaucracy, and courts (both legal and noble). Sandspeech is rarely heard outside the major cities—most traders are Bedu, and thus Beduan has become the *de facto* language of commerce in rural regions.

## Religion

Sphinxes have been Faithful since the days they first walked the earth. Although exposed to the teachings of Suleiman (both the Devoted creed and the new versions of the gods) over the centuries by incomers and visitors, the religion of the sphinxes is an older version. Aside from variations in titles, festivals, and prayers, and perhaps a more serious point of doctrine (denoted in the sidebar on p. 5) that might result in theological disagreements and charges of heresy being leveled elsewhere, the core beliefs are identical to those followed elsewhere.

Within any settlement, the deity worshipped by the highest ranking sphinx automatically becomes the state religion. Inhabitants are free to worship who they want, of course, but the ruler's cult is always the most important. During the centuries immediately following the civil war, new rulers often chose whatever deity they thought would serve them best as patron. Today, it has become tradition for the pharaoh to honor the god of his more recent ancestors, thus providing continuity.

Without a single civil ruler or spiritual authority, and with sphinxes holding titles of high priest in every cult, the cults have become highly localized. The cults within a given settlement place no value on proclamations made by high priests in other communities, nor those of the Caliph (whose spiritual authority the sphinxes consider both self-appointed and sacrilegious). The fractured nature of the cults does mean that clerics from the Kingdoms' are not subject to the Orders Hindrance from cult members outside their city's reach.

Clerics from the Kingdoms may not suffer the same sins as others, but this does not permit them to practice their version of the faith openly in other lands without

potentially encountering problems. A cleric of Upuaut who fails to speak out against an oppressive regime, for example, *may* be tried for heresy in another realm if he flaunts his views in public. This is the price a native cleric pays for having a much weaker Orders Hindrance. Of course, these obvious differences in doctrine can be avoided simply by the cleric following the standard teachings when in other lands. In the case of Upuaut's clergy, their freedom from having to support totalitarian governments does not mean they have to actively support their policies or stand up for them.

Of course, the reverse is also true. A cleric of Upuaut from the Caliphate, for example, who speaks out against the tyranny and excesses of the sphinxes in the name of his god *may* be charged with heresy, among other things.

While permitted to practice their religion openly, Devoted pay higher taxes for the privilege and are held in low esteem by the Sphinxes. Regardless of their skills and experience, few Devoted achieve anything approaching high station out of blatant religious favoritism.

## SPHINXES & THE GODS

While it was humans who shaped the Faithful creed followed elsewhere in Al-Shirkuh, they have always acknowledged that not every god takes their form—Qedeshet has the head of an ibis, for instance, Tamarni has a feline head, and Upuaut is always a cakali.

The sphinxes' legendary arrogance demands depictions of the gods within the Kingdoms are always in their own image—to accept the gods as having the form of lesser races would weaken their claims to be superior to those races. More often than not religious statues and engravings are reworked to mirror the face of the local pharaoh or sar-nesu, thus reaffirming the link between the deity and his mortal servant.

## HIGH PRIESTS

During reconstruction of society after the civil war ended, all the pharaohs realized that too many or too few nobles houses living within a city caused problems when it came to the cults. Some heads of rival houses had the same patron deity, and thus were direct competitors for the position of high priest, while other gods lacked any major support from the sphinxes, meaning the title might have to be wielded by a non-sphinx.

To get around these thorny issues, the pharaohs ruled there would be exactly ten noble houses, and thus ten sar-nesus, within their city. (Talawdi has just nine noble houses. The heir to the throne, or an appointed regent where there no heir has been named, serves as high priest of whichever of the two deities is not honored by the pharaoh, thus keeping power in royal hands.) This also limits the number of potential enemies a pharaoh might have to face. Which pharaoh started this practice is argued to this day by the seven royal houses, each of whom claims it was their "ancestor."



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

Each noble house holds a different deity as patron. None honor Iblis, though individual sphinxes might, nor do they follow the same god as their pharaoh. Members of the house save for the direct descendants of the sar-nesu are entitled to honor a different deity. They are forbidden this privilege, so as to maintain continuity (not to mention retain the house's power) down the generations.

Sphinxes do not trouble themselves with the daily running of the cult's business affairs or lesser matters of doctrine—those they leave to a lesser being of their choosing. Normally he is a disciple, but any cleric the high priests deems competent (and loyal) can be appointed. For all intents and purposes that cleric is the high priest, though he does not wield that title and has much lower status than his sphinx peers. His official title is "Steward of the Temple." This applies even among cults that do not have temples, such as Duamutef and Upuaut.

As with Faithful elsewhere, high priests, while carrying the same title, are not necessarily equal in status within a cult. The top tier of the standard cleric hierarchy detailed in *Realm Guide #20* is slightly different in the Kingdoms of the Sphinxes. The order used is as below. Remember, cults in one city are not answerable to spiritual authority figures from another city, even pharaohs, in matters of the cult's spiritual or economic affairs. Even with the peculiarities of the sphinxes' supposed divine or blessed status, the separation of cults between different cities means such instances are not considered refusal to obey a sphinx's orders.

- \* Sphinx high priests of the major deities within a given city. As the head of the family, only these sphinxes use the sar-nesu title.

- \* Sphinx high priests of temples in towns and villages beholden to the local pharaoh. These are usually members of the same noble house as the sar-nesu.

- \* Sphinx high priests in charge of a shrine within a pharaoh's domain. Except when a minor deity has a dedicated temple, high priests of the cult are of this tier. In both instances, the high priest is normally a blood relative of the sar-nesu.

- \* Any sphinx cleric of the cult.

- \* The top three tiers above are repeated for stewards. Since any sphinx outranks a steward, even a common cleric, situations may arise where orders concerning the cult conflict. In such instances, orders from the higher ranking sphinx always take precedent. Sphinxes lower down the pecking order must tread carefully when giving a steward orders relating to the cult, especially if the order might be seen as being issued for personal gain or to undermine a superior, lest word get back to that superior—sar-nesus take a dim view of underlings who abuse their authority for plot against them.

## SPHINXES & MIRACLES

Except among sphinxes, the topic of whether or not their ancient ancestors were truly celestial beings incarnate (see p. 8) is open to much heated debate. What is

## SIN CHANGES

The deities worshipped within the Kingdoms are *almost* identical to those honored elsewhere in Al-Shirkuh. Whereas other races and cultures not enslaved by the jinn have adopted the new teachings of Suleiman, the deities worshipped by the sphinxes are an older form. This means there are some differences between the gods presented in the core rules and the gods of the Kingdoms.

For instance, in the Kingdoms, Upuaut has never been associated with standing up against rigid and oppressive governments—that was added to his aspects by Suleiman. This doesn't mean that the aspect is totally unknown—the downtrodden masses have learned of the deity's freedom aspect from outsiders and hold it in high regard. The local cults, however, do not consider it part of their doctrine. The owning of slaves is still a sin, though, but only because an enslaved creature cannot travel, Upuaut's most important aspect. However, the cult has long learned that directly opposing the owning of slaves by non-worshippers with too much fervor is not a way to make friends among the sphinxes.

Similarly, Qedeset has never been the god of literacy or teaching in the Kingdoms, though he is the god of knowledge. Equally, clerics of Shamash teach how to live a virtuous life by example, but they do not police immoral behavior unless it breaks the laws of the land.

As a result of the differences between older and new faiths, there are a few variations in the sin list for clerics born, raised, and, more importantly, ordained in the Kingdoms. Changes to what constitutes a sin for clerics ordained in the Kingdoms are noted below.

**All:** Add (Minor) disobeying a sphinx; (Major) injuring a sphinx; (Mortal) killing a sphinx.

**Qedeset:** Remove (Minor) refusing to teach someone; (Major) refusing to teach an illiterate person to read and write.

**Shamash:** Remove (Major) not standing up against immoral behavior. Add (Major) acting against a sphinx or a fellow cult member, actively promoting immoral behavior.

**Upuaut:** Remove (Mortal) supporting rigid and oppressive governments. Add (Minor) deliberately harming a bird; (Major); damaging a chariot or ship; (Mortal) destroying a chariot or ship.

undeniable to even the most closed mind is their close relationship with the gods, as expressed through their ability to invoke miracles.

Typically, a sphinx chooses his patron deity when he reaches adulthood. This is not a strict requirement—some nominate their patron much earlier, while others prefer to wait and see which one will benefit them most. Regard-

less, once a patron is chosen, the sphinx has access to that deity's miracles, even if they are not ordained as a cleric. With regard sins, sphinxes once again appear especially blessed—they ignore minor sins, major sins are treated as minor sins, and mortal sins are treated as majors ones. Changing patron deity carries with it the same punishments as it would any cleric, though—total loss of access to miracles and the ability to gain access to new ones. Sphinxes may be blessed, but they are not that blessed.

Some scholars of theology have argued that sphinxes are not the descendants of blessed beings. More likely, they say, that they know secret prayers and sacrifices that bestow them with their powers. Others refute this on the grounds that no other race, even those whose empires rose before the sphinxes first recorded appearance in the annals of history, have such knowledge.

## The Afterlife

Entrance to the Afterlife for natives of the Kingdoms is as per the standard Faithful creed—souls are collected, judged, and either assigned according to their station or condemned for their sins. However, the nature of the celestial realm differs. Note that references to “every deity” excludes Iblis by default.

Every soul is deposited in Akert (“Realm of the Highest”) by Djemuti. Only the pharaohs are destined to reside there for eternity, though, for Akert is the realm of the gods (both major and minor) and the highest of their divine followers. Akert is a single realm, vast on a cosmic scale but not infinite, for there are dark places beyond its borders where the power of the gods is limited or challenged by foreign deities. Physically it appears little different to the mortal realm, having mountains and valleys, and rivers and deserts. Naturally, it is a paradise, dotted with magnificent palaces (for the settled deities) and grand tents (for the nomadic ones). It is a land without war or want, disease or despair.

Enter a god's palace and one steps into Amenti (“Realm of the Faithful”). Although every deity has a specific Amenti, they all share the same name. When mortals use the name it invariably refers to the Amenti of their patron deity. The name of the appropriate god is added if clarification is likely to be needed. Amenti is reserved for the great bulk of sphinxes, a few select members of the lesser races (such as the Stewards of the Temples and disciples), and lesser divine servants. It exists only within the walls of the palace, but these heavenly structures are truly infinite. Like their earthly counterparts, there are immense gardens, private orchards, and even workshops where chosen commoners spend their working hours.

Pass beyond the palace through the right door and one enters Tuaut (“The Blessed Land”). Unlike Amenti, there is only one Tuaut, but there is one version of it for every major deity and all versions exist simultaneously—it is a realm shaped by a soul's perception, not a fixed reality. This is the realm of commoners and elementals, the latter the lowliest of divine servants. Life for souls

sent here is much as it was during life, though slightly less arduous and without the many perils.

The lowest realm is the Bottomless Pit. It is separated from the heavens by the mortal realm, which it is said to lie beneath, though direct routes exist.

## Military

Throughout the reign of Hamapta, there were eight official armies—the army of the pharaoh and seven smaller city armies Hamapta could summon to his banner when required. Since the civil war ended, the Kingdoms has lacked a central military.

Although the sphinxes have faced no major threats in some 800 years, mistrust has seen the size of each pharaoh's army steadily grow over the centuries. Without a central authority to curb growth, the only limit to how large an army a pharaoh can support is limited only by his willingness to spend money. Preferring to lavish money on grandiose projects and pampered lifestyles, most armies have reasonable strength for their size but suffer shortages of equipment or inferior armaments, average training, and low morale.

By law, nobles beholden to a pharaoh are entitled to maintain a militia to protect their assets, whether inside or outside the city. In order to reduce the likelihood of a coup, numbers are fixed under law and carefully monitored. As high priests, the *sar-nesus* also have authority over their cult's clerics and *fadeen*. Although they are not supposed to use them as a private security force, many consider them to be exactly that.

As befits his station, every sphinx is entitled to maintain a bodyguard, but must do so from his own coffers. No laws govern the number of bodyguards a sphinx might have. Arrogance in their own superiority and not wishing to be seen to be fearful coupled with the cost of maintaining such a force (who are a cut above common soldiers) keeps their numbers to a sensible limit. Most are paladins, but it is not unusual for a sphinx to hire *wizir* mages or former adventurers.

The pharaohs' unwillingness to expand their territory has allowed the independent nobles a largely free hand to rule as they wish and raise whatever size armies they feel suitable. Aside from money, fear keeps the outlying communities from raising a vast horde—the pharaohs may be overly cautious, but none would allow a potential hostile power to blossom right on their doorstep.

The rivalry between the seven royal houses is the Kingdoms' weak link, and one a determined invader could easily exploit. In the event a major foreign army ever crossing its borders in the modern age, it is very likely the pharaohs would do nothing to aid their neighbors. Rather, they would see the invasion as an opportunity to rid themselves of a troublesome pretender. Of course, if the invading force is large enough it could sack each city in turn, or at least secure a major chunk of land, without fear of meeting combined resistance.



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

## INFANTRY AND CAVALRY

Despite centuries of independence, the pharaohs retain the basic structure employed by the army under Hamapta. Partly this is convenience, and partly an attempt to prove that they are following the same practice as laid down by their illustrious “ancestor.”

The smallest unit is the 10-man dathaba, or squad, which is commanded by a sergeant. Ten squads form a sataba, or company, led by a captain. The largest current unit is the hazarabam, or regiment, which is under the authority of a commander.

Cavalry formations use the same basic formations, but as prefixed “Ar-” (“Horse”) and are based around five, 25, and 125 personnel respectively. For every five men there is a squire, who doubles as a veterinarian. The armies of the Kingdoms are the last to employ chariots as standard military units. Chariot formations are based on multiples of six. Each squad of six men has two war chariots, each with one driver and two passengers equipped as archers.

Companies are always made up of the same specific troop type, such as medium infantry, skirmishers, or archers. Regiments often contain different types of company. Given their reluctance to spend money on equipment, most troops are light infantry and archers, with medium infantry serving as shocktroops, a role usually performed by heavy infantry. Cavalry are invariably light.

The rank of commander is always held by a sphinx appointed personally by the pharaoh. Some have training in strategy or experience of battle against orcs, but many are political appointees or potential heirs to the throne learning the art of leadership. In order to prevent their men forming any bond with them, commanders are routinely rotated between regiments.

Traditionally, the senior captain (the head of the first company in a regiment) is a non-sphinx with combat experience, or at least a thorough education. Barring some special favor, it is the highest rank a non-sphinx can hold. With sphinxes rarely making public appearances, it is the senior captain who runs the regiment on a day-to-day basis and who leads the regiment in battle. Naturally, his superior takes the glory for any victory and passes on the blame for any failure. Many common soldiers cannot actually name their commander, and those that can have rarely seen them in the flesh except at a distance.

The head of the army, no matter its size, is the highest ranking noble in the realm. No pharaoh has led an army to battle since the war against the jinn. Most rulers have nothing to do with running the army on a daily basis, and a stand-in is appointed. Since the army belongs to the ruler, his replacement is almost always from his close family—to appoint a sphinx from a different family is to risk his house gaining popularity with the troops and masses. Again, lack of interest in public appearances means the army is without a visible head except on civic

## MILITARY UNITS OF THE KINGDOMS

### INFANTRY & ARCHERS

Name	Sandspeech Name	Personnel	Commanded By
Dathaba	Squad	10	Sergeant
Sataba	Company	100	Captain
Hazarabam	Regiment	1000	Commander

### CAVALRY/CHARIOTS

Name	Sandspeech Name	Personnel	Commanded By
Ar-Dathaba	Squad	5/6	Sergeant
Ar-Sataba	Company	25/36	Captain
Ar-Hazarabam	Battalion	125/216	Commander

and religious occasions—units receive signed orders, and they are expected to obey them without question.

Some generals do make the occasional, and usually announced, appearance in some distant camp or fort—watching a sphinx parade around in full gilded battle armor with iron-tipped claws is enough to remind the troops who is in charge and convince those who might be thinking of deserting or committing mutiny to reconsider their unwise act.

## NAVY

Every city maintains a navy. Some navies are used to escort merchant vessels, but most are merely an extension of the need to prove one’s superiority by having the largest military.

Individual ships are commanded by a captain. Rarely are they sphinxes. Ships are grouped together in squadrons of varying sizes and are overseen by a commander. This is normally a sphinx, but as with the army a senior captain wields effective control on a daily basis. The squadrons together form the fleet, which is led by an admiral. While a sphinx of royal blood, like his army counterpart, the admiral is largely a figurehead with no real interest in running the navy.

Solar barques are extremely rare items. Every pharaoh has at least one, which he uses as his personal barge. Since the pharaohs never leave their city, the vessel is only used during major festivals, when the pharaoh and his family use it to awe the masses into remembering who is in charge and the power they wield.

## Law & Order

The first unified codex of laws was laid down by Pharaoh Hamapta, and is largely followed to this day. This means a traveler can expect the same basic laws to apply in every city, though not necessarily to the same degree.

## ORIGIN OF THE SPHINXES

The origin of the race is a mystery that is unlikely to ever be solved. That sphinxes claim to be creations of the gods is nothing unusual—every sentient race holds itself as being created by a higher power. Where sphinxes differ is in their specific beliefs.

Though arrogant and haughty, sphinxes do not claim to be the oldest race—that honor they leave to dragons. They do not even question the great antiquity of the scorpionmen or ophidae. Contrary to popular belief, they have never denied that humans are older than their kind (though obviously humans are far less intelligent and civilized). Sphinxes claim that their ancestors were divine servants, members of two higher orders of beings, sent to the mortal realm in corporeal form to punish sinners, for the races (especially man) had grown wicked and had forgotten the teachings of the gods.

Other races refute this grandiose suggestion, for no holy text known to any race (except the sphinxes, who wrote their own history when the first Kingdom was founded) makes any reference to this. A small few go so far to suggest sphinxes were created by Iblis or Druj, for they epitomize many negative traits—arrogance, greed, pride, selfishness, and vengefulness.

The origin of their name is open to much interpretation. Sphinxes favor it as a Hekatic word, *shese-pankh*, which translates as “living image,” for they are the living image of the gods. Most scholars and sages agree the name is likely much older, though they do not deny sphinxes were held in high esteem in early Hekata—one only need look at the rows of crumbling statues to see this.

Where sphinxes originated is as much an enigma as when. Until contact with Rassilon, no one doubted Al-Shirkuh was their home. The discovery of a race of northern sphinxes, the so-called cryosphinxes, left this open to debate. Their northern cousins have obvious physical differences, such as shaggy coats and batlike wings. Were these beings created at the same time as their desert cousins? If so, why are they evolved for a climate that, until 500 years ago, was found only in the far north, beyond the realm of most sentient races?

The possibility that there were several distinct races of sphinxes has been further fuelled by statues unearthed in Hekata and Magor. Here, there are sphinxes were the heads of hawks (hieracosphinxes) and rams (criosphinxes). No living sphinxes display such unusual features, nor do they feature in sphinx myths. Did the modern sphinxes war against and wipe out their cousins in antiquity, leaving only folk memories? Perhaps they never existed at all, and the sculptures of Hekata are fanciful creations. One question remains unanswered—if sphinxes are so old, why do they not appear in cakali art or literature?

Each pharaoh has also taken it upon himself to create his own laws as he desires, meaning visitors are advised to read up on by-laws to avoid running foul of them—ignorance of the law is not an excuse.

## The Watch

The city watch is a civil force, and thus separate from the military command structure. The Commander of the Watch is the senior officer. Although considered the lowest civic appointment possible, the position is always held by a royal sphinx. Most watches run three eight-hour shifts, each commanded by a non-sphinx watch captain. His role is mostly administrative. Individual patrols are led by a watch sergeant.

The city watch exists to maintain law and order, not impress the populace. Many watchmen are little more than uneducated thugs imposing their masters' will on the people through threats and force, and most are open to bribes. The watch has the authority to use violence in the apprehension of criminals, and killings carried out in the line of duty are rarely matters to concern the court. Often the death of a suspect doesn't even warrant any extra paperwork. Of course, low arrest rates, whether through bribes to look the other way or killing suspects in the course of an arrest, means fewer potential slaves, so the watch must rein in their corruption and brutality.

Many temples of Shamash also operate watch shifts. These are sanctioned by divine law, not civil law, and the patrols are answerable only to the high priests of Shamash. Members are rarely well educated unless they are clerics, but they are, on the whole, scrupulously honest. Opinion is divided as to whether this is a good thing or not—offering a bribe may leave one broke and fuel already rampant corruption, whereas as a slave one gets feed and housed.

Unlike in the Caliphate, the city watch has royal backing, and thus has the authority to enter temple compounds in the pursuit of criminals. It cannot enter the inner areas of the temple reserved for clergy without written authority from the Commander of the Watch or the invitation of the high priest. The former always overrules objections by the latter. Sensible watch commanders never abuse this privilege—little good ever comes from upsetting the cults.

## PRIVATE LAW ENFORCEMENT

With the watch normally both corrupt and lazy (or inept), citizens who want justice must often call upon the service of private investigators. Licensed by the state, these businesses have the same basic rights as the watch, though they are not permitted to kill during the course of their investigations. Maiming is usually ignored, so long as the accused can still work as a slave if found guilty of the charges. Prices, experience, and competency vary.

For those who can afford nothing, justice is delivered by the Brotherhood of Unfortunate Souls. Rarely con-



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cerned with bringing the courts into it, the organization delivers street justice. While members are careful not to go up against a sphinx in person, they have no compunctions about targeting one's businesses that exploit the weak, or non-sphinx employees who willingly prey on the poor and helpless. Naturally, the Brotherhood is outlawed in the Kingdoms. Every watch has standing orders to take suspected members alive so they can be tortured into revealing the whereabouts of more of their kind. Not surprisingly, many lower-class citizens are prepared to risk their lives in return by offering Brothers shelter and what little food they have.

## WANTED!

The lack of cooperation between cities can benefit criminals. While the sphinxes regularly send out wanted posters, rivals are likely to ignore them unless the crime was committed against a sphinx. Even though they are as keen as anyone to punish those who transgress against their kind, lest it encourage others to do the same to them and their allies, rulers will want something in return for handing over the felon.

Crimes against sphinxes always warrant the Major Wanted Hindrance within the Kingdoms. Criminals with the Minor Wanted Hindrance have very little to fear if they move to a different city from the one in which the crime was committed (unless they commit a crime there, of course).

## The Courts

Since the time of Hamapta, the sphinxes have recognized three separate courts. The High Court oversees civil and criminal breaches of the law. The Military Court tries soldiers charged with specific military offences. The Religious Court deals with religious crimes. The includes all offences where a sphinx is the victim. All judges are expected to be versed in the various laws of their city, plus both major creeds. This allows them to sit in any court equally. Except where a sphinx is involved, judges are usually members of other races.

## SPHINXES & THE LAW

Given that the laws are created by sphinxes and the courts overseen by them, it is hardly surprising the legal system favors them. In general, sphinxes are only summoned to face criminal charges when they make the mistake of committing a crime against another of their kind. More often than not the matter is dealt with privately to avoid bad publicity. In all of the recorded history of the Kingdoms, no non-sphinx has ever brought a sphinx to trial. More often than not, the accuser is arrested and charged with besmirching the name of the sphinx, a crime for which the death penalty is sanctioned.

That sphinxes bother to involve the courts at all when a lesser being commits a crime against them is more a

public show of following due process than true regard for the law. In practice, many such criminals never get to court—they are either killed while “resisting arrest” or just disappear. When a non-sphinx defendant is found guilty of a crime against a sphinx, the aggrieved sphinx has the right to set the sentence, albeit within certain guidelines.

Sessions are held daily, due backlogs may mean a defendant rots in jail for as much as a week unless he is prepared to bribe the court officials to bring about a speedier trial. Evidence is heard from both sides, eyewitnesses speak, and physical evidence is presented. There is no cross examination. When the judge feels he has heard enough to make an impartial verdict, he ends the trial and passes sentence.

Although the law allows sphinxes to be enslaved as punishment, it happens more rarely than sphinx actually being dragged before the courts. Instead, they are given heavy fines, stripped of office or titles, or made subject to house arrest (hardly a punishment given the opulent palaces they inhabit and rarely leave).

## PUNISHMENT

Except in Talawdi, slavery is legal in the Kingdoms, with the noted exception that no sphinx may be enslaved save by due process of law. Slave markets are held regularly and few buyers are concerned with how the slave came to be in chains. Visitors used to crimes carrying fines or public flogging are in for a rude shock—virtually every crime carries a sentence of slavery, with durations ranging from a few months to life.

Crimes committed against sphinxes by lesser races always carry a more severe punishment than if committed against another race. Failure to show proper respect warrants enslavement for several months at minimum, while disobeying a lawful order from a sphinx can mean a sentence lasting years. Even touching a sphinx without its permission can warrant public flogging.

Except in crimes involving debt or a sphinx, those found guilty become the property of the state, and the state can use them as it wishes. Most are put to work for the good of the community, or at least its ruler. This typically means becoming a laborer on a building project or being sent to a farm or mine. With slaves being easy to replace, most are literally worked to death. Long hours, high work quotas, little sustenance, and frequent floggings are all part of the average day. Coupled with unsanitary living conditions, many sentenced to more than a year never live to earn their release. Those with particular talents beyond being able to lift heavy objects or wield a pick or shovel for hours on end might be spared hard labor, at least until their usefulness reaches its end. Others, especially those facing life sentences, may be sold to raise funds. With slavery legal, auctions are held in public and are open to anyone, irrespective of race, nationality, creed, or gender. If he is very fortunate, a strapping young man or attractive woman might end up the plaything of some bored sphinx.

Though slavery is preferred, some crimes carry the death penalty. Physically harming a sphinx, sedition, treason, and religious crimes that warrant a death sentence in other realms always carries this punishment in the Kingdoms. The traditional fate for the condemned is death by consumption (i.e., the guilty party is eaten).

Some sphinxes have convicts publicly beheaded as a warning to others before having his corpse stuffed and cooked. A few prefer to let the meat hang for a few days, both as a public reminder as to the fate that awaits criminals and to allow the meat to acquire a more gamey flavor. Others take a sick enjoyment from hunting the naked and unarmed party through their palace—fear, they claim, adds a certain piquancy to the meat.

## APPEALS

All appeals are heard by the highest authority in the land, at least in theory. When it comes to dealing with lesser races, the great lords leave this onerous duty to the chief judge, himself often a sphinx.

Appeals for non-sphinxes are dealt with quickly—no one wants convicts who could be put to good use as slaves loitering in the dungeons. Few appeals are ever successful—refusing to accept the original verdict is paramount to disobeying a lawful order from a sphinx, itself a criminal offence. At best, the convict can do little but throw himself on the ground and flatter whoever he faces. Few will ever have their sentence completely overturned, but they might earn a degree of clemency by having their sentenced reduced or being swiftly beheaded rather than having to suffer the terror of being hunted by a ravenous sphinx.

Sphinxes who somehow fall foul of the legal system always have appeals heard by the highest authority. Of course, if their crime was against the pharaoh then the appeal is a mere formality before sentence is duly carried out.

## Magic, Miracles, & Law

With the exception of sphinxes, who may cast miracles as they desire so long as no other sphinxes or their property are harmed, the use of supernatural powers in public is subject to the misuse of magic laws at the whim of the city watch. A sphinx's immunity is not *carte blanche* to go around dropping *blast* spells wherever he wants, though. Sphinxes are physically impressive beings, but they are vastly outnumbered by their subjects—those who flout their privileges are made examples of so as to prevent unrest from turning into an armed uprising.

Mages are not as tolerated as clerics. Mages who fail to acquire a license are considered to be enemies of the state if discovered, even if they have not wielded any powers in public. Knowing that it is hard to keep a mage in captivity for long, the punishment for this crime is always mutilation (sometimes before the trial even takes place) followed very quickly by death by consumption, assum-

ing the accused survives being arrested, that is. Since the average watchman is no match for an angry mage armed with offensive spells, the duty of arresting wayward mages falls to clerics, mages in the employ of the state, and licensed mage-killers. Most of the latter are simply mercenaries with Improved Arcane Resistance. While Jinn Slayers have no special rights to operate openly, few law enforcers persecute them—in many cases the watch does not even bother to investigate the murder of mages unless they work for a sphinx.

The greatest threats faced by the Kingdoms came from Hekata and the jinn. In both cases, the pharaohs were reluctantly forced to work together to defend their borders. Lack of battlefield cohesion meant that while victorious they suffered heavy losses. Ironically, being called upon to cooperate only widened the divide between the cities—the rulers realized just how weak they were individually and thus how open they were to assault by their neighbors. Instead of seizing the opportunity to create a new unified realm, they retreated to their fortified cities and began rebuilding their armies in fear of imminent attack.

Since then, all aspects of khem-hekau have been outlawed. Jinn magic is not expressly outlawed, but jinn not bound into spirit relics (items that only sphinxes are legally permitted to own) are subject to immediate destruction if found within the Kingdoms. In the case of summoned jinn, the summoner is charged with aiding an enemy of the state, a crime that once again involves the guilty being eaten.

Jinn blooded are tolerated simply because it is very hard to detect one for what he is unless he manifests his natural abilities. Even then, Faithful jinn blooded have little to worry about—the sphinxes see them as being blessed by the gods rather than the offspring of ancient jinn/mortal relationships. Devoted jinn blooded who use their innate powers may be considered no better than true jinn, and thus subject to immediate termination with extreme prejudice.

## Trade & Tribute

The six coastal cities have direct access to the markets of eastern and central Rassilon via Sandvik, and the Jade Empire via Barbarian Island. Despite centuries of regular trade, the sphinxes have opened no official embassies on foreign soil—the Jade Empire refuses to allow them, and the Saxa of Ostmark are considered beneath the attention of the mighty sphinxes. The sphinxes' monopoly on exotic items from these foreign lands has been severely damaged by the rise of Jadid, City of Trade, and the Free Emirates. Caravans still make the long trip along the Sphinx Road (the Snake Road has become too dangerous for many), but their wares are less sought after and profits are steadily falling year on year.

Should Jadid fall, of course, the other realms would have to purchase Jade Empire wares from the sphinxes,



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so reversing their ailing fortunes. Unfortunately, lack of cooperation not only makes this unlikely to happen any time soon, but success would probably lead to a bitter trade war to corner the market.

Most internal trade is carried by ship, with barges catering to settlements further up the rivers. Small overland trade roads link all the cities, but ships carry larger cargoes more quickly. Smugglers are fond of the overland routes—they rarely carry heavy cargoes, and the city guard on the gates are notoriously easy to bribe.

Being fully independent, each pharaoh sets his own taxes. Few are considered fair by the locals—sphinxes live opulent lifestyles, and that costs money. Poverty also keeps the locals in line, or so sphinx mentality insists. Naturally, sphinxes pay next to no taxes.

All Faithful must pay a tithe (10% of their annual income before other taxes). Each ruler typically demands that 75% go to his cult (some independent nobles are more lenient, though even they never reduce this below 50%). The rest may be given to whatever cult the citizen desires. Devoted are not exempt from tithes. They must pay 20% of their annual income directly to the state. This is tantamount to a protection racket, for this tax permits the citizen to worship without persecution. Devoted who wish to donate to their local kada must do so separately.

## Major Locales

The following locales are situated outside the control of the pharaohs, and thus are part of the greater Kingdoms rather than an individual city's territory.

### THE DESERT OF DECEPTION

It does not take a genius to see that Muqlad, City of Woes, could easily forge a caravan route to the eastern section of the Snake Road, thus giving it a quick route to the Sphinx Road and the markets of the southern cities without the need to rely on the port at Jawf, City of War. That it has not done so is the result of an ancient and powerful curse.

The sphinxes cannot agree on the origin of the curse, for it was laid down long before Hamapta's death. Most claim it was laid down against Duamutef by the gator-men in revenge for the shrinking of their marshy realm. Others blame the ophidae, who, foreseeing a time when sphinxes would dominate the northern continent, cursed the land to thwart their expansion.

Between the western banks of the River Damasc and the end of the Prophecy Hills lies the Desert of Deception. Bedu are experts in desert navigation, using patterns in the dunes, ancient ruins, patches of grass, geological features, and the stars to guide them. Here even they are stymied. The dunes change direction and size overnight, ruins appear and disappear, and even the stars are wrong. Travelling close to the mountains brings no relief, for there are days when they cannot be seen, or

appear on a different part of the horizon. Even the most experienced caravans become turned around, traveling for days on end only to spy the glittering waters of the River Damasc ahead. Others walk in circles until their water runs out and death claims them. The sphinxes of Muqlad would pay a rich reward to anyone who can end the curse.

### DRY RIVER FORT

**Population:** 400 (<1% sphinxes, 90% Hadaree, 10% other races)

**Ruler:** Imy-Er Tao-Shemsu of Jawf and Imy-Er Seqen-shamash of Jizah

Before Hekata crumbled under the weight of its own malign deeds, the River Ankh flowed from the Firebarrier Mountains to Jawf, City of War. Outside of Hekata, all that is visible of its course today is the wide depression east of Lost Tomb Oasis, along which the Sphinx Road runs.

On the junction that leads to Jizah, City of the Sphinx, and Jawf, the Sphinx Road bends either side of a long, narrow, steep-sided plateau accessible by a winding oath cut into the southern flank. When water flowed this was an island, a trading outpost of the Haranites.

Here they fished the water, traded with merchants from the distant Hekatic Empire, and worshipped the sun in a magnificent temple. Although the inhabitants turned to worshipping the sphinxes as living gods (c. -1300), little changed until the River Ankh dried up in -1085. When it became obvious the waters would not flow again, and with no other water source capable of supporting the population in the vicinity, the settlement was abandoned and left to the elements.

On the western tip stands a small fort, a modern construction raised by the sphinxes from the stones and bricks of the ruined city. It serves to protect the Sphinx Road. It does not serve as a caravanserai, being reliant on imported water (which is stored in cisterns), though merchants with their own supplies are welcome to shelter within its walls for a nominal fee.

Roughly equidistant from Jawf and Jizah, the fort has been a point of contention since the idea of building it was first mooted. Neither pharaoh trusts the other to fairly govern such a vital junction on the Sphinx Road. In order to resolve the matter, the fort is under dual governance. Naturally, each sphinx serves to further his pharaoh's aims and stymie the others. This has led to an impasse when it comes to making important decisions. A diplomatic treaty limits each side to exactly 200 personnel (regardless of occupation or race), and both cities have ensured they have a full quota at all times. Not surprisingly, soldiers make up the great bulk.

Pharaoh Kauakht's son, Wendjeb-en-djed, has already started making plans to secure the fort for Jawf. Unfortunately for his kinsmen, his plans involve the poisoning of Jawf's garrison. Just to make sure blame cannot be placed elsewhere, evidence will be left framing Jizah. Faced with such open hostility, his father will be forced to act against his rival.

## DRY THROAT CARAVANSERAI

Situated in the shadow of the northernmost peaks of the Godhome Mountains, Dry Throat Caravanserai caters to caravans heading to and from the Salt Basin. The caravanserai offers no luxuries, but few visitors complain—its strong walls offer shelter from orcs and desert winds, and that is welcome enough.

Water is the caravanserai's biggest problem—caravans heading to the salt mines load up with great quantities in preparation, while those returning are keen to sate their dire thirst. The owner constructed a channel that would funnel spring water from the mountains into the cisterns, but constant orc sabotage has limited its effectiveness (there was also a concern that orcs might poison the water). These days, guards enter the peaks to fill great barrels from the springs. These are then lowered down the gentle incline. Knowing that the caravanserai is the only viable supply depot in the region, the owner has imposed strict export limits of one gallon per person. Additional water can be purchased at 2 dinars per quart. Caravan masters frequently complain at this outrageous charge, but they can do little but pay up or go thirsty.

The caravanserai is run by, and home to, Hakar Semdjedwa. Serving the sphinx are 30 servants and 50 guards. He spends his days in his chambers, entertaining important visitors, feasting, and counting his money. The daily operation of the business is left to Wakeem bin Lukash, an overworked underling who takes the brunt of caravans' anger at the water situation.

An essential supply depot, the caravanserai has a well stocked market. Treat it as a Village with regard to item availability. Dry Throat is a popular stopping point for slavers, who sell their wares to caravans. At any one time there are 2d4 laborers for sale.

## THE EMERALD CAVERNS

Also known as the Glittering Caves, the Emerald Caverns are said to be the location of two enormous emeralds. In ages past, these fabulous treasures were stolen from the temple of Geb-Agni in Mizdah, City of Power, and concealed deep within the earth—or so the popular tale goes. Many have searched for the cavern, which supposedly lies in the Prophecy Mountains, but so far they have remained elusive.

The twin emeralds do exist, in a way. They are not gems, but the unblinking eyes of a gargantuan snake. Long ago, the caverns served as a temple to Ss'esslis, lord of serpents. Though the cult was thought exterminated centuries ago, it has grown in recent years. A mixture of assassins, fanatics, and madmen, the cultists worship the huge snake as an aspect of their deity.

The main reason the cavern has gone unnoticed is that the entrance is extremely low and narrow, a mere slit in a rock wall. Those wishing to gain entrance must crawl on their bellies through a labyrinth of passageways before the tunnels begin to open out. Another reason why it has remained secret is the large number of serpents and con-

strictors living in the caves. The low passageways are no obstacle to the snakes, whereas explorers find it difficult to effectively bring their weapons to bear when prone.

## THE FROZEN OASIS

In the wide, arid plain between the Mountains of Fear and Prophecy Hills is a small oasis. Summer or winter, the water is frozen solid, and the surrounding land blanketed in a thin layer of ice. Beneath the icy skin is regular sand, but dig a little deeper and it becomes a frozen mass as hard as stone.

Stories, passed down by Bedu eyewitnesses and written down later by storytellers, tell of a titanic struggle between two immense dragons that occurred around 45 CJ. One dragon had scales of glittering gold that shone like the sun. The other was white-blue, and shone like the moon. For a day and a night they battled high in the sky, their roars carrying for many miles, their blood falling like rain. In the end, the sun dragon was victorious, and the "moon" dragon fell to the earth. The moon dragon was, in fact, a Hellfrost dragon, an advanced scout gathering information in preparation for an invasion once the northern lands fell to the Hellfrost armies.

The decaying flesh of the dragon has created an area of permanent winter. Originally just confined to its carcass, the aura has since grown to cover an area 30 miles in diameter. It has now stopped expanding. Within the affected area the temperature is the same as the High Winterlands all year round.

Ice is a prized commodity among the desert dwellers, but few are brave enough to harvest it from the oasis. The land has an unearthly origin, and talk of those who consume the snow being frozen solid from the inside is commonplace, if unproven. That Shamash cannot melt the ice is further evidence it is a place of great evil.

Others are afraid of the Blue Man, the only soul who lives in the vicinity. That he possesses fantastic magical powers is well attested. He walks naked in the frigid waste, seemingly impervious to the bitter cold, can call forth biting winds and jagged icicles, and knows the secret of summoning jinn made of ice and snow. Some believe he is a khamsin jinni. He lives in a felt tent at the heart of the frozen region.

The Blue Man is Hrimberht, a frostborn priest of Thrym. He seeks a way to not only expand the aura of winter, but to create a permanent gateway to the Hellfrost. This achieved, Thrym's minions can enter Al-Shirkuh in secret to continue the war.

## THE GOD TOMB

The first, and so far, only reference to the God Tomb is from a 129-year old travelogue. The author, who gives his name only as Hassan, claims to have entered a mud brick ruin in the hope of unearthing inscriptions. Instead, he found a shaft sunk deep into the ground.

Bravely venturing into the unknown void (his words), Hassan emerged into a small cave which held but another



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shaft. Descending this one, he entered a larger cavern, around the edge of which were seven burial chambers. In each was an enormous monolithic granite sarcophagus, far too large to hold the remains of a normal human. Finding no inscriptions or pottery by which to identify the builders, Hassan continued exploring. Finding a third shaft, he ventured downward once more.

This chamber was more interesting. Save for a small island in the middle, it was flooded waist deep in cold, fresh water. At each corner of the island stood a granite obelisk. Hassan notes that these were covered inscriptions, but his attention was drawn to what lay in the center of the island. Flush with the floor was another huge sarcophagus, this one horizontal with a lid carved from an unknown blue stone. There the explorer's adventure ended. Hassan records an unearthly green glow emanating from the sarcophagus. Being no seasoned warrior or spellcaster, Hassan ran for his life.

His last entry notes that leading from the partially flooded chamber were five tunnels. Each sloped downward and none were navigable because of the water level. Hassan provides no notes on the obelisks' inscriptions.

Hassan named the place the God Tomb because of the size of the various sarcophagi and the eerie glow. Scholars who have studied the text are less inclined to fanciful imagination. Despite Hassan providing no measurements for the sarcophagi, most sages argue the tomb was probably built as a burial place for sphinx nobles during the early years of Hamapta's reign. That the creators might be minotaurs or ogres, is instantly dismissed—no sage considers them capable of such labors. As for fire giants, the size of the shafts, described by Hassan as "narrow," would appear too small for their needs. Perhaps, some insist, the complex was constructed by the Haranites as a temple for their version of Tammuz, god of death.

According to Hassan's journal, the veracity of which has never been proven, the site lies in the rugged upland south of the Mountains of Fear. Alas for those who plan on seeking it out and traversing its as yet unexplored depths, the sphinxes, for reasons unknown, demolished the mud brick structure 30 years ago. No one is sure whether or not they backfilled any of the shafts.

## GOLDEN TOMB OF KING SADIM

Legend is the story of King Sadim of Hittar, his fabulous wealth, and his lost tomb. A covetous king of an ancient and now forgotten nation, his lust for gold was insatiable. All the tales agree he possessed a unique and powerful relic—a hand of gold that transformed everything it touched into pure gold. How he acquired such a relic depends on which version of the tale one hears.

One version says it was a gift from Iblis, who appeared in disguise after the king, whose kingdom was poor, lamented that he had no wealth with which to benefit his people. Another speaks of a demon lord, an artifact of Hekatic origin, and even a liche. Regardless of the story, the source is always evil, for evil soon befell the king.

No matter how much gold he possessed, Sadim al-

## SPHINX PHYSIOLOGY

Sphinxes are leonine creatures with a human head and feathered wings. A fully grown adult is approximately the same size as an elephant and weighs as much as two tons. Sphinxes have two genders—male and female. Male sphinxes are more correctly known as androsphinxes, and females of the species as gynosphinxes.

Sphinxes are long-lived by the standards of many races. Barring accidents, one can reasonably expect to live for 300-350 years. Rare individuals do live longer, but their mental state rapidly declines. They become sexually active at around 100 years, but females produce only one to four cubs during their entire life. Twins are extremely rare, and a source of much celebration.

Sphinxes are muscular creatures, yet their average strength is only at the high end of human possibilities. This means they are comparatively weak for their size—even ogres possess greater strength. What they lack in strength, they more than make up for in stamina. A sphinx easily shrugs off blows that would fell a lesser creature, and they are quick to recover from physical (and mental) shock. For creatures of such enormous size, they are remarkably graceful.

Sphinxes are almost entirely carnivorous by nature, and have powerful jaws and sharp claws. Their forepaws are a crude approximation of human hands, having an opposable thumb, three fingers, and a dew claw. The claws on all four limbs are retractable, and the dew claw can be extended independently of the others. Rear paws have five claws, lacking a thumb and dew claw. Manual dexterity is poor, and the size of their paws precludes them from using tools designed for smaller races. Their tail is similar to that of a lion, though obviously much bigger.

Despite being listed among the civilized races for many centuries, sphinxes retain a fondness for human flesh. Where perhaps they once hunted their favorite prey, today they dine exclusively on convicts sentenced to death. As agents of the gods, they see nothing wrong with this diet—they are merely consuming the flesh of sinners, as can happen to those found guilty by Tammuz.

Though possibly descended from a race of primitive hunters, the various senses of a modern sphinx are comparable to those of a human. Their paws are padded, and sphinxes are capable of moving stealthily when the need arises.

A sphinx's feathered wings, though relatively small in comparison to its mass, allow true flight. Averaging a steady pace of 4 miles per hour on foot, they soar at 6 miles per hour when airborne. As well as being a mode of transport, sphinxes use their wings to intimidate rivals (by making themselves look bigger) and in their elaborate courtship rituals.



## MUMMY, GOLDEN

These rare creatures can be found lurking in the dark passageways of the Golden Tomb of King Sadim. Whether other variants were ever created is unknown. It is certainly possible that mummies belonging to clerics of Shamash, who were once entombed bedecked in gold jewelry, may have been transformed into undead by necromancers or servants of Iblis.

For the most part, golden mummies resemble standard mummies. Indeed, save for a few alterations, the creation process is identical. The first major difference is their fingernails, which are made of solid gold. Their spines are coated in a thin veneer of gold, though this is only apparent if one is torn apart. The second major difference is they are dripping wet. Naturally, this means they are impervious to fire. Sadim had their sarcophagi filled with brine. (Periodically, this is replaced from a central reservoir by a cunning mechanism.) When thoroughly soaked, the mummies can deliver a powerful electric shock through their claws.

**Attributes:** Agility d6, Smarts d4, Spirit d8, Strength d8, Vigor d8

**Skills:** Fighting d8, Intimidation d6, Notice d6, Stealth d6

**Pace:** 4; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 8

**Treasure:** Worthwhile (fingernails and spine) or Meager (fingernails only)

### Special Abilities:

\* **Electric Shock:** By making a Fighting attack (+2 Fighting), a golden mummy can deliver 2d6 damage with an electrical trapping. This is not a magical attack, but is foiled by the appropriate energy immunity. After making five such attacks, the mummy must either rely on its slam attack or return to its brine-filled sarcophagus to recharge. For each hour it spends soaking, it recovers one use of this ability.

\* **Immunity:** Takes no damage from any magical or mundane electricity, fire, or heat-based attack.

\* **Recharge:** When struck by a damage-causing spell with an electricity trapping, the mummy gains a charge for its electric shock attack for each die of damage the spell would otherwise have caused. Non-damaging spells with such a trapping affect it as normal, but it also gains one additional charge. Neither can increase its current charges above five.

\* **Shuffling Gait:** Mummies roll a d4 running die.

\* **Slam:** Str.

\* **Undead:** +2 Toughness. +2 to recover from being Shaken. No additional damage from Called Shots. Immune to disease and poison.

ways craved more. By the end of his reign, he had taken to transforming his subjects into gold statues, for everything else was already turned to gold. His final act was to transform himself into a statue.

While many of his advisors plotted to acquire the hand, the priests, men of higher virtue, acted quickly. Partly they wished to spare others from the curse, and partly they feared the nation would be torn asunder by civil war as competing factions strove to gain the magical hand. Sadim was interred along with his wealth (which the clerics considered equally cursed) in a labyrinthine tomb. Popular consensus places it in the Prophecy Hills. Here the tales end.

In order that none might possess the golden hand, the priests installed special traps and guardians in the labyrinth. The traps comprise gold plates fitted to the floor and walls. When activated, brine gushes from the ceiling, creating an electrical circuit capable of delivering a powerful jolt. His guardians are undead, a form of mummy known as golden mummies. At the center of the labyrinth lies the body of King Sadim and his immense haul of gold objects. Encased in a golden sarcophagus, his mummy retains its golden hand. The only way to acquire its power is to sever it from the king's corpse and attach it to a living stump.

Whether the hand is truly a relic is left to the individual GM. Below are a few suggestions as to how it might work. Regardless, the labyrinth traps and guardians are as described above.

\* The story is a myth. Sadim was immensely wealthy, and did indeed possess a gold hand. However, it was mundane, valuable in its own right, but not a relic. Unfortunately, any would-be possessor who fails to check this first will only discover the error after he has severed his own hand. Sadim's corpse is merely wrapped in gold leaf within a golden sarcophagus.

\* The hand can generate wealth, but its curse is far worse than simple greed. For each 5,000 dinars worth of gold it creates, the owner must sacrifice a sentient being to its creator. Until this is done, the hand remains inert.

\* The curse drives the owner to extreme greed. He gains the Major Greedy Hindrance. He has absolutely *no* desire to spend or share his gold—he simply wants to possess more and more of it. Over time, he will grow increasingly paranoid that everyone is out to steal his wealth and shun family and friends.

## GREAT WIND OASIS

**Population:** 795

**Ruler:** Sheikh Mahmoud Tent-Shaker

**Religion:** Faithful (Ashtart)

**Imports:** Trade

**Exports:** Beans and onions

The tiny oasis lies close to the Sphinx Road, near to where it crosses into the Great Northern Desert. Surrounding it are a handful of verdant fields full of beans and onions. Once harvested, these are sold to passing merchants heading to the sphinxes' lands.

Its name comes not from the power of the air, nor any bound khamsin, but from the water. Something in it causes drinkers to suffer from chronic and extremely loud flatulence. The expulsion is mostly air, and not par-



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

ticularly fell smelling. Locally it has become something of a prized asset. Farting has become part of every day life, with loud noises being heard from dusk until dawn. Each year, the tribe holds a competition to see who can fart the loudest with and without aid of the water. The winners receive the title Prince of the Dry or Wet Wind respectively, and are treated like nobility until the next year's contest.

The water's reputation has spread far and wide. Those seeking to embarrass or trick others substitute the oasis' water for regular water. Farting is seen as a perfectly normal bodily function, but there is a right time and place for everything.

## KHAMEL'S RETREAT

Khem-hekau may have been created in Hekata, but the art quickly spread throughout neighboring lands. Modern practitioners agree that Khamel the Tainted was one of the greatest masters of the art. Legends abound, for his wickedness was such that his reputation has weathered the passage of millennia and spread to all corners of the continent. Some say he could kill with a simple touch, summon a host of undead with a gesture, or speak a word of power that caused the gates to the Bottomless Pit to open and demons to bow in servitude at his feet. The latter ability has confounded khem-hekau mages since the birth of the art, for none has yet managed to summon a demon.

Above all else, Khamel desired to become a liche. Not a liche-wizir bound to the eternal service of a withered pharaoh, but an independent greater undead whose mastery over death and undeath would be without peer. Knowing his work would take decades, and having no wish to be disturbed, Khamel retreated into a cave system in the Mountains of Fear. It is said he had in his possession the Black Libram, the oldest and darkest repository of khem-hekau lore, from the unholy pages of which the first necromancers learned their unholy art.

Sages agree that it is unlikely Khamel succeeded, for his name vanished from historical records and stories at the same time he retreated inside the mountain. Perhaps he perished while performing one of the many fell and complex rituals required to earn eternal life, or his allotted days expired before he unlocked the final terrible secret. Maybe he lies inside, weakened by his efforts, a genius necromancer's mind trapped in a helpless body or reduced to nothing more than a disembodied spirit. Then again, it is not unthinkable to imagine that Khamel succeeded, and that he has been devoting the centuries to a deeper understanding of khem-hekau. If the latter proves true, who knows what dark and terrible powers he might have mastered, or what vile abominations he has at his beck and call.

Anyone trying to gain possession of the Black Libram must first find the cave, no mean feat in a region dotted with hundreds of cracks, crevices, and caves. Then he must battle past the many animated skeletons and bone golems Khamel set in place to protect him.

## THE MARID'S GROTTA

This unusual site is actually located at the western end of the hills that tumble down from the Mountains of Fear, just inside the modern border. Carved into the living rock is a labyrinth of winding tunnels and small chambers. Every inch is decorated with murals made up of colored seashells. It is this unusual decoration that gives the site its name.

Discovered 430 years ago, the first explorers commented on how it looked like a greater marid's home (in their minds, at least). No one ever suggested a marid had actually called the tunnels home (the lack of water makes it unlikely), but the name stuck.

This leaves the questions of who built the grotto and for what purpose? While it is the sort of lavish waste of resources a sphinx might have invested in, the tunnels are too narrow to permit one of the massive beast's inside. That it was built by the Haranites is not given any credence—that ancient culture was exclusively devoted to sun worship, and caves were anathema to their beliefs. The two main theories debated by scholars and sages are that it was the tomb of a nobleman from some forgotten culture or was a temple raised in antiquity to honor a water deity.

Both theories have flaws. There is absolutely no sign the grotto was ever inhabited by the living or the dead—throughout history and in every land, tomb robbers always leave some trace of grave goods behind. The shells themselves would actually be valuable in landlocked cultures for us in jewelry, yet the mosaics are undamaged. As for it being a temple, there are two main issues. First, why build one devoted to a water deity in arid hills? There is no sign a spring ever bubbled up inside the structure, nor is there one nearby. Second, the presence of seashells would indicate it was devoted to a deity of the sea rather than fresh water, an oddity given the site is over 200 miles from the coast.

The tunnels have never been thoroughly explored (mere talk of it being a marid's home is enough to keep the local Bedu away), and the solution to the mystery of its origins may yet lie inside.

## SILPHIUM VALLEY

The only reference to silphium appears in a Magorian codex of medicinal herbs. Referred to as the "hair of Ashtart," it was by all accounts a wonder herb. The medicinal properties of its leaves, petals, sap, and roots were seemingly without end, and its fragrance was so pure that the petals were used in the creation of perfumes for the kings of old. The codex continues by saying that although the Magorians knew of it, they believed it to be extinct. It grew only in one place (a secluded valley in a range of mountains in a land dominated by the sphinxes in their time), could not be cultivated outside the valley, and no herbalist had used it in many centuries.

That the Magorians knew of it at all is down to their origins. Before the sphinxes rose to power, Hekatic

## SPHINX PSYCHOLOGY

Sphinxes consider themselves divinely appointed to rule over the lesser races. Others are less inclined to agree, for among the many traits found among their race are arrogance, bloodthirstiness, gluttony, greed, jealousy, pride, stubbornness, and vengeful nature. Indeed, it is hard for non-sphinxes to find a single positive trait outside of a few rare individuals.

Sphinxes are possessed of high intellect and great cunning. Some of this is undoubtedly the result of schooling, but much of this appears innate—idiotic sphinxes are very few are far between, save in old age, when their mental faculties rapidly diminish.

Their physical size allows them to swat aside lesser beings as humans would a fly, but sphinxes take a perverse pleasure in establishing their own superiority. Indeed, every sphinx suffers from a deep seated superiority complex. Words are their favorite weapons, with cleverly worded taunts favored over base threats. Those anticipating on giving a sphinx of its own medicine are frequently disappointed—they have strong minds, and rarely raise an eyebrow when threatened or ridiculed, save in shock at their foe's audacity or stupidity. Of course, when an enemy's words do bite home a sphinx's pride demands the creature be suitably punished as a warning to others. Not to do so is considered a sign of weakness, though clever sphinxes can turn this around with well chosen words or gestures of amusement.

Their superiority complex is a weakness that can be exploited. Lesser beings skilled with words can avoid a sphinx's immediate wrath through flattery. Caution must be taken, though—if a sphinx thinks it is being ridiculed by excessive flattery it will quickly show its displeasure.

That they enjoy riddles is common knowledge. Quite why this should be is open to debate. Some scholars argue that this is how their ancestors tested the other races—those who failed to reply correctly were eaten. Others argue this love comes from their need to continually show their superiority, for even a wise man can be left stumped by a riddle. Another possibility is that it arose as a means of settling disputes. Sphinxes are not a numerous race, and contests of wits may have replaced contests of strength. Instead of culling the weak through violence, they use words to remind lesser sphinxes of where they stand. Regardless, there are plentiful stories of heroes of escaping a sphinx's wrath by offering a riddle contest. Again, a warning is required—sphinxes live a long time and they know many riddles.

That sphinxes own slaves is yet another display of their need to show their superiority.

Finally, sphinxes enjoy pleasure objects and activities. Presenting one with an amusing toy (living or inanimate) is a surefire means of earning its gratitude, if only for a short while.

merchants purchased it from the people in whose lands the valley lay. Unfortunately, Hekatic records refer to them only as the "Valley People," a meaningless title in the modern age and little better even in ancient times. Depending on which mountain range the plant grew, the Valley People could have been the Assarites, Haranites, or Hittari, or perhaps a minor culture whose existence has been erased from history by time and sphinx oppression. The codex ends by saying that silphium was considered more precious than any gemstone.

Since the codex was discovered 50 years ago, herbalists across Al-Shirkuh have sponsored numerous expeditions to find the lost valley. Although each mission failed they continue to finance ventures—the potential rewards are immense and hirelings are cheap—though fewer are sponsored in the modern age due to a growing belief either the herb is extinct or its existence a fable.

## PERSONS OF Note

### GOUBAK DUNG-HANDS

Goubak, a sand goblin, has a strange knack of turning up at travelers' camps just as they are serving food or coffee. He survives in the wilderness by bartering dried dung to caravans in exchange for food and basic goods. Although his personal hygiene leaves a lot to be desired and he has a tendency to "borrow" unwatched objects, Goubak is rarely turned away by those who know of him—he knows the wild lands of the Kingdoms like the back of his smelly hands, travels far and wide, and is always happy to pass on rumors and news to those who show him any degree of kindness.

### GRAY SAGE OLVIR DRAKETONGUE

A Saxa priest of Hoenir, Olvir is in Al-Shirkuh researching material for two new books. The first is a study of the native species of dragon in Al-Shirkuh. The second is a discourse on sun dragons, with emphasis on the differences between those found in Rassilon and their desert-dwelling cousins. So far he has spent his time traveling between the great cities of the Kingdoms, trawling through libraries and questioning sages. Having gleaned all the knowledge he can from these sources, his next step is to venture out into the wilderness in order to study the habits of local species of dragon in their native environment and interview as many as possible.

Olvir is middle-aged and in good health. He speaks Saxa, a smattering of Sphinx, and fluent Draketongue. He knows a handful of common sentences in Beduan. The heroes might encounter him in one of the cities, where he is trying to hire guides and guards without much success, or in the wilderness, where he is likely to be in some tight spot from which he needs extricating.



## FARAF

### City of Voices

All is relatively calm on the surface, but beneath the veneer of civility the city is in chaos. Bankrupted by the pharaoh's last decree and with the pharaoh's three children each plotting their ascension to the throne, Faraf is a city teetering on the brink of civil unrest.

### Social Hierarchy

Whether Ankh-Psamtek is the oldest sphinx ever recorded is open to debate. Hamapta certainly ruled for three centuries, but his age upon attaining the throne is unknown. Stories abound he was extremely young or already old, and historical records from that early age are incomplete. Regardless, Ankh-Psamtek is assuredly the oldest living member of the species, and it shows—his golden fur has turned steel gray, he has only a handful of teeth remaining, his face is craggy, and his skin hangs from his withered frame.

His title Font of Knowledge was well deserved. In his prime, the pharaoh was regarded as wisest of a race renowned for its wisdom. Many had hoped that he might be able to reunite the cities under one pharaoh, but Ankh-Psamtek lacked the ambition. That he has all but lost his mind is well known in Faraf and much lamented. It has also cast a shadow of uncertainty across the city, for after centuries of stability under the same pharaoh the dawn of a new monarch is approaching.

Who will succeed him is as yet unknown. Even if he was to name an heir, it is very likely his other two children (or all three if he nominated someone else) would refuse to accept the decree. No heir-apparent has yet secured the full support of the cult of Qedeshet or the military, ruling out assassination of the elderly ruler. Until such time as he succumbs to old age, all his children can do is plot and wait. Of course, none of them is getting any younger, and if their father continues to live on one of them may be forced to play their hand early.

Of the noble houses, three are planning coups, believing that Ankh-Psamtek's line has had its day in the light and that the time has come for a new house to rule. They must tread lightly, though, for if their plans became known it could lead to bitter reprisals from the pharaoh's children and potentially plunge the city into utter chaos.

Although traditionally the noble houses grew rich from their status as priests and owning land rich in papyrus, over the centuries they have branched out into general trade. Each of them controls a share of the city's economy, making the sphinxes economic as well as political and spiritual rivals.

Ankh-Psamtek has long patronized education, at least at higher levels, bestowing wealth and honor noble titles on the wisest people in the city. Among the lesser races, clerics of Qedeshet and true sages (those employed by a school or university) are held in high esteem. Even the lowliest member is treated as being *mak-shabrum*, regardless of his influence or wealth.

Indeed, among the lesser races education is seen as more important than social contacts or material wealth. Thus, bureaucrats, scribes, and clerics in general are treated as being higher socially than merchants or craftsmen. Even mages and imams are accorded respect, for they are usually educated beings.

The illusion of education is just as important as actual knowledge. So long as one sounds authoritative and no one corrects any flaws or fallacies, anyone can earn the respect of his peers simply by recounting a few facts. This rarely fools sphinxes, for they are learned in many topics (though they may go along with the illusion for their own amusement), but many a "sage" has earned a free meal and bed for the night from peasants in return for teaching them a previously unknown fact or two.

### Education

Education is highly prized among the lesser races in Faraf, for it promises a way out of poverty. From the time a child can talk, parents push them to absorb as much wisdom as possible in the hope they will be accepted into state-sponsored schooling. Many, of course, fail to meet the required standard. Even then, parents encourage their offspring to attend street schools in the vain hope they might learn something of use.

Unless a child is exceptionally gifted, comes from wealth, has a rich patron, or joins a cult, advanced education is an aspiration too far. The fortunate few enjoy a wide choice of higher educational establishment, for Faraf boasts a total of six universities. Of these, the University of Faraf and University of the Sphinxes offer basic courses. Despite the name, the latter is open to all races who meet the entrance fee.

The Imperial University was founded by Hamapta to school courtiers, and continues to provide instruction in the essential skills of the court—heraldry and law—as well as stewardship, an essential skill for running a city, government office, or a business.

Founded after the jinn invasion of -505 CJ, the University of Adversaries initially instructed pupils in the ways of the jinn, so that later generations might know

## RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in Faraf.

\* **Education:** Due to the street teachers, the generic setting rule for being Illiterate is ignored.

\* **Herbal Remedies:** Increased demand has led to the price of antibiotic herbal remedies (see *Realm Guide #15*) rise to 100 dinars per dose (75 on the black market). Dried herbs to create antibiotics cost 20 dinars a batch but are hard to find. Fresh herbs (see *Realm Guide #20*) cost three times normal and are even rarer.

\* **Native Heroes:** A native character may choose to be a graduate of *one* of the advanced universities. Each grants certain benefits, as listed below, but only during character generation and the hero must meet all other requirements. Unless otherwise stated, these benefits are only open to heroes with Smarts d8+, Rich, or Arcane Background (Miracles). In all cases, a maximum of one skill point may be spent on university perks.

*Adversaries:* For one skill point, a hero may take two of the following Knowledge skills at d4 or one at d6: Area: Hekata, Area: Jinn Lands, Monsters: Jinn, Monsters: Undead.

*Ancient Lore:* For one skill point, a hero may take both of the following Knowledge skills at d4 or one at d6: Folklore, History.

*Esoteric Lore:* For one skill point, a hero may take two of the following Knowledge skills at d4 or one at d6: Alchemy, Arcana, Riddles.

*Imperial:* For one skill point, a hero may take two of the following Knowledge skills at d4 or one at d6: Heraldry, Law, Stewardship.

\* **Scholarly Materials:** Parchment costs 3 dirhams per sheet, scroll cases cost 2 dinars, and writing equipment 10 dinars. Tomes of lore cost 125 dinars per point up to +3, and 450 dinars per point from +4 to +6.

\* **Slaves:** Educated slaves are highly sought after by the native sphinxes. Average prices are higher than in other cities. *Base:* 2000; *Skills:* +150 per die in Knowledge skills; *Edges:* Investigator (+100), Sage (+150), Scholar (+300).

\* **Tainted Water:** Faraf receives its water from wells, which are as yet untainted. Anyone drinking from the River Nyl, who eats crops grown in affected regions, or who falls into the black water must make a Vigor roll at -2 or contract black pox.

*Black Pox (Ingestion, -2):* Victims suffer from boils and weeping sores that lead to a lingering death if untreated with antibiotics. Victims must make a Vigor roll at -2 each week after infection or drop one die in Vigor, dying when Vigor is reduced below a d4. Lost Vigor dice return at the rate of one per two weeks if the patient is active (i.e. adventuring) or one per week if he is resting once the infection ends.

their enemy. Although there was no further violence between the two lands, knowledge of jinn ways proved useful as trade slowly developed (the jinn weren't going to go away, and both sides had lost the appetite for further wars). After the Hekatic invasion of -302, the land of Hekata and its undead inhabitants was added to the curriculum. Few sphinxes attend courses these days as both threats have ceased to exist.

The University of Ancient Lore specializes in folklore and history. Again, much of the student body is made up of lesser races. As well as being an educational establishment, students conduct field trips to acquire physical historical artifacts for the growing antiques market.

Finally, there is the University of the Esoteric Arts. Its syllabus includes the study of alchemy, arcana, and riddles. Although sphinxes view all forms of magic with suspicion, mages with a valid license are accepted—better to keep them close and control what they study than let them vanish into the shadows and learn lore the sphinxes might see as a threat to their power.

Since the separation of the cities, the royal lines have shunned sending their children to Faraf to be educated. Partly this stems from their having no wish to admit Faraf offers better education than their native universities and partly because they are loathe to let their heirs be educated by a foreign power, lest they be corrupted or fall under Faraf's sway. The nobles are less concerned by these factors—they want their offspring to have the best education, and that is what Faraf offers.

## RELIGION

Qedeset, who sphinxes hold as the god of knowledge rather than literacy or the act of learning, has been patron of Faraf since the days of Hamapta, when the pharaoh decreed it would be the center of learning in his new Kingdom. Even on the odd occasion when the pharaoh opted to follow a different deity, Qedeset remained popular.

The cult is extremely rich. Not only does it have a hand in matters of trade (seen as a lesser aspect of Qedeset in Faraf), but it has full control over the Education District and a large share in the other schools and universities. As the royal cult, it also receives the lion's share of all tithes. This is further augmented by the antiques trade, which it dominates (though not without competition from one of the thieves' guilds).

The cult is currently sundered. Each of the pharaoh's three children, all of whom are clerics, have declared that Qedeset sent them a vision declaring them the rightful heir. Never one to argue against a sphinx, clerics of the lesser races have taken sides based on whom they believe is most sincere, and who is most likely to advance the cult's standing in the city. A small few have taken the unusual step of declaring their support openly. Should their candidate win, they can expect to be rewarded. Failure, though, might mean they are reduced in rank for



backing the wrong side or, if deemed influential enough, permanently silenced lest they stir up resentment toward the new pharaoh. The noble houses, having no ties to the cult, have been unable to secure any margin of support among the clergy.

The division within the cult is largely theological, with clerics debating the meaning of each sphinxes' vision. A few have received beatings for daring to speak out against a given heir apparent by that sphinx's supporters, as have those who argue that perhaps another aspect of Qedeshet (such as diplomacy or trade) will ascend to dominance under the new pharaoh.

Qedeshet may be the chief god, but Ashtart has more devout followers. The city's economy relies as much on papyrus as education, and that falls under the auspices of the goddess of plants. With its power lying outside the city walls, the cult has little direct influence over the court, and even its high priest is apolitical. The pollution of the River Nyl has led many to abandon the countryside in favor of the city, weakening the cult's standing.

Since the pollution of the Nyl, the cult of Apsu has suffered a drastic loss of influence. When the clerics were unable to remove the corruption, the city was reluctantly forced to rely on jinn mages. Fortunately for the cult, they too failed. Otherwise, the cult may have suffered a loss of influence and faith from which it might never have recovered. Despite previous failures, clerics continue their quest to find the source of the pollution.

Apsu's loss has been Marqod's gain. Though their miracles can only cure the plague within the first few minutes of infection, antibiotic herbal remedies offer a glimmer of hope for the afflicted. Loss of the herb's natural habit and increased demand for the remedy have led to prices dramatically increasing in the last two years. While the cult struggles to meet demand, smugglers are growing rich selling antibiotics on the black market.

## LOCAL FESTIVALS

**Graduation Day:** Tamith Yaus al-Niwt Tamith Alak Shemu marks the day students receive their exam marks. For those at the end of their course, it is the day they either graduate or learn whether they must repeat the previous year (if they have the money) or enter the world having failed to earn one or more qualifications. Traditionally, graduating university students receive their diplomas from the pharaoh in person, one of the rare public civic duties he performs. In recent years, that honor has fallen more and more to one of his children due to the pharaoh's ill health.

Students taking part-time or short courses take their exams and learn their results at varying times during the year, but they must wait until Graduation Day to receive written evidence of their educational achievements.

**Pharaoh's Birthday:** Pharaoh Ankh-Psamtek was born on Anshi Yaus al-Ittrou Baot Alak Paret. The anniversary is a public holiday across the realm, and is marked with feasts and celebrations. For his 400th birthday, officials are planning a gala at the palace. Naturally, while

all resident sphinxes will receive an invitation, few lesser races will be able to enjoy the spectacle, despite having funded it through their taxes.

## Military

In order to conduct a coup, an usurper needs the backing of both the royal court, which includes the bureaucracy, and the military. While the three main heirs apparent conduct political battles and attempt to use religious authority to stake their claims, they have forgotten about the army. The three nobles houses, however, have not. Since the commanders are sphinxes, the nobles have taken the unusual step of courting the captains, despite them being of lesser races. This has led to different companies within the same regiment backing different would be successors to the throne and, in a few cases, different squads within the same company having a different allegiance.

Their grip over the army is far from absolute, though, with perhaps a quarter of the military currently loyal to one of the three factions. Most soldiers still hold allegiance to the pharaoh, making civil war unlikely. Of course, were the pharaoh to die suddenly, the army might decide it has the strength to appoint a pharaoh of its own choosing. Whatever the future holds for Faraf, it is likely to be very messy.

## ARMY

Despite being a major pawn in the unfolding drama, Faraf's army is quite modest in size. Its present strength is two infantry regiments, two cavalry battalions, and one chariot battalion. The first regiment has two medium infantry companies, six light infantry companies, and two archer companies. The second regiment has six light infantry and four archer companies. All the cavalry is light.

The general, Iry-Paht Shemhoru, self-titled Shield of Faraf, is the pharaoh's great-nephew. Although loyal to the pharaoh, he sees the army in much the same way a child does toy soldiers, a plaything of little practical use. Lacking all inclination to be a true military commander, and ignorant of the power he wields when it comes to deciding the next pharaoh, he is content to spend his days playing wargames against the five commanders under his authority, recreating battles of old and planning for conflicts unlikely to ever occur, such as another Hekatic invasion. The sphinxes' apathy has given the captains a largely free hand in how they run their companies and allowed the nobles to gain influence.

Protecting the city is the city guard—one company of light infantry and one of archers, and two squads of artilleryists. While the guard is considered a lesser position in the military, its current leader, Commander Iry-Paht Hekhotep, is no armchair general. Proud of his station, he takes an active interest in the affairs of his men. He has never seen battle, but he is well versed in siege tactics, something he has passed onto to his captains and sergeants.

Hek-hotep has not been approached by the scheming nobles. Everyone knows his first loyalty is to the person of the pharaoh, not the throne itself. Fortunately, his position means he has not deduced the gradual splintering of the army into rival factions, for he would certainly alter the pharaoh if he did. The nobles consider him a thorn in their side and are planning to have him removed from office one way or another.

The pharaoh's bodyguard is known as the One Hundred Wise Men (even though it accepts women). Every member must be not only a capable warrior and fiercely loyal, but also educated to a high standard (Smarts d8+ and two Knowledge skills at d6+). Around a quarter are paladins of the cult of Qedeset, who see this as a religious duty (the pharaoh being the deity's representative among mortals). Their commander is Quill Anshur ibn Jezzail, a human paladin appointed personally by the pharaoh. Fully aware of the trouble at court, he has made it a matter of honor to ensure the safety of his liege. In private, he has told all three of the pharaoh's children that he will support whoever becomes the new ruler of Faraf, but will play no part in helping them secure the throne.

## NAVY

Faraf has never bothered with much of a navy. Its main exports are not likely to attract corsairs, and the antiquities and books its sphinxes crave usually enter via a land route. As a result, a token ten light warships are responsible for patrolling the river and protecting the approaches to the harbor. These are divided into the two squadrons of five ships each.

## Law & Order

The city watch, a mere three companies of light infantry, is struggling to cope with the influx of refugees and an increase in crime.

With citizens abandoning rural life, the city watch is coming under mounting pressure from the nobles to increase arrest rates so that more slaves might be available to work the farms and reed beds. So far the Commander of the Watch has refused—as a royal sphinx, he sees the current problems as an opportunity to weaken the noble houses and so ensure his family remains in power.

The guard is currently busy investigating a spate of deaths among astronomers. In other cities these would be treated like any other murder and thus likely to attract much attention from the authorities. Here, though, true sages (as opposed to the crackpots on the street corners) are not only greatly respected, but are patronized, or slaves owned, by sphinxes. Many were clerics of Qedeset, which means their deaths are an attack against the royal cult, and thus the pharaoh.

Educated slaves are highly sought after by the sphinxes. Although slaves, and thus lacking more common freedoms and rights, they enjoy a relatively comfortable life.

Much of their time is spent researching pet projects for their masters (trusted slaves are even allowed to go out into the world unaccompanied by bodyguards), answering questions sphinxes pose them, and cataloguing the household's collection of antiques and manuscripts.

Faraf has three thieves' guilds—The Brotherhood of Thieves, The Quills of Injustice, and The Shadow Sages. The city's economic woes have proved a golden age for them. First, the pharaoh's divisions of the royal treasury means that many citizens have money stashed away, making every household a target. Second, shortages of food and medicine have proven lucrative for smugglers. Third, poor newcomers looking for any work mean that their ranks are at a greater strength than ever before.

The guilds are rivals but refrain from open violence—there is plenty of wealth to go around at the moment. The unspoken rule is that if a thief is already burgling a house, any latecomer must find a new target.

Committing crimes has become more difficult since the pharaoh passed the Law of Illumination. After dark, it is a crime to walk around the city with one's face not illuminated by a lantern or torch, and clearly visible to the authorities (so wearing a hood isn't a loophole). Those who flout the law are subject to blinding in one eye and three months slavery. A second offence gives the criminal the darkness he obviously desires, for he is blinded in the other eye.

## Trade & Tribute

Faraf is facing a growing economic crisis. The pollution of the River Nyl has destroyed much of the last two harvests, and the remaining agricultural land is not enough to sate the inhabitants' basic needs. The granaries, which have kept the city fed since the water turned black, are almost empty. With its coffers equally barren, the city lacks the funds to purchase enough supplies to stave off famine. The price of food is currently stable and most basic foodstuffs are still available in sufficient quantities to avoid mass unrest, but shortages will soon bite, causing prices to skyrocket.

The papyrus trade has yet to be seriously affected, though few are convinced things will remain good for much longer. Several reed beds have failed, and a serious flood in the coming year could endanger many more. With papyrus in raw and finished form its major export, any further reduction in harvests would be disastrous. Currently, it is only Faraf's educational establishments that are staving off complete economic collapse.

Adding to the problem is a growing migration of rural workers into the city in search of better prospects. As the city grows more crowded and its economy slows, so skilled craftsmen are migrating to other cities, further damaging industry.

The city's main imports are ancient artifacts and books. These are destined not for the main markets, but the private collections of sphinxes and other rich citi-



zens. Traders, including adventurers, who deal in these objects can make good money, but little of the riches are seen by the common people.

## COINAGE

Although the pharaoh emptied the treasury and divided the wealth among the populace, inflation has remained relatively stable. A few spent their new fortune in a matter of days, but many sensed the dark cloud on the horizon and wisely opted to set the money aside for harder times to come.

The city is minting new coins so it can pay the military and bureaucracy, fund essential projects, and purchase vital supplies, but is careful about the amount—too many would lead to rampant inflation. Most bureaucrats and soldiers have been on half pay since the pharaoh's madness. In order to prevent unrest, they are issued credit notes they can use at any shop in the city. Unfortunately, this means the shopkeepers are not getting paid, since the credit notes are not being honored in a timely fashion. All told, the economy is a shambles.

Local coins have the head and name of the pharaoh on one face. Dinars are stamped with an ankh (a cross with a looped top) on the reverse, while dirhams carry a quill design. For over two centuries, the design has remain unchanged.

The standard coins seen on the streets are the one gold dinar ("Ankh" after the reverse face image), one silver dirham ("Quill"), one-half dirham ("Half-Quill"), and one-quarter dirham ("Quarter-Quill").

## LOCAL TAXES

Commoners (i.e. all non-sphinxes) lose a minimum of 50% of their wages in standard taxes and tithes, and many face a tax bill that consumes as much as 75% of their annual income—a rate that will make survival extremely difficult if famine strikes. By comparison, sphinxes lose around 10%, since they pay only tithes and a few minor taxes. In order to restore the city treasury's wealth and pay for the pharaoh's birthday celebrations, new taxes and tax increases have been introduced. Needless to say, they are not popular.

**Birthday Tax:** To help fund the pharaoh's 400th birthday celebrations, all citizens, regardless of age or financial status, pay 10 dinars a year. Visitors are charged 10 dinars. A wooden token is issued to show the visitor has paid.

**Customs Duty:** Faraf has recently raised its customs duty from 2% to 4% in an attempt to strengthen its economic outlook.

**Docking Fees:** Ships are charged 10 dinars per day. Ships owned by sphinxes resident to Faraf pay no docking fees, and those of other sphinxes a token 2 dinars.

**Gate Tax:** Sphinxes and their slaves pay nothing. Non-natives are charged at 1 dinar for pedestrians, 2 dinars for mounts, and 5 dinars for wagons. Natives are charged in dirhams, but must prove their citizenship.

**Sales Tax:** A surcharge of 5% is placed on all purchases within the city.

## Architecture

Although large, as demanded by the sheer physical size of the occupants, the palaces of the sphinxes are less architecturally splendid than those in other cities. This is not down to modesty (a trait few sphinxes have), but the simple fact that Faraf has never been a truly wealthy city.

It boasts a goodly number of statues and obelisks, as befits sphinxes egotism, but years of financial hardship have left these in desperate need of repainting and, in some cases, recarving. In poorer districts, the buildings are need in maintenance, and even the roads need relaying. Unfortunately, nothing is likely to change any time soon, leaving Faraf a faded shadow of its former glory.

Built on high ground surrounded by marsh, the city walls were erected at the edge of the available dry ground. As a result, the streets inhabited by lesser beings were constructed to be very narrow, with small houses two or three stories high. Naturally, areas where the sphinxes might care to roam have wider streets and larger buildings to accommodate their bulk.

## Major Locales

Detailed below are a number of locations in and around Faraf that the heroes may have reason to visit.

### CITY DISTRICTS

Faraf's population currently stands at 73,500, or just under 55% of the total population answerable to the pharaoh, and it grows daily. The city was built to accommodate around 70,000 souls. Although barely over that number it is already showing signs of strain, with slums springing up in already impoverished areas.

The districts mentioned below account for around two-thirds of the city, leaving just one-third dedicated to residential areas.

**Docks:** Faraf's docks are located on a small patch of raised land along the river and lie 250 yards south of the city proper. A stone causeway links the docks to the city. Warehouses, ships chandlers, inns, and brothels stand among tightly packed clusters of lower-class housing. The city watch rarely patrols here, and never after dark. The sphinxes who own warehouses employ private guards to protect their property and its contents, while visitors can hire bodyguards of varying bravery and skill for a few dinars a day.

**Educational:** Despite more universities lying outside the district, the Educational District is the local name for the public part of the palace. Here stands the grand temple of Qedeshet, Imperial University, the main library, schools catering only for sphinxes, and an observatory, as well as houses for clerics of Qedeshet, faculty members, and visiting students deemed worthy of residing here.

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**Noble:** The great mansions of the ten noble sphinx families lie outside the Palace District, south of the High Gate. Each mansion is surrounded by walls. Inside are apartments for members of the family, ornate gardens, courtyards, servants quarters, and work areas (kitchens, small workshops, and such like).

**Palace:** The Palace District dominates the eastern third of the city. It comprises two separate areas—the pharaoh's home and seat of government (which occupies the northern portion of the district) and the larger Educational District. Within the palace are apartments for the royal sphinxes and senior bureaucrats, government offices, barracks for the pharaoh's bodyguard, and the city treasury. Beneath it are located the prison and a multi-level crypt holding the mortal remains of previous generations of royal sphinxes.

**Papyrus:** The city's key industrial center is located in the south of the city and accessed from without by the Marsh Gate and River Gate. As well as workshops preparing raw papyrus for transformation into scrolls, there are inkers, binders, calligraphers, and illuminators, as well as lower- and middle-class housing.

**Sage:** The true educational heart of Faraf is the Sage District. It borders the Noble District to the east and the Papyrus District to the south. Crammed within are five universities, six schools, and a small temple to Qedeshet, not to mention housing for clerics, sages (independent and faculty members), students, and workers, small shops catering for students' needs, taverns, and inns.

**Temple:** North of the great avenue that runs from the palace to the Royal Gate in the western wall stand the houses of the gods. Within each compound are the main temple (where applicable), dozens of shrines, statues, and obelisks, accommodation for clerics, faddeen, and laity, storehouses, and workshops.

## CITY LOCALES

**Antiques Auction House:** Although the sphinxes purchase ancient artifacts for their collections, they rarely buy directly from sellers. Unless they are working for a sphinx patron, heroes looking to sell such items should present them to the auction house, where they are carefully checked and evaluated by experts before being placed in the next monthly sale. Agents from each sphinx family, along with other private collectors, then bid on each lot. The auction house charges 15% a commission fee. This is paid both by the seller (who thus receives only 85% of the final price) and the purchaser (who ends up paying 15% more).

The auction house also hires individuals to retrieve artifacts for the sphinxes to order. Secretly cosponsored by the Universities of Adversaries, Ancient Lore, and Esoteric Arts, all of which collect artifacts for rich patrons and their own collections, it provides training in essential skills for recovering artifacts from trap-laden tombs. Fees are waived if the student swears a sacred oath to undertake a number of missions on behalf of the auction house and its various patrons. Typically, each mission, which is financed

by the individual student, offsets one month of training fees. The auction house has no official ties to the thieves' guilds, but everyone knows thieves train here.

**Special:** Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; **Skills:** Lockpicking; **Edges:** Tomb Robber.

**City Walls:** The city walls rise 30 feet above the top of the small island, which is itself 10 feet higher than the surrounding marsh. The walls encircle the city but do not extend to the docks (which has no fortifications). Thirteen square towers, each 10 feet higher than the wall and spaced unevenly along the wall, serve as barracks for the city guard.

**Gates:** Faraf has three external gates and one major internal gate. The Royal Gate is located in the extreme west and is considered the main gate. It leads to a stone causeway that runs arrow straight through the marsh until it reaches dry land. The Marsh Gate, in the southwest, leads directly into the marsh. It is mainly used by papyrus farmers. Further to the east is the River Gate, which leads to the docks. Internally, the High Gate (which is aligned with the Royal Gate) separates the greater Palace District from the city.

All four gates are open between dawn and dusk. After dark, the Royal Gate is opened for caravans and pedestrians as and when required. Everyone passing through the High Gate during the house of darkness is questioned by the pharaoh's bodyguards, a squad of which is responsible for security. The other gates are opened only if a sphinx demands access.

**Graybeard Tavern:** Located in the Sage District, this tavern is popular not only with learned men and women, but also with those who seek their counsel. Around the walls are a number of booth, each containing a table and several chairs. Day and night, each is occupied by a single sage whose services are for hire. Each sage hangs a small plaque bearing his name and specialties outside the booth he is occupying.

Those wishing to consult a sage are expected to purchase food and drink for the relevant wise man before entering a booth. This is the price for an introduction, not a consultation. If the sage accepts the request after learning of his patron's needs, he draws the curtains on the booth to show he is engaged with a client and is not to be disturbed.

Many of the sages have need of things they cannot acquire themselves. In return for the patrons performing a given task, such as tracking down a specific item or piece of lore (usually from some crumbling monster-infested ruin or tomb or distant location), the sage waives his usual payment. The difficulty of the task and the dangers to be faced is not always commensurate with the information being sought. For instance, some who seek obscure lore that might take months to research have it easy, while others who seek knowledge the sage can unearth in a few days face deadly perils.

**Imperial University:** Although it trains young sphinxes in the essential skills of the court and governance, the university accepts lesser races. Many of these are destined to work in the city's bureaucracy or as estate



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managers for a sphinx family. A small few are clerics looking to boost their chances of promotion.

Whereas lesser races are trained in groups, sphinxes receive private tuition. In reality, sphinx students are few and far between. They make up a tiny percentage of the total population of the Kingdoms, have very few cubs, and live for centuries, meaning decades may pass between sphinxes attending. Some lecturers have spent their whole lives here without ever teaching a sphinx.

**Special:** Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; **Skills:** Knowledge (Heraldry), Knowledge (Law), Knowledge (Stewardship); **Edges:** Scholar (only applies to skills taught at the university).

**Oman's Used Goods:** Oman buys and sells second-hand goods. When purchasing, he pays a flat 20%. This is lower than heroes could get if they make a Streetwise roll, but Oman is well known and offers easy money for a quick sale. When selling, he charges 75% of the normal price. He rarely has armor and weapons for sale—he sells these to the thieves' guilds, for whom he acts as a fence.

**The Prison:** The city's prison, which lies beneath the palace, holds suspects awaiting trial. Rumors abound that there is one permanent resident, a prisoner who is kept in strict isolation. All access routes are heavily protected not only by living guardians, but also deadly *glyphs*. No one knows his or her name, race, creed, or crime. Only one jailor is permitted to shove food and water through the hatch at the base of the door, or so it is said, and he is both blind and mute.

**University of Adversaries:** The university has an impressive collection of objects and manuscripts dating back to before the War of Copper Jars. The most valuable of these are kept in a secure vault protected by elaborate magical and mundane traps. Access is at the sole discretion of the curator, Khendjer a cantankerous old sphinx loathe to open "his" museum to anyone.

Unbeknownst to the cult of Tammuz, the collection includes several undead, captives taken during the war of -302 C.J. The more dangerous specimens are kept in check by means of a powerful *warding* relic taken from the jinn, with further magical safeguards placed on their sarcophagi. Their knowledge of Hekata has proven invaluable over the centuries.

A junior curator, Ara abd Khendjer, is currently worried for her life. One of the valuable exhibits under her care, a first generation Hekatic mummy, has disappeared. She has managed to keep this a secret from her master, but she knows she cannot maintain this forever as the sphinx is fond of talking with it. Ara tells adventurers the mummy was stolen. In truth, it simply walked out after she forgot to seal its sarcophagus properly. The mummy, which goes by the name Apephotep, is currently residing in one of the slums, where it is posing as a beggar until it decides how to liberate its comrades and avenge its centuries long captivity. Ara wants it brought back undamaged and without attracting any attention.

**Special:** Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; **Skills:** Knowledge (Area: Hekata), Knowledge (Area: Jinn Lands), Knowledge (Monsters: Jinn),

## OPTIONAL RULE

The core Knowledge skills represent broad fields of study and every hero with the same die type has an equal chance of knowing the same facts. This optional rule introduces specialties as a means of adding a little extra flavor.

A character picks one specialty for each die step in his Smarts above d4. Once chosen, these cannot be changed. Whenever one of his specialties applies to any Common Knowledge or Knowledge roll, the character gains a +1 bonus. At the GM's discretion, he may gain multiple bonuses if one or more specialties apply equally.

A character cannot benefit from a specialty that has the same name as one of his Knowledge skills. For instance, a hero with Knowledge (Monsters: Orcs) gains no bonus from having an orc specialty. He would benefit if making a Knowledge (Area) roll to remember the names of local orc tribes, however.

**Example Specialties:** Architecture, armor & weapons, art & music, astrology, astronomy, cartography, cryptography, fauna, flora, genealogy, geology, heraldry & sigils, languages, law, mathematics, medicine, meteorology, military history, myths & legends, numismatics, other planes of existence, philosophy & ethics, poisons, politics, pottery, religion, specific culture, deity, magic type, monster, race, or realm.

## EXAMPLE

Ahmed the Paladin has Smarts d8, so he knows two specialties (one for having d6 and a second for having d8). He picks architecture and jinn. His Knowledge skills are Area: Jinn Lands d6 and Battle d8.

During an adventure in the deep desert of the Jinn Lands of Old, the party stumbles across a ruin recently uncovered by a sandstorm. It is devoid of inscriptions or statues, leaving no obvious clues as to its creators or purpose. Ahmed asks to make a Knowledge (Area: Jinn Lands) roll to see if he has heard of the place. His friend, Suleiman the Nomad, was born in the Jinn Lands and thus can use Common Knowledge. His Smarts is d6, and his one specialty is geology, which is no use here.

The GM knows the ruin was built by the jinn. Since Ahmed specializes in architecture *and* jinn, the GM awards a +2 bonus. Ahmed rolls a raise, while Suleiman scores a success. Both know it was built by the jinn by its basic architecture, but Ahmed recognizes it as a tomb, the sort in which greater ifrit nobles were interred.

While exploring the structure the party is attacked by a band of rogue lesser ifrits. Ahmed has the Tactician Edge. Because he has a jinn specialty, the GM allows a +1 bonus to his Knowledge (Battle) roll—the hero has studied typical jinn tactics, and knows how best to handle them.

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Knowledge (Monsters: Undead); *Edges*: Scholar (only applies to skills taught at the university); *Languages*: Hekatic, Jinn.

**University of Ancient Lore:** A senior lecturer in history, Füreyya, a female cakali, has urgent need of adventurers. Three months ago, the university sent a team of students under the guidance of a lecturer to investigate reports of a tomb complex in the western Prophecy Hills. Nothing has been heard from them since.

*Special:* Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; *Skills:* Knowledge (Folklore), Knowledge (History); *Edges:* Scholar (only applies to skills taught at the university).

**University of the Esoteric Arts:** Popular with clerics and mages alike, the university teaches what are broadly termed esoteric arts. It does not impart practical instruction in any of the various magical arts—the sphinxes of Faraf may tolerate mages, but they have no wish to increase their numbers.

One of the lecturers, Jusef ibn Fayeed, has heard of a riddle so cunning that it was never been solved before being lost to history. According to legend, a noble sphinx spent his entire life pondering the problem, going so far as to construct a monastery high in the Godhome Mountains in order to avoid being disturbed. What he does not know is that the sphinx still lives on in the form of a liche driven insane by his inability to solve the riddle. Jusef hopes to acquire the riddle and use it to secure promotion and an honor title by reciting it to a royal sphinx.

*Special:* Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; *Skills:* Knowledge (Alchemy), Knowledge (Arcana), Knowledge (Riddles); *Edges:* Alchemy, Scholar (only applies to skills taught at the university).

## HESRA

**Population:** 240

**Ruler:** Iry-Paht Nebneferre

**Religion:** Faithful (Qedeshet, Upuaut)

**Imports:** Pottery

**Exports:** Fish, Reeds

The small village of Hesra lies some 30 miles south of Faraf, City of Voices, to which it is ultimately beholden. A coastal settlement situated near a salt marsh, it divides its income between fishing and harvesting reeds for papyrus. Until recently, the village's ruler, a young female sphinx distantly related to the pharaoh of Faraf, had little to do but bask in the praise of her servants, feast, and watch the peasants toil in the fields. These days, she is a very worried sphinx.

Local legends had long told of an eerie glowing mist rolled across the land every 100 years. So the story went, the fog would come for five consecutive full moons, during which time death would stalk the land and sea. Where such phenomena exist, there is always a difference of opinions as to the cause. Curses and angry jinn are usually top of the list, and Hesra is no exception to that unwritten rule. With regard the curse, it relates to a ship lured onto the rocks off Hesra by a false beacon.

The ship was wrecked, and the crew and passengers condemned to a watery grave. Each century, the gods allow them to exact their revenge on the living.

For the last three full moons, a glowing fog has indeed engulfed the village. During that time, some 15 citizens have met a ghastly end or simply vanished into thin air. Panic now fills the air, and the harvests have been ignored despite liberal application of threats and force. Knowing the pharaoh is a drooling idiot, Nebneferre has so far managed to keep the lack of industry and death of the citizens from her overlord. However, bureaucrats have noticed the lack of caravans and are demanding answers. Nebneferre has learned that they plan to send an investigator to delve into the situation. Unless she can end the curse, or at least ensure productivity resumes, she risks being impeached, stripped of her position, and shamed.

## PERSONS OF NOTE

Described below are a few of the city's many denizens the heroes may encounter while exploring the city.

### DUQAQ ABID QEDESHEṬ

Until three moons ago, Duqaq was an astronomer-priest of Qedeshet, widely respected for his knowledge of the heavens and patronized by several sphinxes, who funded his research. Then he lost his mind. Now he wanders the streets aimlessly, gibbering incoherently, and surviving on the charity of donations.

What caused his insanity has never been determined. Since that fateful day, Duqaq has not uttered a single sound. He was found curled up in the observatory by his assistant, who had popped out to brew coffee, his eyes open wide in utter fear. His telescope was found pointing toward the northern sky, but inspection revealed nothing untoward in the night sky. Some say his mental state was destroyed by working long hours. Others suggest he saw something that shattered his sanity, though none have yet presented a plausible explanation for what could do such a thing. Oddly, no other astronomers working that night reported anything strange in the heavens.

### IMY-ER NEFERKAMIN

Neferkamin, an elderly sphinx sage whose interests lay in scholastic pursuits rather than following Geb-Agni, his family's patron, is a common sight at the University of Ancient Lore and the Map Room. Until recently his research focused on the early history of the Kingdoms, specifically the years before Hamapta united the cities.

Following a chance encounter with a visitor from Rasilon, he learned that a race of sphinxes different from those of Al-Shirkuh inhabits the frozen lands far to the north. Intrigued, he now seeks adventurers prepared to travel north and question one of the cryosphinxes about the history of their race.



## JAWF

### City of War

The city of Jawf has long been a fortress. Before the sphinxes rose to power, it guarded the mouth of the River Ankh and served as the main port for Hekata. Today, its mighty walls signal the start of the Sphinx Road. Within his palace the pharaoh chafes at the bit, eager to go to war with his neighbors, but only on his terms. Little does he realize that he is being duped by those who crave war for their own reasons.

### Social Hierarchy

Kauakht's "ancestor," one of Hamapta's sons, served as general of the royal army. A millennia and more has passed since the Kingdoms fractured and the title became meaningless, but the pharaohs of Jawf have always regarded themselves as the true defenders of the Kingdoms. When Hekata and the jinn invaded, it was their pharaohs who commanded the briefly unified armies, leading their kin to glorious victory yet never acknowledged for the role they played.

Pharaoh Kauakht longs for war, but he is not prepared to attack his neighbors without direct provocation—his army and city are strong, but not strong enough to withstand a combined assault from the other six cities. When war comes to the Kingdoms, and it surely will given unfolding events further north, he will not hold back his fury or his mighty army, but he is not a warmonger seeking battle for battle's sake.

His son and heir, Wendjeb-en-djed, on the other hand, is a conniving weasel who hopes to plunge Jawf into war in the very near future. Although he is the permanent commander of the elite first regiment, The Teeth of Jawf, and second-in-command of the army, an honorable position, he sees answering to a human general an insult to his royal status and a slight against his skills as a warrior. Still relatively young, he has yet to learn that martial prowess does not make one a good leader and that while his men may show him respect for being a sphinx of royal blood, he must earn their respect as a military commander. His father has tried to instill an important lesson in him, but without success—soldiers will fight and die for any commander who orders them, but a true leader gets the same result merely by asking them.

Nine of the noble families have prospered by dominating trade and the arms industry. Every armorer and weaponsmith in the city works for one of the noble houses. The tenth house, dedicated to Ashtart, has made its fortune from agriculture, owning sizeable estates along the banks of the River Harad.

Many sphinxes have succumbed to the charms of the sphinx Puppeteer in court, who has gently reminded them that war can be good for business, especially when that business is supplying arms and armor.

Even the sphinxes of House Harsiese, which honors Marqod, have been convinced that war is inevitable. While it will undoubtedly profit from supplying *healing* potions and herbal remedies, it can at least offset the misery of war by using the income to support worthy causes. Sphinxes see a "worthy cause" as being something that directly benefits them, but at least those of House Harsiese can use the argument to ease their collective conscience. Of course, war will benefit the house in other ways. It may not have any weaponsmiths under its control, but it has plenty of armorers' workshops.

Among the lesser races, the upper class is reserved for senior clerics and military captains, as well as the merchants and master craftsmen sphinxes chose to favor. The latter two are employees, and thus only those who run a mercantile business or workshop on behalf of their masters receive this status.

Armorers and weaponsmiths of journeymen rank (skilled, but not worthy of master status) are the backbone of the economy, and thus the primary income source for most noble houses. They number among the *shabrum*, as do sergeants, senior bureaucrats, many merchants, and most clerics. Other crafts are seen as inferior or of secondary importance, and practitioners rarely rise above *jaleepa* status unless they have managed to secure sphinx patronage.

Although soldiers still number among the *barajam*, they sit higher than farmers, laborers, and other unskilled workers. Not quite skilled enough to be *jaleepa*, they are nonetheless respected members of the community.

### Education

Jawf makes no attempts to educate its peasants any more than is absolutely necessary. Children who meet the required intelligence level to be schooled are ordered to attend classes so that the bureaucracy has enough scribes, the army sufficient officers, and the merchants enough apprentices. Failure to comply with this order is punishable by the family being sent to the arena. Fortunately, most parents are only too happy for their children to have a chance at a bright future.

Whereas many other cities whose economy relies on one craft (or a number of closely related crafts) operate trade schools, Jawf does not. Aspiring apprentices must

## RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in Jawf.

\* **Arms & Armor:** All native forms of weapons and armor can be purchased at 85% of the normal price. Heroes looking to sell arms and armor receive 10% of the value on a successful Streetwise roll and 25% on a raise. Heroes with the Expert Hagglers Edge (see *Realm Guide #13*) receive the standard 25% or 50% as appropriate.

\* **Conscription:** Heroes born in Jawf are required to do two years military service. Heroes aged 18 or over can purchase Fighting d4 and Shooting d4 for one skill point during character generation.

\* **Native Heroes:** A native character may choose to be a graduate of the advanced university. This grants certain benefits, as listed below, but only during character generation and the hero must meet all other requirements. These benefits are only open to heroes with Smarts d6+ and the Command Edge. A maximum of one skill point may be spent in this manner.

*Military Academy:* For one skill point, a character begins play with Knowledge (Battle) d6, instead of d4 as normal.

approach a master and either demonstrate their ability to learn the craft or have their parents pay a suitable bribe. Master metalworkers have plenty of candidates, but are notoriously picky—selecting someone who turns out to be a poor apprentice not only wastes the master's time, but it wastes the sphinxes' money, something the sphinxes reward with punishment.

Jawf has just two universities. The University of Jawf is a basic educational establishment catering for those whose interests lie outside of military command. The Jawf Military Academy trains both sphinxes and lesser races in the art of war. Every sphinx is required to study here for a minimum of five years, thus ensuring that senior commanders lost in battle can be easily replaced.

Lesser races seeking to enrol do not require high intelligence or great wealth. Promising candidates are closely monitored during their two-year military service. Those who display the necessary leadership qualities are invited to enrol, their tuition fees paid for by the city. In return, they must serve for five years with the army. A player character who elects to be a former student must thus be a minimum of 23 years old.

Sphinxes from outside Jawf are accepted as students, but they are trained separately from native sphinxes—Jawf is prepared to live up to its ancient obligations by continuing to providing military training to all sphinxes, but it has no wish to reveal its tactics and strategies to potential enemies.

Even with the city's large military, graduates are not assured a position as an officer. They are, however, more likely to be promoted when a vacancy arises. To help

commanders determine who has studied at the academy, graduates are given a silver pin in the shape of a scimitar, while those who pass with honors receive a gold pin.

## Religion

The cult of Karmelos is the most prestigious by dint of being the royal cult, but membership is largely restricted to the royal household and the army. That said, the temple precinct is large enough for every regiment to parade simultaneously, something they do only rarely. On most special occasions, each regiment sends just one company, so as not to leave the borders undefended. It also houses the main armory and the House of Standards, the sacred hall where each company and regiment keeps its standard in times of peace.

Unless they are already training to be clerics, have taken holy vows, or are Devoted, citizens are automatically enrolled in the cult for the duration of their conscription. As Karmelos' earthly representative, the pharaoh has decreed that they may switch allegiance to another patron after they have served the city without any stain on their soul. This applies equally to those who reenlist, though most tend to stick with Karmelos. Religious instruction in the cult's tenets is minimal, however (not enough to warrant any form of game mechanic).

In terms of the number of regular worshippers, Geb-Agni is the most influential. This naturally means that the noble house dedicated to the god of metalworkers is the most powerful, not to mention wealthiest, of the ten families. Traditionally, it has enjoyed great royal patronage, with many royal sphinxes choosing spouses from the household.

Duamutef, usually a minor god among sphinxes, who rarely leave their palaces, yet alone venture out into the desert, has greater status in Jawf thanks to the deity also being patron of archers. It is this role that is most dominant, though visiting Faithful Bedu honor his other aspects normally. In order that the military is not divided in its place of worship, Duamutef's shrine stands in the precinct of Karmelos' temple.

As is often the case, travel beyond the city walls and one finds plentiful worshippers of Ashtart. Thanks to the city being self-sufficient in a wide variety of crops and able to set aside a portion of the harvest for bad times, clearly a blessing from Ashtart, not to mention its associated noble house being very rich, the cult enjoys much favor at court.

## LOCAL FESTIVALS

**Blood and Sand Day:** Held over Yaus al-Kemi through Yaus al-Sesht Alak Neteru, this festival is a three-day gladiatorial spectacle held in honor of the pharaoh. Admittance to the arena is free, guaranteeing a capacity crowd. The highlight of the gladiatorial year, every gladiator will fight at some point during the three days.



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

The final day is the highpoint. Not only does the most popular gladiator in the city make his appearance as the final bout, but the crowd are thrilled with gladiators matched up against orcs, ferocious beasts, and sometimes even giants. These uncivilized creatures do not understand the nuances of appeasing the crowd, and the fight is run as a normal combat (as opposed to the method listed on page 30).

The true highlight is always an extravagant spectacular recreating battles by pitting teams of gladiators against undead (normally skeleton warriors) and lesser jinn animated and summoned specifically for the role. Since the sphinxes won the historical battles, and the fight is intended to remind spectators of this, the odds are stacked in favor of the gladiators.

## Military

Jawf prides itself on its military might. Its army is well equipped, well trained, highly disciplined, and has excellent morale. No other army in the Kingdoms could hope to stand against it and win alone, and even with two or three allies there is still a good chance Jawf would emerge victorious.

### ARMY

Jawf's permanent army stands at eight infantry regiments and four cavalry battalions, a force equal to 3.5% of the total population. Whereas other pharaohs favor light arms and armor to save money and lessen the odds of a mutiny succeeding, Pharaoh Kauakht has spared no expense in ensuring his troops have the best equipment money can buy. Two of the regiments are classified as heavy infantry, three are medium infantry, three are light infantry. Regardless of their classification, two companies in each regiment are archers. Of the cavalry battalions, one is heavy and three are light.

Since the pharaoh is Karmelos' emissary, the army is, by default, an extension of the cult, even if not every soldier follows the god. Clerics and fadeen see no difference between serving in the army and serving the cult. Each company has a minimum of one paladin, and each regiment at least one priest. They carry the honorific ranks of High Scimitar-Captain and High Advisor-Commander respectively. Fadeen who enlist add Fadeen before their rank to denote their special status.

Each infantry regiment actually fields 11 companies. The extra company is made up of conscripts led by seasoned officers. As a training company, it breaks the normal rule of no mixed troops types, comprising as it does five squads of infantry and five squads of archer. For the first year, conscripts learn drills and the basic of weapon handling. During their second year, the greater majority spend half the year serving as a common infantryman and the other half as an archer. Cavalry training is highly specialized, and only those already competent

in the saddle or who reenlist after finishing their tour are permitted to train as cavalymen.

In times of war, every male under the age of 40 and in good health can be recalled into service. Unless the situation is dire, only farmers and laborers are conscripted, leaving the clerics, metalworkers, and other skilled citizens to carry on their normal routines and keep the city running smoothly.

The city guard is not a military separate force. At any one time, an entire regiment from the army is garrisoned in the city. Regiments are rotated every few months to stop them getting lazy and ensure they are trained in the latest tactics and strategies. Supporting the city guard regiment are two companies of dedicated artilleryists.

General Harkhuf abd Kauakht is loved by his men and despised by many of his commanders. No idle courtier or armchair general, he is actively involved in the daily business of running the army, personally overseeing everything from logistics to training. While soldiers in other armies enjoy quiet garrison duty, Harkhuf ensures his men are kept in fighting shape with frequent maneuvers, drills, and mock battles, not to mention long patrols. He pushes the soldiers hard and punishes transgressions harshly, but he is never arbitrary or malicious. Every soldier worth his salt knows that the discipline being instilled into them will be of benefit should they ever be called upon to go to war.

Harkhuf may be a human, and a slave at that, but he does not cringe or grovel before his sphinx commanders, nor does he allow them to sit at court while their men sweat. Every commander is required to be in the field alongside the army and to actively participate in daily routines. This has earned him few friends among the senior officers, but Harkhuf doesn't give a damn—his role is to oversee the army, not pander to the sphinxes. More than one upstart looking to intimidate the general has slinked away with his tail firmly between his legs.

Guarding the pharaoh are the Fearless Shields, two companies of infantry renowned for their bravery. Every man who seeks to join must face the pharaoh and argue for his position. Those who fail without disgracing themselves are returned to their units. Any who quail in the pharaoh's presence are sent to the arena to serve as sparring partners for gladiators.

### NAVY

Not content with having an impressive army, the pharaohs of Jawf have long maintained a large navy. The fleet comprises 40 light warships and 12 galleys, enough to transport over half the army in one go. They galleys' oarsmen are slaves, either sentenced by the court or captives bought on the open market. The former serve a fixed term based on the severity of their crime. The latter are destined to work the oars until they die (or become infirm, at which time they are executed).

The fleet is divided into four maritime squadrons, each with seven light and three galleys, and a river squadron of 12 light warships. Two maritime squadrons are usually

in port while the other two are patrolling the approaches to the city and visiting coastal settlements.

The navy is currently investigating a number of sightings of *kbaliya safin* (“ships that travel without sailors to make them move”). By all accounts, these vessels are made entirely of metal and have no obvious means of propulsion. The pharaoh has ordered the fleet to observe these craft but not engage them unless fired upon first—he is unsure whether the strange ships are warships from the Jade Empire, a new invention employed by one of his rivals (or possibly Jadid, City of Trade), or in the service of a yet unknown power. All he knows for sure is that they are not from Rassilon, as merchants from Ostmark have reported similar vessels in their waters.

## Law & Order

The downside to conscription is that the average citizen knows how to handle weapons (though arguably not to a competent level). Not many can afford to purchase weapons, of course, but the city watch does not take chances—its members are heavily armored and prefer to use force first and ask questions later.

The watch comprises just three companies, a small number for a city of Jawf’s size. In the event of widespread civil unrest, the watch can call upon the city guard. Each company patrols for eight hours a day, though individuals spend as little as four hours actually on the streets. Major crimes are given serious investigation, but petty offences are often ignored unless the victim is a sphinx or the criminal is caught red-handed.

Slavery is the preferred sentence imposed by the courts. Criminals sentenced to short periods of slavery are destined either for the galleys or, if lucky, working for the city cleaning sewers, sweeping streets, constructing new buildings, or clearing irrigation channels. Unless the navy or work parties are short of numbers, the city has no wish to feed and house excess slaves. In such instances the guilty party is given the choice of paying a heavy fine or entering the arena. Given the scale of the fines, most have little choice but to sell everything they own or become a gladiator. Those convicted of violent crimes or punished with long sentences invariably end up in the arena. Only a small few survive to the end of their sentence.

Crime is dominated by the Razors, a guild dedicated to, as they claim, shaving the wealth from the rich. Since the pharaoh raised taxes on trade destined for Jizah, City of the Sphinx, the guild has done a lucrative trade smuggling cargoes past customs inspectors.

Gambling is not illegal in Jawf, but gambling winnings are treated as income and are thus taxable. In licensed premises, this is taken at source to prevent fraud. The guild runs illegal gambling, focusing mainly on gladiatorial fights. In return for a suitable fee, it is also prepared to rig gladiatorial contests by having combatants drugged or, for more serious money, physically harmed.

## Trade & Tribute

Jawf has grown rich from its position at the start of the Sphinx Road. Thanks to the geography of the Kingdoms, that is unlikely to change any time soon—the Desert of Deception prevents caravans going around the top of the Prophecy Hills, orcs and ogres control the valley between the hills and the Mountains of Fear, and the Godshome Mountains are impenetrable. Jizah’s growing demand for stone and slaves makes overland transportation impractical, further fuelling Jawf’s economy. The native sphinxes know the boom will end when the pyramid is complete, so they are squeezing out every dirham they can from the dwindling number of merchants still using the port.

The city’s sphere of influence extends 80 miles along the Sphinx Road. Every ten miles is a small fort housing two companies of infantry from one of the medium or light regiments and one light cavalry company. Caravans can hire these troops to escort them as far as the next fort. Rates depend on the number of troops required. The last fort in the chain never reduces its strength below a company—the pharaoh doesn’t trust the Jizah garrison at Dry River Fort.

The River Harad is navigable along its fertile belt, but not for the entire length. At the kink between the two great curves, the water tumbles over a high cataract, preventing ships from sailing its entire length. Low weight goods are hauled to higher or lower water by bearers, where barges from the other city take over their transportation. Most of the traffic on the lower stretch is barges carrying crops from the farming settlements under Jawf’s control, while military ships provide escorts.

While the city produces enough crops to feed its population and set a little aside for poor harvests, it exports very little. Even though it is self-sufficient, citizens still suffer shortages thanks to the voracious appetites of the sphinxes. Fortunately, these are not severe enough to drive up prices more than is normal in the Kingdoms.

Jawf’s main import is unworked metal. Much of this comes from Mizdah, City of Power, though the pharaoh is too wary to place all his eggs in one basket, and thus merchants buy from whoever has ore or ingots for sale. Once in the city, the metal is worked into an array of goods, though armor and weapons make up the majority of exports. All metalworkers are employees of one of the noble houses.

## COINAGE

Jawf’s coins carry the head of the pharaoh on one side and a stylized weapon on the other. The latter designs give the various coins their common nicknames. The city mint produces four standard coins—the one dinar (“Sword”), the one dirham (“Spear”), one-half dirham (“Dagger”), and one-quarter dirham (“Arrow”). In order to avoid having to import too much precious metal, the half and quarter dirham coins are minted from copper. Though they have the same weight, this makes them larger than the dinar and dirham.



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

## LOCAL TAXES

Trade income has lowered the burden on the citizens, with most paying around 25% of their income to the city and temples. This does not mean individuals are particularly rich—wages are kept artificially low.

**Arms & Armor Tax:** In a bid to prevent visitors from selling arms and armor at lower prices than the city's shops, a levy is charged on all armor and weapons entering the city. The current rate is 20% of the full price. Any items not paid for must be left outside the city or sold for 10% of their value. Surrendered armor and weapons that fails to meet the city's standards are melted down.

**Customs Duty:** Situated at the start of the Sphinx Road, Jawf profits from merchants from the other cities seeking inland markets. Imports destined for the local markets are charged at 2%, whereas those merely passing through are charged 6%. This is an added burden for merchants, but it is still cheaper than having a caravan make a long and difficult overland journey to the Sphinx Road. Imports from Jizah, City of the Sphinx, and exports destined for it, are charged at 30%.

**Docking Fees:** Ships docking at the main harbor pay 50 dinars a day. Barges using the river wharves pay a meager 2 dinars a day.

**Gate Tax:** Pedestrians are charged one-half dirham, mounts one dirham, and vehicles one dinar.

**Sales Tax:** All general sales carry a 3% surcharge.

## Architecture

Jawf was fortified long before the sphinxes seized control. Buildings were built for defense, with low doors, narrow windows, and thick walls that restrict the amount of internal space. Sphinxes require more living space, and entire neighborhoods were flattened to provide adequate grounds for their palaces and gardens. The displaced population had no choice but to build on top of existing structures, raising the height of the average home to three stories. Although the palaces are grand, they too are veritable fortresses, with high walls and guard towers designed to keep out invaders.

## Major Locales

Detailed below are a number of locations in and around Jawf that the heroes may have cause to visit.

## CITY DISTRICTS

The city houses 125,000 souls, accounting for some 50% of the total population beholden to the pharaoh. Two military districts and the harbor facilities dominate the eastern side. Lower class residential areas are clustered inside the walls, with more salubrious districts nearer to the center.

**Docks:** Jawf sits on the estuary of the River Harad, but its harbor is a natural bay a few hundred yards north of the channel. The two great defence walls curve around this to either side, sundered only by the heavily fortified Sea Gate. Aside from wooden customs posts, there are no buildings in the docks—any structures would impede the defenders and provide cover for attackers.

**Dockside:** Just inside the Sea Gate are rows of warehouses. Among these are nestled taverns and gambling dens, ships chandlers, fish preparation factories, and lower class houses. The shrine to Upuaut is located here.

**Granaries:** Jawf hasn't had to face a serious threat in some 800 years, but the pharaohs prefer to take no chances. The granaries (more akin to armored bunkers) stand near the center of the city. As well as the city granaries, there are storage facilities belonging to the temple of Ashtart and noble houses with remote estates. Security is tight, though it is paladins of Ashtart who patrol here most frequently.

**Military:** Jawf has two military districts—one to the north of the harbor and one to the south. Each has barracks for several thousands troops, as well as armories, granaries, storehouses, workshops, and stables. Each district has a small temple to Karmelos.

**Palace:** A veritable fortress built for practical defence rather than architectural splendor, dominates the center of the city. The pharaohs private quarters are within the central structure, with offices and accommodation spaces around the inside of the walls.

**Riverside:** Trade to and from the settlements upriver is handled in Riverside, which is located up the estuary. Although passage up the estuary is restricted by sunken spikes, no buildings are permitted outside the walls.

## CITY LOCALES

**Altair & Wardah Investigations:** Altair & Wardah are independent investigators. Officially licensed by the city, they track down criminals the watch cannot be bothered to deal with. Sphinxes patronize them when they have problems they would rather keep quiet.

Three weeks ago, the detectives informed their staff they were going out on an investigation. Nothing was listed in the record of current investigations, nor did the pair say where they were headed. They have not been seen since. Since then, three employees have been murdered. The remaining staff, none of whom are investigators, are appealing for help.

**The Arena:** The heart of Jawf's entertainment industry, the arena holds gladiatorial events every week and chariot races every month. Tiered seating can hold up to 40,000 spectators. Each noble house has a private box, as does the pharaoh. Ticket prices range for a quarter-dirham to ten dinars, depending on where one wants to sit. Food vendors sell all manner of hot and cold snacks during contests.

Beneath the arena floor are holding pens for gladiators, orcs, and wild beasts, stables, medical facilities (including a well stocked herbalists), and armories. Located

## GLADIATORS

Whether he is sentenced to the arena by the courts, a captive forced into the role, or a free citizen who volunteers, a gladiator is a slave. Many sphinxes have a stable of gladiators. The gladiator retains his first name, but then adds “abd” (servant of) and the name of the stable owner. If he survives, he might earn a suitable nickname.

## CROWD SUPPORT

Every gladiator has a special skill called Popularity. This represents the gladiator’s popularity with the crowd and his ability to get them on his side.

The skill begins at d4-2—no matter how famous he might have been in his other life, his skill as a gladiator is as yet unknown. For each five victories he earns, the skill automatically increases one die type to a maximum of d12+2. The first increase raises the skill to d4. This is the only way to increase the skill.

At the start of each fight, both gladiators make an opposed Popularity roll. Wild Cards get to add their Wild Die as normal. Whoever rolls highest has the crowd roaring his name, giving him a psychological boost. The victor earns one benny for each success and raise over his opponent’s total. These bennies are lost if unused at the end of the bout, so there is no reason for the gladiator to hoard them.

In the event a gladiator fights in a different city (sphinxes sometimes pit champions against each other to settle disputes), the visitor’s Popularity is lowered by one die for the fight (min. d4-2)—his reputation may be known, but home field advantage counts.

## GLADIATORS AND FIGHTS

There are no specific classifications of gladiators, nor are there any specialized weapons or fighting techniques. Gladiators fight with whatever armor and arms they are given before each bout. In most cases the contests are balanced, but a fighter may find himself facing a stronger or weaker opponent. The use of magic is outlawed unless both gladiators’ master agree to its use.

Although bouts are held weekly, individual gladiators do not fight at every performance. Typically, a gladiator with Popularity d6 or lower fights once a week—he is still an expendable asset at this stage in his career. Those with a rating of d8 to d10 fight only once per month. Over d10, the gladiator is called out only every few months, and more often than not only for special occasions.

## ENTERTAINING THE CROWD

Life in the arena requires a balancing act of staying alive, defeating your opponent, and entertain-

nearby is the gladiator school, where those sent to the arena receive basic training and try to catch the eye of a sphinx in the hope of being taken into his stable, and the stables where professional gladiators live. The latter are more akin to prisons.

Most gladiators who die in the arena are unceremoniously dumped in common graves outside the city—as slaves, they deserve little better. Those honored by their patrons are buried in a special necropolis deep beneath the Arena so that they might continue to serve their master in the Afterlife. Such funerals are rarely elaborate, though the sphinxes do at least provide basic grave goods. Highly honored gladiators are buried in more lavish ceremonies and have grave goods costing many thousands of dinars.

**Food for Forts:** Trail rations typically consist of cured strips of meat, flatbreads, dried cereal, smoked cheese, and preserved fruit. It packs enough nutrition keep a man alive, but it’s fairly bland. Itisham, the owner of the business, sells rations that are extremely flavorsome. Customers can buy standard packs in a variety of flavors or talk to Itisham, who will put together a pack to match their tastes. His rations cost 5 dinars per week. Itisham sells a lot of packs to soldiers who want better rations, hence the shop’s name. As servants of the pharaoh, they receive better rates (3 dinars per week).

**Gates:** Jawf has three gates. The Sea Gate allows ingress from the harbor, the River Gate from the river wharves, and the Caravan Gate marks the official start of the Sphinx Road. All three are protected by great gatehouses, a squad of city guard (who stare at visitors from the safety of the gatehouse), and a handful of watchmen. Only the Caravan Gate is closed at night, though sentries on the other two are doubled as a precaution against surprise attack and to deter criminals.

**Gateway Tavern:** Jawf once boasted a fourth gate. Situated in the northern wall, it was sealed up centuries ago after the then pharaoh decided it served no purpose and was a weak point in the fortifications. Some decades later, an enterprising businessman converted the gatehouse, which was never dismantled, into a tavern. The western tower houses the kitchen, storeroom, and quarters for the owner and his staff. The right tower is a small restaurant. The central span serves as the main drinking hall.

**The Golden House:** Merchants and caravan masters are commonplace in Jawf. The Golden House is a moneylenders catering to those who lack the funds to buy a cargo or wish to expand their business, as well as private citizens who find themselves in need of a little extra cash. The interest rate is 2% (compound) per week. Citizens can also deposit money with the company. It uses this to invest in trade deals. The annual return is 1%, less a 50 dinar handling fee. Investors thus need to deposit over 5000 dinars to see any return on their money.

**The Happy Hippo & The Drunken Camel:** These two inns are located at either end of a street in Dockside. Both cater for low class citizens. The inns are run by brothers, but they recently fell out over an inheritance.



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

Both feel aggrieved and are taking revenge on the other by sabotaging their trade. Things began low key, with bad mouthing the other's drinks and food, slipping rats into the inn, and heckling storytellers. Since then the situation has escalated. Both sides are seeking outsiders to poison the others supplies and rough up customers. If that fails, they are quite prepared to engage in arson. Neither landlord wants the other killed, though—they want them to suffer.

**Heroes Arch:** Marking the entrance to the main temple of Karmelos, Heroes Arch was erected after the war against the jinn to mark the occasion and honor the fallen. Although the great bulk of the army was human, carvings show sphinxes trampling down jinn under the watchful gaze of Karmelos (who is naturally depicted as a sphinx). At the very top are carving showing the victorious sphinxes carrying away treasures taken from the jinn. It has long been known that these valuables never made it to the royal treasury. Whether they were destroyed as being too dangerous, hidden elsewhere (perhaps in the temple of Karmelos, in areas only senior priests can visit), or were fictitious is the source of much heated debate in taverns and coffee houses.

**Jawf Military Academy:** Every officer in Jawf's army, and many sphinxes from other cities, has studied at the prestigious academy. General Harkhuf, well aware that spies study his army's every maneuver in the hope of gaining an advantage in battle, has ordered the dean, Grand Advisor Bara'ah bint Marghub, to solve the problem. Since rooting out every spy would be impossible, Bara'ah has opted to hire adventurers to track down ancient treatises on warfare from old tombs as far afield as Hekata and the sages of Rassilon, as well as spy on the mameluks of Qurqas, City of Slaves. In order that enemy spies are not tipped off, she acts through Majd ibn Thabit, a sage who specializes in military history.

**Special:** Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; **Skills:** Knowledge (Battle); **Edges:** All Leadership Edges.

**Madani's Mounts & Accessories:** Madani ibn Razin sells camels, horses, and standard saddles at 50% of the normal price, though he only ever has one or two beasts in stock at any time. He claims he has a cousin who runs a horse farm, and that his low prices are a sign of his lack of greed. If pressed by suspicious customers, he reluctantly reveals that he has gambling debts and has to sell his stock cheaply. Madani doesn't have gambling debts. He does have a cousin, but he doesn't raise mounts—he steals them, along with whatever saddle and tack they happen to be wearing.

**The Mansion of Hotepkarmwy:** Adventurers looking for work may be pointed toward the mansion of Imy-Er Hotepkarmwy. The sphinx has spent a fortune strengthening the defences of his home and hiring guards in recent weeks. It is fairly obvious something has the sphinx worried, but what could possibly trouble a sphinx has them both curious and slightly fearful.

**Money for Old Rope:** Hamim ibn Hamim is a rope-maker of great skill. His hemp rope can support 400

ing the crowd. No spectator appreciates a gladiator who walks into the arena and slays his opponent within a few seconds. Equally, drawn out engagements are boring.

To simulate feints and circling opponents while making exploratory attacks, no actual combat occurs for the first three rounds. Instead, each combatant makes a Fighting roll to size up his opponent. Each success and raise earns a token. Note that both warriors can earn tokens during the same round. At the end of the third round, whoever has the highest number of tokens earns a bonus benny. This is lost if unused when the fight ends.

A gladiator who performs a Trick or Test of Will and scores a raise earns an additional victory, assuming he survives to fight another day. Only one such bonus can be earned in any one fight, though.

## DEATH

Gladiators are divided into two categories. The first are the professional gladiators. The second are convicts sent to the arena as sword fodder to appease the crowd's bloodlust. The former are expensive assets, and not to be casually thrown away—training takes time and costs money, as does hiring masseurs and healers. The latter exist only to die, though those fortunate to survive invariably become professionals.

When a professional gladiator reaches Incapacitated he remains conscious. However, he is considered disarmed, prone, and at the mercy of his opponent. At this time, the victor looks to the pharaoh (or whoever is sponsoring the games) for a verdict. To decide the verdict, the loser makes a Popularity roll at -2. Bonuses and penalties may be applied depending on how well the gladiator performed. Success means the pharaoh raises a paw with claws retracted, a signal the loser may live to fight another day. Failure means the claws are extended, signaling the end of the gladiator's life. The victor performs a Finishing Move.

## FAME & RELEASE

Despite their status as slaves, popular gladiators can achieve celebrity status and more freedom. They are permitted to move around the city unescorted, are given lavish gifts by their sponsors, and invited to feasts, where they are shown off to the sphinx's peers. When not due to fight in the near future, many serve as bodyguards—their reputation alone can give potential assassins reason to reconsider. Popular gladiators *may* be given their freedom. Most, however, remain as slaves, though in a more exalted position. Some become permanent bodyguards. Others are given roles training the next generation of combatants.

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pounds but weighs only 5 pounds per 5" length. He buys old hemp rope at very competitive prices (20 dinars per 5"), so long as it is in usable condition.

**Rasha's Blades:** Rasha Pashar bint Hannad, a majin jinn blooded, is the best throwing knife maker in Jawf. Although she numbers among the most honored master weaponsmiths, she is a humble woman, content to ply her craft and discuss the finer points of knife throwing with knowledgeable customers over hot coffee. Her finest blades are very expensive (100 dinars) but are balanced for individual customers for improved accuracy and penetration. They have Range 4/8/16 and inflict an additional +1 damage.

**Sulafah's Potions:** A licensed jinn mage, Sulafah's creates and sells alchemical devices. She is a master of both earth and fire magic. During a conversation with a merchant recently returned from the Jade Empire, she learned that the native alchemists produce a variety of devices that produced different effects, such as explosions, smoke, and itching. None of this seemed remarkable to the mage, until she learned that the devices were not magical, and thus could not be detected by touch.

Although it cost her a small fortune, Sulafah has acquired a small quantity of two of the devices. Before investing in more, she wants someone to test them in the field against living opponents.

She has three explosive devices. Each takes the form of a metal sphere with a fuse that must be lit (an action). These have Range 3/6/12, inflict 3d6 damage in a Medium Burst Template and weigh 2 pounds.

She also has two delicate glass spheres filled with itching powder. They have the same range as above but need no activation before use. On impact, the powder fills a Small Burst Template. Any creature in the cloud must make a Vigor roll or be Shaken as their eyes begin to stream and their skin itches. If the device actually struck a creature, rather than just being thrown at the ground, the Vigor roll is made at -2 instead.

Sulafah is prepared to give these to adventurers who visit her shop at no cost, so long as they report back on their effectiveness.

## BURNT KEEP

A mile from the harbor is a small, craggy island, on which stood a small castle. Sixty years ago it was severely damaged by a fire so intense it melted the stones. Since that day, a pall of acrid smoke has hung over the island, despite the flames having died out decades ago. The pharaoh sent a squad to investigate, but they failed to return. He then dispatched a company, but they too vanished. No further official attempts were made, though several bands of adventurers thought they could do better. They too never returned.

What caused the fire and what killed the fire is open to little debate—pretty much everyone agrees the castle was attacked by a greater ifrit. This may be true, but none can yet answer the questions why it destroyed the fort and why it has done nothing but kill anyone who lands

there. Many mariners and fishermen claim to have witnessed flame-shrouded skeletons patrolling the walls at night, but sailors are a superstitious bunch.

## PYRAMIDIOS

**Population:** 260

**Ruler:** Imy-Er Niumateped

**Religion:** Faithful (Ashtart)

**Imports:** None of note

**Exports:** Ancient artifacts, crops

Pyramidios is one of dozens of small farming communities on the southern bank of the River Harad. On paper, it has little to interest visitors—it buys only common goods, such as pottery and metalware, and exports nothing but cereal and vegetable crops.

Those who bother to make the long trip are amazed by what they see. Instead of conventional houses, the villagers live inside small, steep-sided pyramids. These are not recent constructions, but ancient tombs long plundered of their valuables and occupants. Centuries of use as habitation has destroyed any paintings that might once have decorated the burial chamber, and any carvings have long since been rubbed away. Locals claim they are descended from Assarites, and that the tombs are those of their ancestors. So numerous are the pyramids that each holds just a single family in its single chamber, and there are still many dozens unoccupied.

Somewhere nearby lies a hidden necropolis. Evidence of its existence comes in the form of silver and gold funeral goods the locals sell to visiting merchants. The imy-er is not ignorant of the illicit trade. So long as the peasants hand over 20% of their earnings he lets them get on with their tomb robbing unimpeded.

## PERSONS OF NOTE

Described below are a few of the city's many denizens the heroes may encounter while exploring the city.

## THE BEAST

Famous gladiators make their name by giving the crowd what they crave—entertainment. The Beast is infamous, having earned his reputation for his bloodthirstiness. A hyaenidae, the Beasts' muscles are so big that he looks deformed. His appearance is gruesome—scars cover his head and arms, and he files his teeth and claws to sharp points. This doesn't increase their effectiveness as weapons, but it does make him very intimidating.

The Beast has earned the right to wander the city unscored, and only an idiot stands in his path. Even the city guard step aside and nod politely as he stomps through the streets. Peasants who stand in his way often end up dead, but the watch turns a blind eye, even if a patrol witnesses the murder—not only is the Beast considered to be psychotic, but he is in the pharaoh's gladiator stable.



## JIZAH

### City of the Sphinx

For untold thousands of years Jizah basked in the blessing of Shamash, lord of the sun and guardian of cosmic order, its golden spires intended to be an earthly representation of the sun god's celestial palace. In just 30 years, Pharaoh Horhotep has transformed the radiant city into a cesspit of misery and oppression. The sun still shines on Jizah, but the light within the city burns dim.

### Social Hierarchy

Pharaoh Horhotep takes his position as divine representative of Shamash incarnate very seriously. His monumental pyramid is intended to mark not only his earthly position as pharaoh of Jizah and inheritor of Hamapta's throne, for it was from here the great sphinx ruled, but also his divine nature. Whether he is a zealot or insane no long matters to his people. Horhotep has made it known to his people that on his death his soul will ascend to the heavens, whereupon it will attain a favored position in Shamash's celestial court. From there he will rule over Jizah eternally as its patron deity. Given his recent behavior, most consider this an undesirable destiny.

Unbeknownst to his people, Horhotep intends to live on as a living god, not just a spiritual beings. Through trusted agents, he hires adventurers to scour the ruins of Hekata for the secrets of the mummification rituals that created Apophis, the first withered pharaoh. None have yet succeeded, and those few who have returned have been silenced to ensure no word of their quest leaks out, lest it somehow be traced back to Horhotep.

Ankhnes-Pepi, pharaoh's conniving daughter, has watched the kingdom she will one day inherit slide ever closer toward extinction. A senior priest of Shamash, she knows her plan is more than earthly treason—to strike against her father would be symbolic of attacking Shamash directly, for in the eyes of the sphinxes and the people they are one and the same. She has convinced herself that her father has tipped the balance of chaos and order too far in the wrong direction, and that striking him down would return the balance to normal. Thus, morally and spiritually, it is the right thing to do. It is a weak argument, but it has soothed her conscience, which whispered that she has become an agent of Iblis seeking to plunge the city into utter darkness.

Unlike their peers in other cities, the noble houses of Jizah were never independently wealthy. As Shamash's representative and absolute ruler, Horhotep kept them in line through issuing annual stipends. The allocations were enough to keep them largely content, but not

enough for them to grow truly rich. Those who grovelled and toadied up to pharaoh in court were duly rewarded, but most houses chose to supplement their income by siphoning funds from the temples they controlled.

While they accepted their lot with overt good grace and covert grumbles, they assumed they would be spared hardship when Horhotep announced his grand project. Instead, pharaoh has severely cut back on their stipends as goods and funds are diverted to the building project, reducing them to a state of near poverty (by the sphinxes' definition of the word).

Among the lesser races, one's social class has ceased to have much meaning. Shortages have become so severe that even those with influence and money struggle to survive. For most, the only way to survive is begging, selling what few possessions they own, and stealing. Those with steady work and regular wages are looked upon by their neighbors with a mix of envy and hatred, for while they may not have money to spend on luxuries, they at least can afford to purchase what little food reaches the markets. As the situation worsens, so people are turning more insular and forgetting their duty to be charitable.

Even the clergy is suffering. Reduced incomes among the workers means reduced tithes, and what little is handed over to the cults barely supports existing personnel and businesses. For those who know the stories of the jinn, it seems the cruel overlords have returned in the guise of sphinxes.

### Education

In the last three decades, education among the lesser races has virtually ceased to exist. Even those who can still afford to send their children to school have abandoned the notion. Planning for the future has been replaced with the daily struggle to survive, with children sent out to beg, scavenge, or steal. In extreme cases, children approaching adulthood are sold to the city to work on the pyramid. Exorbitant food prices means the money does not last long, but few in Jizah look beyond the dawn of the next day. Literacy rates have plummeted to single percentage points, hampering the city's bureaucracy as well as many businesses. By the time the pyramid is finished, literacy and education are likely to be the exclusive preserve of the sphinxes.

The city has two universities. The University of Jizah is a basic school. The University of the Radiant Heavens specializes in theology and heraldry. Attendance at the latter was near compulsory for clerics in the past, espe-

## RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in Jizah.

\* **Barter:** There are few coins left in circulation. Heroes looking to sell war booty or buy equipment from nomadic wanderers will need to accept or offer trade goods if they hope to strike any kind of deal. The GM should not demand the heroes keep a detailed list of their exact trade goods. A hero who spends 100 dinars on trade goods need only record "trade goods: 100 d" on his character sheet, leaving the exact nature of the goods flexible. He may then spend the trade goods as if it were coin in Jizah. For convenience, every 5 dinars of trade goods weighs 2 pounds.

\* **Buying & Selling:** Except where noted elsewhere, only cheap meals and rations are available, and they cost 20 times normal. All other goods cost five times normal. Prices for food and common equipment on the black market are 20% lower than normal, but supplies are limited and finding the thieves' guild is not easy. Again, barring specific locales, heroes selling goods receive 5% or 15%. Heroes with the Expert Hagglers Edge (see *Realm Guide #13*) receive 15% or 30%.

\* **Disease:** Once a week, heroes must make a Vigor roll or contract Apsu's Curse (see *Realm Guide #15*).

\* **Infected Wounds:** A character who receives a wound that is not treated within 10 minutes must make a Vigor roll. With failure, the wound becomes infected. The character is Fatigued until all his current wounds are healed. Alternately, he may take a five-day course of antibiotics. This cures the infection and removes the Fatigue.

\* **Native Heroes I:** Characters born in Jizah cannot begin play with the Rich Edge, nor can they use points from Hindrances to boost their starting income.

\* **Native Heroes II:** A native character may choose to be a graduate of *one* of the advanced universities. Each grants certain benefits, as listed below, but only during character generation and the hero must meet all other requirements. Unless otherwise stated, these benefits are only open to heroes with Smarts d8+ or Arcane Background (Miracles).

**Entertainers:** The hero can reduce one trait requirement by one die type when taking Acrobat or Storyteller, or (if he has the Arcane Background) take Dervish at d6. However, he begins with a debt of 500 dinars.

**Radiant Heavens:** For one skill point, the hero begins with Knowledge (Heraldry) and Knowledge (Religion) d4, or one of the skills at d6.

\* **Rats:** For each day spent on the streets, the characters must make a Vigor roll to suffer a level of Fatigue (to a maximum of Exhausted) as if from Bumps & Bruises due to numerous rat bites.

\* **Slaves:** Slave traders sell their captives directly to pharaoh, and all criminals sentenced in Jizah automatically become Horhotep's property. Thus, there are no slaves for sale in Jizah.

cially those of Shamash, but these days the classrooms are mostly empty. Many younger clerics struggle to read the holy texts due to poor education, and those who could once look forward to receiving advanced tuition are instead put to work for the good of the cult's income rather than sitting idly in classrooms.

A third educational establishment exists—the School of Entertainers. Here students learn common forms of entertainment, such as tumbling, juggling, fire-breathing, musical instruments, singing, and storytelling. The School demands no fees. Instead, students must sign contracts requiring them to hand over 50% of their earnings until the cost of their education is met. Given that failing to comply results in becoming a debtor, and thus a punishment of slavery, few renege.

## Religion

The cult of Shamash has held power in Jizah for over two millennia under the sphinxes, and for an unknown age before that. Though strict, it was regarded as ensuring moral righteousness and celestial balance. Today, it is universally despised as the iron hand of the despot pharaoh. Even the noble sphinxes' reputations have suffered, for they have largely failed to speak out against the cruelty and excesses saddled upon the people. Such is the dislike of the cult that citizens attend temple and pay tithes only because of the threat of enslavement. Few clerics walk through the streets without miracles in place and weapons drawn, for they have become targets for the peoples' growing anger.

Although responsible for passing sentences, the cult of Tammuz has managed to weather the storm without serious backlash. In a cynical move to curry favor with the locals and make the cult of Shamash look even worse, the sar-nesu publicly demanded that pharaoh allow the cult to conduct fair trials, in accordance with religious scripture. The pharaoh reminded the cult that Shamash, and thus he, makes the laws, and that the cult of Tammuz merely ensures they are carried out.

Marqod's clerics work hard to alleviate the suffering of the people, but they are few in number and their resources are limited. Miracles are cast to the point clerics collapse from exhaustion, but it would be easier to stop the sun moving through the heavens than cure every festering injury or rat bite (not to mention crushed limbs and torn flesh among the slaves) or remove traces of disease before the contagion takes hold.

The cult has drawn open criticism from concentrating its efforts on the slaves working on the pyramid rather than the beleaguered city. The populace see this as open approval of and support for the pharaoh's madness. The clergy, however, endeavor to keep the slaves fit and healthy in the vain hope the pyramid will be finished ahead of time, thus ending the city's torment sooner.

Most other cults have lost influence, status, and wealth since work on the pyramid began. Few are blamed direct-



ly for the city's problems, though. The concept of Maat, or universal balance (see *Realm Guide #20*), is followed by the Faithful of the Kingdoms just as it is elsewhere. In Jizah, citizens are convinced that the balance has tipped in favor of chaos, bringing with it increased suffering and disorder. The cause of the disorder is Horhotep.

Forced clearances in rural areas and a string of failed harvests has stripped the cult of Ashtart of both followers and income. "Freed" from the task of maintaining and protecting the fields, the clerics (along with those of other faiths who know *feast*) have been conscripted to work for the city. Assigned to work camps, they toil to keep the army of slaves fed with little reward save the knowledge they are carrying out Horhotep's will.

Life in Jizah no longer brings with it any degree of pleasure, nor does luck seem to favor the people. Clerics of Sekhmet, minor goddess of rodent extermination (see *Realm Guide #9*), are much maligned for failing to stem the scurrying tide of rats that consumes food and spreads disease in every quarter of the city.

Of all the cults, it is that of Iblis that has benefitted most. With the scales tipped heavily in his favor, many have decided that it is better to side with the victor than cling hopelessly to gods who provide little or no succor. Few attend any shrine or temple, though several exist, preferring instead to whisper prayers as night falls and the hand of chaos grips tighter. Those who know of the cult's greater theology believe that it is Baalzebul, minor god of disease, and Birdu, minor god of domination (see *Realm Guide #8* for both) that now hold true spiritual power in Jizah.

## LOCAL FESTIVALS

The citizens of Jizah have little to celebrate. Religious festivals are still held regularly, but temple attendances are down, and most who do attend have no joy in the hearts.

## Military

Once seen as the defenders of the Kingdom, the army is now viewed as just another tool in Horhotep's oppression of the masses. Jawf, City of War, pays little attention to the size of its neighbor's army. While the two forces are roughly equal in numbers, the military of Jizah is half-starved, badly trained, ill disciplined, and poorly equipped—it is a rabble of thugs rather than a serious fighting force. Were a conflict between the two cities to break out, Jawf is certain half their enemy would flee rather than fight.

### ARMY

Despite the broken economy, Horhotep maintains an impressive army—seven regiments of light infantry (with two archer companies per regiment) and four battalions of light cavalry.

This force is more than enough to secure the borders, protect the trade routes, and eradicate the growing number of bandits, if it had the orders and inclination to act, that is. Horhotep, however, has ordered them to focus on guarding the many work camps, the goldsmithing complex, and the quarries. The army has a well deserved reputation for brutality and corruption. With their pay and rations cut, many soldiers have resorted to taking food from the slaves. More than a few attacks against caravans are not the work of bandits, but of soldiers.

One regiment and one battalion has been assigned to round up rural settlers (and anyone else it can grab) for the work gangs. Of all the units, they are the most hated. As well as shackling peasants, they plunder their homes. In theory, the possessions of the slaves are supposed to be taken to Jizah and sold, with the profits going toward the cost of the pyramid. Every citizen knows the goods are sold in the markets for high prices and the money kept by the soldiers.

The city guard has been reduced to just four companies of medium infantry, their ranks stripped in order to bolster the watch. Their primary role is no longer to man the walls, but to crush food riots with whatever force is deemed necessary.

Horhotep is protected by the Divine Light, a body-guard numbering three companies of medium infantry. Of these, his most trusted unit is a single squad (the Radiant Knights) comprised entirely of paladins of Shamash. Fanatically loyal to the pharaoh, who has promised they will serve at his side throughout eternity, ten are never out of his presence.

### NAVY

Jizah's navy once numbered ten light warships. This is hardly a large number, but Jizah has no coast and only a small navigable stretch of the River Harad. Of these, four ships mutinied and turned to piracy, attacking the few grain barges that ply the waters with near impunity.

## Law & Order

Things inside the city are little better than outside in terms of lawlessness—citizens murder each other over a scrap of bread or shred of meat and thefts have risen dramatically. The watch, recently expanded to six companies, has strict orders to arrest any criminals and haul them to court. Those with anything left of value can pay a bribe to have the matter dropped, but the watchmen are just as destitute and the payments they demand are above the ability of many to pay.

At night, the watch ceases to exist. Attacks against them have risen, as has the theft of their arms and armor. Fearful of their lives, they remain in their stations, listening to the cries for help and shouts of murder impassively. In the morning, they know that there will be more bodies on the streets and fewer mouths to feed.

## NEW EDGES

### BOUNTY HUNTER (PROF)

**Requirements:** Novice, Spirit d6+, Notice d6+, Streetwise d6+, Tracking d6+

Not every criminal who evades or escapes captivity attracts the attentions of a bounty hunter—that fate is normally reserved for those who committed truly heinous crimes or who acted against a person or organization with money and/or influence. Bounty hunters are paid for results and are relentless in their pursuit of wanted felons. Whether they bring the criminal back dead or alive depends as much on the bounty hunter's own code of ethics as it does the nature of the bounty.

The character has +2 to Streetwise and Tracking rolls, as well as to Notice rolls when trying to detect wanted criminals.

### CONTORTIONIST (PROF)

**Requirements:** Novice, Agility d8+

The character may have a slight build, be naturally supple, or possess double-jointed limbs. However he does it, he is adept at squeezing through small gaps and contorting his limbs in ways that make others wince.

The hero has +1 to make, maintain, and escape grapples. He gains a +2 bonus to slip out of bonds (when such is allowed), including *entangle*. When trying to navigate tight squeezes (see adventure *NF3: Darkness at Darshab*) he treats his effective Size as one level lower.

### MASTER OF KNIVES (COMBAT)

**Requirements:** Novice, Fighting d8+, Throwing d8+

The character has learned to throw a dagger with deadly accuracy and at increased range.

The hero increases the range of a throwing dagger by his Rank (Novice being 1, Seasoned 2, and so on). So at Seasoned, for instance, his knife has Range 5/10/20. In addition, throwing knives in the hands of the master inflict Str+d6 damage at Short range.

Widespread poverty has not hampered the Gilded Shadows, the local thieves' guild. While their traditional revenue streams have all but ceased to exist, the guild has survived by adapting. Normally, shortages are an opportunity to charge high prices for smuggled goods. When the guildmaster ordered that the amassed fortune be spent on buying food and basic wares that would be sold for little more than cost, many of his brethren thought he had lost his mind. True, the scheme has not increased their wealth much, but it has

made them the heroes of the people. Even so, the guild must operate cautiously—citizens are rewarded with extra food for handing in thieves, and in Jizah even a bowl of soup is enough to sway a man into betraying the guild.

While the guild has given up burglary, a new power has filled the vacuum. In a bid to secure new workers, pharaoh ordered his army to capture orcs and ogres (as well as giants). Dozens of orcs have escaped captivity. Some fled back to their homes, but others disappeared inside the city, where they have formed the Eaters of the Weak, a violent guild that preys on anyone who has something they want.

The Brotherhood of Unfortunate Souls, always busy in the Kingdoms due to sphinx oppression, is pressed to breaking point. Their work is made more difficult by the abject poverty, for neighbors turn upon neighbors for a scrap of food, and the rule of might has replaced social order on the streets. The organization has no doubt who is to blame, of course, and attacks upon tax collectors and watch patrols continue to rise.

That most crimes are punishable by slavery is not unusual in the Kingdoms. What makes them draconic is that slavery is for life or until the completion of the pyramid, whichever comes first, with no hope of freedom save through death. Sadly, freedom comes all too soon for many.

The most logical thing for citizens to do is emigrate. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. In a bid to prevent mass migration, Horhotep passed a law forbidding anyone to take more than one day's worth of food and water, 100 dinars in coin, or any home furnishings beyond the city gates. Those caught trying to escape are arrested and duly punished. Visiting merchants are exempt, but every caravan member or mariner must register on entering the city, whereupon he is issued a numbered token and his details recorded. On leaving, he must hand in his token and give his name.

## Trade & Tribute

The construction of Horhotep's pyramid has been an unmitigated disaster for the city. Its sheer scale means it would have brought hardship to Jizah, but the time frame for completion, the desire to have its entire surface plated in gold, and the quantity of grave goods requested have shattered the economy, possibly beyond hope of recovery.

Virtually every dinar the city (and thus Horhotep) earns is spent on importing fresh slaves and great quantities of stone. Most pyramid building cultures used sandstone for the core, but pharaoh has seen the results of time and wind on older structures, and he has no wish for his eternal resting place to crumble to dust. Instead, he has ordered the outermost layers be made of granite, a resource Jizah lacks.

During the first decade or so, sandstone was excavated from the ground close to the construction site.



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

This meant the lower levels were completed relatively quickly. These quarries are now exhausted. New quarries have been opened further afield, but the distances involved means it takes longer to haul finished stones to the construction site, placing an added burden on the already overworked slaves and causing delays the pharaoh refuses to tolerate.

No one knows for sure the exact quantity of grave goods being stockpiled by pharaoh. Local craftsmen, who once exported their wares for good money, are now forced to sell them to pharaoh for a price that barely covers the material cost, yet alone the man-hours invested in their making. Huge sums are spent importing yet more goods, especially exotic ones made of ivory and precious metals. For these, pharaoh must pay the price the merchants demand, and their prices rise year on year.

Although it is not listed on the city's stat block, Jizah imports sizeable quantities of food. Unfortunately, many shipments are stolen by bandits. What gets through is primarily destined for the sphinx elite. The city grows its own food, but several failed harvests and enforced clearing of villages have destroyed the industry. Once fertile fields are choked with weeds, the soil barren due to lack of fertilizer, the irrigation channels swallowed by the encroaching desert.

The trade road, known locally as the Golden Road until it reaches the Sphinx Road, is beset by bandits, as is much of the countryside. Caravans still come to Jizah, for pharaoh has money to spend, but they require extra guards. This added financial burden is covered by increasing the cost of the goods they transport.

## COINAGE

Horhotep has ceased minting coins so the precious metal can be used for his grave goods. As coins are collected by tax collectors, they too are minted down. As a result, coins are growing rarer on the streets and bartering has become the norm (along with begging and stealing). Foreign coins are accepted, but few are seen. With little of value to buy, merchants prefer to barter an exchange of goods. The local coins still in circulation are the one dinar gold Royal and one dirham silver Noble. Smaller coins have ceased to be of any use—even a cup of coffee costs several dirhams these days.

## LOCAL TAXES

Harsh taxation and low wages has driven many into financial ruin. A cruel downside to this is that as tax revenue drops, so pharaoh increases the burden to maintain his income. Lesser races are lucky if they keep 20% of their annual income, and even the sphinxes have seen their stipends cut by 50%. Even those with no income are not spared taxation—every citizen must pay a fixed sum of 50 dinars toward the cost of the pyramid every year. Tax collectors take whatever a family has left, ordering those who still fall short to be arrested for debt. Visitors to the city are also subject to a variety of taxes.

**Arms & Armament Duty:** A tax of 10% of the value of any armor and weapons carried into the city is levied at the gates. Visitors have the option of leaving any items they do not wish to pay for at the gate, but do so at their own risk. Most quickly vanish onto the black market.

**Docking Fees:** What few ships call at the wharves are charged 20 dinars per day. Captains not recognized by officials are charged as much as the bureaucrats thinks they can get away with. Everything over 20 dinars goes into their pockets.

**Pyramid Tax:** Visitors to Jizah are not spared honoring the pharaoh by contributing to his tomb's construction. A charge equal to 20% of the value of all coins and gems brought into the city is levied each and every time one passes through a gate. Much of this never makes it to the treasury—it is claimed by the city watch.

## Architecture

Outside of the Kingdoms and bordering areas, storytellers speak of Jizah in awe, telling enraptured audience of its gold-coated walls and streets. Alas for those who come to marvel, the stories are false, though not without foundation. In reality, the "gold" is just yellow sandstone, favored because of its golden hue. Little gold exists in Jizah anymore. Even the temples of Shamash have been plundered on pharaoh's orders.

The palaces of the sphinxes are worthy of mention. Each household makes its home atop a low truncated pyramid faced with golden sandstone. The summits are reached only by a single set of steep steps. At the top are varying numbers of buildings devoted to living space for the sphinxes. Servants' quarters, storage, kitchens, and other such areas are located inside the pyramids. Before the rise of the sphinxes, these grandiose buildings were actually temples, on whose summits ceremonies to honor Shamash were carried out. Arranged in an east-west line that stretches across the length of the city, each was dedicated to one specific aspect of the sun.

Indeed, the city was built as a vast temple complex. The pyramids have huge footprints and dominate the center of the city. Crowded around them are rows of small houses once inhabited by workers and craftsmen essential to the temples' upkeep. Outside what is now the noble district, the city is claustrophobic.

The general look is one of decay. Nothing has been spent on city maintenance in 30 years, and even the wealthiest citizen has more important things to spend his money on than the upkeep on his home.

## Major Locales

Detailed below are a number of locations in and around Jizah that the heroes may have cause to visit should they come to the destitute city.

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## CITY DISTRICTS

The population within the city walls is 184,000 (70% of the greater population). Such has been the scale of deaths due to starvation and violence, not to mention slavery handed out by the courts, that the total is down 50,000 on three decades ago, when Horhotep began erecting his tomb. Roughly 60,000 people, a number that exceeds the internal population of some great cities, currently labor as slaves in the quarries and building the massive monument. The city is split in two by a wide, paved road, the Highway of the Sun, that runs directly below the line of pyramid-temples.

**Civic:** Located directly opposite the palace, on the south side of the Highway of the Sun, are various bureaucratic offices, including the courthouse. Much of the bureaucracy is now concerned with the construction of pharaoh's pyramid.

**Docks:** The wharves, which lie outside the southern walls, are a ghost town, the empty warehouses and granaries a sign of the times, the few taverns still in business patronized only by visitors who have no wish to witness the death, disease, and vermin that await inside the gates. Only the fishing trade prospers, but fishermen who land their catch here risk their lives from gangs of hungry citizens awaiting their arrival.

**Noble:** There are two noble district—five pyramids stand east of the pharaoh's palace and five to the west. At the southern side of each, facing the Highway of the Gods, stand the great temples and shrines of each noble house's patron deity.

**Palace:** Horhotep's palace is the central structure in the line of pyramids, and thus splits the Noble District into an east and west half. It was once was a temple honoring the noon sun. With no room on top for civic buildings, the palace is merely the pharaoh's residence, and thus off limits to most visitors. The main temple of Shamash is located at its southern base.

## CITY LOCALES

**Azzam's Pawnshop:** Hardship is Azzam's bread and butter. The greedy merchant offers secured loans, taking personal possessions as collateral. He offers just 10% of an item's true value (25% on a raise on a Streetwise roll) in return for hard coin. If the loan, plus 100% interest, is not repaid in three months, Azzam becomes the legal guardian of the pawned item. He sells the goods at three times the normal value. Despite these rates, he is doing a good trade—people need money, and those with money find he is cheaper than other shops. Of course, everything he sells is secondhand, and thus the quality varies from barely serviceable to pristine.

Azzam stocks every item in the Land of Fire armor, melee and ranged weapons, ammunition, clothing, common goods, and unusual goods lists. He even has a few chariots stored away. Not every item he sells is legal—among his special wares are khem-hekau texts, alchemical devices, and spirit relics.

The shop is a fortress, with iron bars on the winds, a reinforced door, well paid mercenaries, and *glyphs* in place to protect not only his stock, but his haul of coins.

**The Bazaar:** Since the pharaoh ordered craftsmen to provide copious quantities of goods for his tomb the amount and variety of goods on sale has dropped considerably. Inflation, caused mainly by high food prices, makes even common goods beyond the reach of the average citizen. Many of the stalls have gone, replaced by desperate citizens hoping to raise a few coins by selling their personal possessions. There are bargains to be had, but none have anything of true value (such objects are either being stashed away for truly desperate times or were sold first).

Visitors to the bazaar are quickly swamped by a host of filthy beggars and children. Some of the latter have things to sell, but these are either stolen, worthless trinkets, or thoroughly unsavory (such as barely cooked rat on a stick flavored with herbs to disguise the awful taste of the semi-rotten flesh).

**City Walls:** The city walls are 40 feet thick. The outer and inner ten feet are solid blocks of sandstone filled with packed earth and rubble. Desperate for material for his tomb, Horhotep ordered much of the outer facing stones removed. This has allowed the rubble to spill out, weakening the walls' effectiveness as fortifications.

**Gates:** Jizah has four gates. At the eastern end of the Highway of the Sun is the Gate of Dawn. At its western end is the Gate of Dusk. The southern wall is breached by the Gate of Noon, while the Gate of Shadows lies to the north. Each dawn, clerics of Shamash open the gates as part of their daily rituals. At dusk, they perform their farewell rituals as they close the gates.

**Golden Park:** Located among the pyramid homes of the noble sphinxes, this public garden is golden in name only. The statues of previous pharaohs were once coated in gold, but this was crudely torn away for use in the pyramid. Much of the grass is gone, taken by desperate peasants for food, and the soil has turned to dust. In recent times it has been used as a makeshift cemetery for those too poor to afford a proper burial.

In the middle is a large marble fountain. It is home to six lesser marids who take the form of mermaids. Captured centuries ago and brought to Jizah as an amusement for the then pharaoh, all they want is to be returned to their briny home. They have nothing to offer save their friendship. To a mariner in trouble, this may be worth its weight in gold.

**Library of Stone:** The sphinxes worked hard to eradicate all knowledge of the Assarites, Haranites, and Hittari, but they have not been entirely successful. On occasion, a stone tablet inscribed in one of the lost cultures' languages finds its way onto the black market. Rumors abound that somewhere in the city is a haul of historical documents, a treasure known as the Stone Library. Its value in monetary terms is insignificant compared to its historical importance.

The most likely location is beneath one of the sphinxes' pyramid homes. Which one is open to debate, for while Qedeshet is the logical choice, he was not worshipped



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

before the rise of the sphinxes. Many agree that when the sphinxes began their eradication of the ancient cultures the tablets were secured away in a secret chamber in the sewers before they could be destroyed.

**Seluku and Sululi:** Seluku (male hyaenidae) and Sululi (female hyaenidae) are husband and wife bounty hunters who specialize in the recovery of escaped slaves. Their services do not come cheap (25% of the slave's value), but they have a very good success rate.

**School of Entertainers:** Each month, graduates of the school, and non-students who pay a 10 dinar entry fee, gather to show off their skills. Admission is one dirham, but few citizens can afford even this paltry sum. Much of the audience is made up of outsiders and agents of the sphinxes. The latter are here as talent scouts, for their masters always seek new entertainment to help alleviate their boredom. Entertainers who do especially well are offered employment. Pay rates are low, but as a servant the entertainer will at least be fed and housed.

The school also trains dervish mages, who are popular with sphinxes for their elaborate, magically-enhanced dances. Their rates of pay are considerably higher than those of mundane performers.

**Special:** Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; **Skills:** Dervish, Knowledge (Folklore); **Edges:** Acrobat, Contortionist (see p. 36), Storyteller.

**The Sewers:** Jizah's dark sewers are home to mud-larks, who trawl through the detritus for dropped coins, small items of jewelry, and other treasures. The work is smelly, exposes one to disease, and brings one into often violent confrontation with fellow scavengers. As well as hordes of normal rats, there is a growing number of giant rats looking for an easy meal.

**The Slaughterhouse:** Recently fortified and protected by armed guards to safeguard it from looters, the slaughterhouse continues to sell meat. Rumors abound some of the meat once walked on two legs, but in a city where citizens are forced to eat rats and cannibalism is only a poor harvest away, few care.

The slaughterhouse is the headquarters of the cult of Zaalabar (see sidebar), the demon lord of fortune. The security and guards are just as much to protect the cult as the meat stores. Still small enough to escape notice at present, the cult is steadily growing—desperate citizens are prepared to take any steps that might bring them a little luck, especially if that luck comes in the form of food or avoiding the watch. Some of the meat on sale is indeed human, butchered from the unfortunate souls the foul prince demands as sacrifices in return for granting his followers brief favors.

**Temple of Marqod:** With the clergy now working at the pyramid construction site, provision of healing services has been left to novices, clerics yet to take holy vows (Healing d4, no miracles). While it still operates as a hospital, much of the precinct has been converted to a soup kitchen, where the poor can receive a hot bowl of thin soup and sliver of hard bread. Paladins maintain a constant vigil on the gates so as to prevent desperate crowds storming the precinct and looting the food stores.

## ZAALABAR, DEMON PRINCE

**Note:** Information on demon lords, demonists, and dark pacts, along with stats for a variety of demons, can be found in *Region Guide #45: The Abyss*.

**Titles:** Master of Fortune, Granter of Favors, Tipper of the Balance, The Fortuitous One.

**Aspects:** Fortune.

**Symbol:** Set of scales tipped to the right.

**Signature Spell:** None.

**Powers:** None.

**Special:** Zaalabar does not grant his followers any spells. Those who seek his favor must sacrifice a living creature. At first, these offerings can be mundane animals. After a number of sacrifices equal to his Spirit die, the petitioner must sacrifice sentient creatures to receive a boon. In return for each sacrifice, the follower gains a one-use benny. Sacrifices must be made on nights of the new moon, and no more than two sacrifices per month are permitted.

**Dark Pact:** Demonists subservient to Zaalabar may take the Luck and Great Luck Edges as a dark pact. However, the demonist quickly comes to believe he is nigh on indestructible thanks to his good fortune. He gains the Overconfident Hindrance as well.

**Description:** Zaalabar is usually depicted as a smiling human male holding a pair of dice in his open left palm. The dice both show sixes. His right hand holds a pair of scales weighted to the right from the viewer's point of view (the traditional side where coins are placed during transactions).

Worshippers are found across all social scales. From the lowliest beggar who simply seeks a little good fortune in an otherwise miserable life to merchant-princes who seek to boost their profits through finding the right goods at the best price, all are willing to sacrifice the lives of other creatures to receive the demon prince's boon.

Tamarni's cult, which accepts that there must be balance in fortune in order for the universe to run smoothly, is the mortal enemy of Zaalabar's worshippers.

**University of the Radiant Heavens:** On the day the pharaoh began constructing his tomb, the dean of the university conducted an astrological reading. The omens were especially bad, with predictions the city would fall to darkness the moment the solid gold capstone was placed at the summit. A loyal servant, he duly brought this to Horhotep's attention, but was summarily dismissed from court and branded a charlatan. Since then, he has kept an ear to the ground for anything unusual. He has recently learned that a dozen or more adventuring parties have left Jizah in the last 30 years bound for accursed Hekata. He does not yet have all the pieces of the puzzle, but he suspects the omen and the adventurers are somehow related.

**Special:** Students must be able to speak and read/

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write Sphinx; *Skills*: Knowledge (Heraldry), Knowledge (Religion); *Edges*: Scholar (only applies to skills taught at the university).

**The Vault:** All know that Horhotep has a vault containing his amassed grave goods, but its location is a mystery. Some claim it lies beneath his palace. Others argue that it lies far from the city. Regardless, there is little argue as to its general contents—enough wealth to restore life to Jizah in a heartbeat. Among the rumored treasures stored there are true relics captured from the jinn and Hekatic armies and holy relics plundered from the temple of Shamash. There is little doubt that Horhotep has spared no expense on security, for he covets even the lowliest item among its many mundane objects.

**Yoto Lenghi's:** Some citizens can afford to eat out, and the restaurant of Yoto Lenghi, an emigre from the distant City-State of Balkhand, is among the most popular. He serves cheap, average, and expensive meals at just ten times normal prices, a bargain in modern Jizah. His secret is a mix of using the cheapest ingredients (especially rats and insects) and his natural ability to turn them into something both hearty and flavorful. Such is the popularity of the eatery that, barring a bribe, there is a two week waiting list for a table.

## THE KING'S BARGE

Upriver from Jizah, the banks of the River Harad are swathed in barren sand. A caravan lost in a sandstorm reported spying the stern of a huge barge protruding from the sands. Driven away by the fierce winds, they have no idea exactly where it lies, save that it is somewhere where no river now flows.

The tale fired popular imagination. Many said the vessel was a funeral barge carrying an ancient king and his rich grave goods to his distant tomb in the mountains. Likely it was on a minor channel of the Harad, one now swallowed by the sand, when it was engulfed by a sandstorm. A few suggest the barge, which by all accounts is immense, was actually carrying Hamapta's body to his final resting place, and thus his tomb is not located near Lost Tomb Oasis. Others argue it was a Hekatic trading vessel, sailing along a forgotten canal that linked the Rivers Ankh and Harad in ancient times.

Pharaoh and the noble sphinxes have all heard the rumors. While Horhotep has publicly announced he is prepared to offer 20% of any treasure uncovered and honor noble titles to adventurers willing to investigate and loot the barge, the nobles sphinxes are covertly planning their own raiding parties.

## PYRAMID CONSTRUCTION SITE

Although only half finished, and with none of the gold outer casing yet in place, Hothotep's pyramid is impressive to behold. When completed, it will be the largest structure ever raised in Al-Shirkuh, a lasting testament to the tyranny and authority of one fanatical sphinx, and an eternal monument to the tens of thousands of slaves who

died during its construction. Day and night, an army of slaves scurries across its surface like ants, dragging heavy blocks of stone into place to the beat of drums and crack of whips. All the while, armed guards keep a steely eye on the slaves to prevent escape attempts.

Horhotep knew that the wealth he intended to carry with him to the Afterlife would make his tomb a target for every thief in Al-Shirkuh, and likely lands beyond. To ensure they remained by his side for eternity, he ordered a variety of mundane and magical traps be installed. Only one man, the chief architect, knows their type and location, and his tongue has been cut out and his hands severed to prevent him passing on the information. When he dies, his body and possessions will be destroyed so as to prevent thieves using *gravespeak* to interrogate his spirit. Except for him and Horhotep, any who enter the interior of the pyramid must be blindfolded. Golems answerable only to pharaoh prowl the corridor, their orders to slay anyone who defies Horhotep's order.

## THE TWELVE TOMBS

Standing amid the abandoned farmland are twelve tombs. Arranged at equal points along the perimeter of a circle 30 miles in diameter, the unadorned black edifices are greatly feared by the locals. Ten of the tombs are open. Nothing has ever been discovered inside the small chamber at the heart of each tomb—no engravings, no treasure, no burials.

Locals insist that no robbers have ever desecrated the tombs. Rather, each opened of its own accord at some point in history. Every time a tomb opened, the land was struck by great tragedy. The last tomb opened 31 years ago, heralding the construction of Hothotep's pyramid. According to folklore, the opening of the last tomb will mark the death of Jizah. Many are worried that time may be sooner rather than later, for a crack has recently appeared in the door of the 11th tomb.

## PERSONS OF Note

Described below are a few of the city's many denizens the heroes may encounter while exploring the city.

## THE MANTICORE

Named after the fearsome beast, the Manticore is rumored to be an assassin-for-hire. He has no ties to the Assassins, nor does he worship Chactinax (he follows Tammuz). His nickname comes from his weapon of choice—throwing knives. It is said he is so skilled that he can hit a target blindfolded and have three knives in the air before the first strikes home.

The Manticore is, in fact, a senior member of the Brotherhood of Unfortunate Souls, though stories concerning his prowess with throwing knives are true enough.



## KHARIJAH

### City of Claws

Though it is unaware of its central role, Kharijah is a pawn in a shadowy game being played out by unseen hands. The recent raids on its outlying territories have caused the sphinxes to react by constructing a line of forts, raising tensions not only with its neighbors, but with Jawf, City of War. Should it be seen to be an aggressor, Kharijah will inadvertently spark a war that could tear the Kingdoms apart.

## Social Hierarchy

The youngest pharaoh ever to ascend, Ankhnemesmerire has the potential to become one of its longest serving rulers. Though none in court know it, Pharaoh Ankhnemesmerire is prone to fits of depression caused by her inexperience. She desperately wants to rule well, and as an autocrat, but she is still a teenager, and the demands of being pharaoh and keeping the noble houses both appeased and at arm's length are intense. She often wishes she could go back to being Chief Judge, a role in which she was extremely comfortable and competent, but as the last of her line she cannot afford to daydream.

None doubt that as Tammuz's divine servant incarnate she will be a just, if not necessarily wise, pharaoh, but for now her inexperience in the complexities of ruling an entire city require her to call on her courtiers and advisors. She is under no illusions that the noble houses are trying to better their own positions through the words they offer, but she struggles to see the distant end game of their suggested policies, and is not prepared to second-guess the many possible outcomes.

Her chief advisor is not a sphinx, but Baysam, the cakali commoner she appointed as chief judge in her place. Chief judge has traditionally been the title wielded by the heir to the throne. While the incumbent is a lesser being in the eyes of the sphinxes, and could certainly never ascend to power, it is the position, not the person, that warrants respect. Though it grates their every nerve, the sphinxes are forced to bow in the cakali's presence, while he merely nods in polite recognition of their presence. Baysam acts humbly at court, but secretly he takes great pleasure in watching the mighty beasts lower their heads and offer him greetings usually reserved for the heir to the throne.

Baysam knows that while he was a favorite of the late pharaoh, his appointment to chief judge was entirely political. It served two key purposes. First, it showed the lesser races that diligence and loyalty will be duly rewarded. Seeing one of their own hold such an impor-

tant office greatly appeased the peasants, meaning Ankhnemesmerire could largely forget about them for a while. Second, it meant the noble houses were not accorded any sudden increase in status.

No fool, Baysam knows that should anything happen to Ankhnemesmerire his life expectancy would be very short. He has proven incorruptible and shows no bias in his role as chief judge, even toward sphinxes. Loyal to the current royal house, rather the position of pharaoh, Baysam has wisely gathered a lot of information the noble sphinxes would rather see stay in the shadows. In the event of his death by anything other than proven natural causes, he has arranged for this information to become public. While it might not cause the local population to rise up in revolt, it would certainly give the other pharaohs plenty to consider.

In a bid to protect pharaoh from the unscrupulous nobles, Baysam has suggested she creates an advisory council, rather than accepting a stream of conflicting individual advice. Since the council would need to present a majority voice to pharaoh, he hopes this will keep the nobles at each others' throats, so giving his young mistress the breathing space she needs to learn to trust in her own judgments. Ankhnemesmerire has not yet accepted the motion, though she is leaning toward it.

While the noble houses draw a decent income from their control of mercantile ventures, natural resources, the temples, and farming estates, the big prize is marrying a scion into the royal house. Political battles in court have intensified, and the sphinxes are even turning their attention to the masses, trying to woo the citizens into supporting them by ensuring the cult they control is in favor. Naturally they don't care much what the peasants think of them, but a popular husband would stave off potential problems in the future.

Among the lesser races, clerics of Tammuz and members of the judiciary are held in high accord out of a healthy blend of fear and respect for their authority. Although they rarely hold higher social positions than their job, wealth, or influence traditionally permits, they are treated as being at the very top of their social class.

## Education

Regardless of their level of education, the laws of the land are widely known and strictly followed. Keen not to see their offspring end up in jail, parents and grandparents diligently pass on what they know of the law, a practice that goes back many generations. Whether a child elects to follow the laws remains his or her choice,

## RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in Kharijah.

\* **Food:** All meals and rations cost three times normal.

\* **Native Heroes I:** All children, regardless of their level of schooling, receive tuition in the laws of Kharijah, no matter how trivial they might seem. All native characters have +1 to Common Knowledge rolls relating to local laws.

\* **Native Heroes II:** A native character may choose to be a graduate of *one* of the advanced universities. Each grants certain benefits, as listed below, but only during character generation and the hero must meet all other requirements. Unless otherwise stated, these benefits are only open to heroes with Smarts d8+, Rich, or Arcane Background (Miracles). Only one skill point may be spent in this manner.

*Factual Information:* For one skill point, the hero starts with Investigation and Streetwise d4, or one of the two skills at d6.

*Pharaoh's Code:* For one skill point, the hero begins with Knowledge (Law) d6.

\* **Tomes of Lore:** Tome of lore concerning Knowledge (Law) cost 100 dinars per point up to +3 and 450 dinars per point from +4 to +6.

\* **State-Appointed Lawyers:** Every resident has the right to a legal advocate for free, as do visitors who pay the appropriate tax. To determine the skill of a state-appointed lawyer, the GM should draw a card from the action deck. A black suit indicates the advocate has Knowledge (Law) d4. A red suit means he has Knowledge (Law) d6. On a Joker, he has the skill at d6 and is a Wild Card.

## REMINDER

Common Knowledge covers knowledge of the law in one's own region or city, as appropriate. However, it only covers what constitutes a crime. Knowledge of how the legal system actually works and being able to argue the broader points of law, yet alone the finer ones, falls under Knowledge (Law). Thus, every citizen knows that killing another person is murder, but no matter how high his Smarts, one wouldn't have the know-how to adequately defend himself in court.

but at least they know right from wrong and can make informed decisions.

For those fortunate enough to receive basic formal education, Kharijah offers three avenues for advanced study. The basic university, the University of Kharijah, is the oldest in the city. It is not the most popular with those with aspirations, but it has the largest number of students. Its syllabus covers all forms of knowledge skills except study of the law.

The teaching of law is the exclusive preserve of the

University of the Pharaoh's Code, an institution run by the powerful cult of Tammuz. Most faculty members are clerics, though there are a handful of imams. Although knowledge of local laws is covered by Common Knowledge, neither the university or the cult is closed-minded and insular. Graduates, who come from across the Kingdoms (and sometimes the other great realms) receive education in the laws of all the lands of Al-Shirkuh. This enables those who remain in Kharijah to advise visitors on how similar laws differ, and gives those who wish to work in other cities a good grounding. Whether they have set their eyes on becoming a priest or a paladin, all novitiates of Tammuz spend the first year of their training at the university.

Justice rarely relies on truth, for that is subjective. Instead, hard facts are called for as evidence. Seeing a chance to gain a slice of educational revenue, the cult of Qedeshet founded the University of Factual Information. Here, students learn how to separate oral and written fact from fiction.

## Religion

The cult of Tammuz is powerful and ever-present, at least in the deity's aspects of justice and balance. Tammuz remains god of death, a stage all mortals must go through, of course, but his role as deity of undead slaying has hardly any adherents. The cult and its clergy has developed three distinct tiers of spiritual authority, with law the most powerful, death in the middle, and undead slaying at the bottom. Only those clerics focused on law have any hopes of attaining high office in the cult.

Though they normally work closely, the local cults of Shamash and Tammuz are often at odds. As rulers of Kharijah, the pharaohs have always held the power to create, amend, or abolish laws as they see fit. That they are followers of Tammuz means they are both creators and arbiters of the law, removing the traditional separation and weakening Shamash's cult.

The recent raids on the outlying farming districts has caused the cult of Karmelos' reputation to nosedive, with everyone from pharaoh down to the lowliest beggar asking why the god of war has turned his gaze from Kharijah. The clerics are loathe to point the finger toward the city's small army and lack of investment in the military, for these would be seen as slights against pharaoh, making them tantamount to sedition.

The fortunes of, and support for, the other deities has remained unchanged in centuries. Ashtart has suffered some loss of influence and power since the raids began, and Geb-Agni has enjoyed an increased with construction of the forts, but both cults accept these are only temporary changes to the *status quo*.

## LOCAL FESTIVALS

Although the cult of Tammuz is dominant, Law Day (see *Realm Guide #2* for both) is a major festival. Unusu-



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ally, it is not the pharaoh, the local potentate, who reads out repealed and new laws, but the chief judge.

**Day of the Code:** On Tamith Yaus al-Hamala Alak Neteru, the day before Law Day, a procession of clerics of Tammuz and judiciary, led by the chief judge, parades through the city. Behind the chief judge is carried an ark, in which is stored a scroll. Inscribed upon it is the first codex of laws laid down by Hamapta, greatest and wisest of all the sphinxes. The procession ends at the palace where, in front of the assembled crowd, the pharaoh places her right paw on the ark and swears to remain true to Hamapta's code of law.

## Military

Talk of the construction of Kharijah's military frontier is on every pharaoh's lips. Despite protestations that the city is merely defending itself from increased bandit raids, many suspect the city is strengthening its borders in preparation for an attack on Muqlad, City of Woes, and Talawdi, City of Sails. Such a move, if successful, would give them dominance over the entire northern portion of the Kingdoms. That the fortifications are being erected on the western bank makes strategic sense—the coastline between Kharijah and Faraf, City of Voices, is unsuitable for landing an army, and the empty desert makes supply lines for a siege impractical.

The situation is further muddled by the fact that Kharijah is the smallest of the Kingdoms in terms of population and has an army barely up to protecting its own borders, yet alone marching to war. If it is planning for war, it likely has support from one of the other cities. Naturally, every pharaoh openly denies being involved in any pact.

### ARMY

Kharijah has long been a backwater province. Largely self-sufficient and engaged only in minor trade, it has never needed a large army, not that it has the population to support one if it did.

It presently has a force of just two regiments (each with five light infantry and five archer companies) and two battalions of light cavalry. This accounts for 2% of its total population, and is already a burden on the city's finances. Having to defend the construction sites has weakened their ability to deal with the raids. Pharaoh has ordered a new regiment and battalion to be raised to help alleviate the pressure. Despite plenty of volunteers, it will be a year before the new units are approaching combat readiness. Plans are also afoot to upgrade several companies to medium infantry, which requires new equipment and tactics.

The city guard, a single company of archers, of which two squads are trained artilleryists, is responsible for protecting the old portion of the city. Port Kharijah is defended by five companies drawn from the army, yet another drain on its meager resources. If the forts are

finished on time, pharaoh intends to replace the current wall with a stronger defensive line. This should reduce the number of soldiers required and free them up for duties elsewhere in the region.

The person and palace of Ankhnesmerire is protected by the Claws of Kharijah. Two companies strong, they are named the Front Paw, who guard the pharaoh, and the Rear Paw, who protect the palace. Each squad has a judge advisor to ensure there is no corruption. As with the position of chief judge, the commander of the guard is usually heir to the throne. Since he is chief judge, Baysam has the privilege, and added workload, of commanding the guard.

### NAVY

The other pharaohs have little to worry about with regard Kharijah instigating a naval blockade on its neighbors. Its fleet of six light warships has been assigned to patrols along the river, leaving just three heavy warships to patrol the coast and provide protection for merchant vessels.

## Law & Order

Every law is strictly enforced, and the three companies of city watch are expected to be diligent in enforcing them. Paperwork often means watchmen elsewhere are on the streets barely half the time they are on duty. In Kharijah, a small army of scribes toils behind the scenes to alleviate this burden.

The watch is hard-pressed to solve every crime. Unless the perpetrator is caught red-handed or there is overwhelming evidence as to his identity, lack of resources mean few crimes are ever fully investigated. Citizens who seek justice the watch cannot provide, or who have problems they would rather the authorities not know about, can hire private investigators. Only licensed investigators are permitted to operate in Kharijah, and licenses are only issued to graduates of the University of Truth.

In order to prevent corruption, deliberate or accidental, every government office (including the watch), military company, and naval ship has a dedicated Judicial Advisor. They have no powers of arrest, though they have the authority to order the detainment of suspected wrongdoers. Similarly, they lack the authority to conduct trials. Despite rumors the judiciary has undercover operatives in place at all levels of society, Kharijah is not a police state. Judicial advisors operate openly, and rarely interfere in daily life. While they periodically review paperwork and authorize inquiries into suspected corruption, they are nothing more than legal advisors specialized in one aspect of the law, ever on hand to answer questions should a matter of law arise.

All criminal cases and appeals are overseen by Chief Judge Bayram. In many cases he oversees trials alone, though in complex cases he is supported by other



## AMMUT

When the presence of furies fails to bring a sinful cleric back into line, the gods have little recourse but to unleash an ammut. Whether it is a unique creature whose services are employed by all the gods or just one of many such celestial servants common to all deities is unknown, for ammut is solitary hunters. When an ammut is found on the mortal realm, it serves but a single god (as chosen by the GM) and seeks only sinners of that faith. The name is modern Calimhari, but derives from Hekatic texts, where it is named as Ahemait, or Soul Eater.

This fearsome beast has the head of a crocodile, the front quarters of a lion, and the rear quarters of a hippopotamus. Sentient creatures, they can converse in any tongue, though they have little interest in conversing with mortals. Fully dedicated to hunting down and killing sinners, they use their miracles only to boost their own abilities and harm their prey—they never employ them to aid mortals, even ones that share their faith.

**Attributes:** Agility d6, Smarts d8, Spirit d10, Strength d12, Vigor d10

**Skills:** Faith d8, Fighting d8, Intimidation d8, Notice d8, Stealth d6, Tracking d8

**Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 11 (2)

**Treasure:** None

### Special Abilities:

\* **Armor +2:** Thick skin.

\* **Bite:** Str+d6.

\* **Immunity (Miracles):** An ammut is immune to all spells cast by clerics of the same deity the creature serves.

\* **Powers:** Ammut knows 1d4+2 miracles (chosen by the GM) from the list of the deity they serve.

\* **Sense Sinner:** Can automatically detect the presence of a sinful cleric within 48", even if the cleric is invisible, behind cover, or otherwise obscured. It ignores all penalties for darkness, invisibility, obscure, and such like when attacking its chosen prey.

\* **Sinner's Bane:** +2 to Fighting rolls against sinful clerics of the same faith as the deity the ammut serves. Wounds inflicted on these clerics by an ammut's bite can only heal naturally. The soul of a sinful cleric killed by an ammut is consigned to the Bottomless Pit.

\* **Size +2:** Ammut is roughly the same size as large lions.

judges of his choosing. Those looking to avoid prosecution need to pay bribes before standing in front of the judge—Bayram has a reputation for total honesty, favors no one, and does not deviate from the legal code under any circumstances.

Every citizen brought before the court has the right

to an advocate to advise him on how the court operates and/or speak on his behalf. Those who cannot afford an advocate are appointed one for free. These are students from the University of the Pharaoh's Code, assigned at random from the non-sphinx students, and have Knowledge (Law) d4 or d6.

Whether scribes, advocates, judicial advisors, or judges, only graduates of the Pharaoh's Code are permitted to serve in the judiciary. Some are clerics of Tammuz and many patronize the god of justice, but neither is a strict requirement. Still, religious bias means that those who do not honor Tammuz rarely rise far.

Construction of the forts is being undertaken by slaves and the annual levy raised during summer. While all the slaves previously assigned to other projects have been diverted to the fortifications, pharaoh refuses to implement harsher punishments, as has been done in Jizah, City of Sphinxes. Slaves work their allotted sentence and are then duly released. Overseers are keen to ensure there are no mistakes—enslaving someone for even one extra day would be seen as wrongful enslavement of a citizen, a serious crime.

So called "moral crimes," such as gambling, prostitution, and drug use, have long been regarded as acceptable (except by the cult of Shamash) so long as they occurred in the temple of Tamarni. In a move that simultaneously appeased the cult of Shamash and delighted the cult of Tamarni, a pharaoh of old ruled that sinful businesses that did not immediately move to the precinct of Tamarni's temple and register with the cult would be dealt with severely. Most saw sense—this would legitimize their operations, allow them to raise their prices to meet the higher temple standards, and protect them from the thieves' guild, which demanded high protection fees. Within the precinct, pharaoh further ruled, the watch would have no powers, and Tamarni's temple laws would take precedence over city laws. Needless to say, the cult of Tamarni also turns a blind eye toward other crimes taking place in the precinct, such as trafficking in proscribed objects, at least so long the operators pay their taxes to the cult.

Not all illegal trade has ceased. The vacuum was quickly filled by the thieves' guild, the Claws of Vice. Its prostitution, gambling, and drug dens are less salubrious, and certainly more crooked, than those offered at the temple, but they are considerably cheaper. Many citizens refuse to use them out of fear of being caught and punished by the authorities.

## Trade & Tribute

Kharijah has largely been self-sufficient throughout its history. While it trades with its neighbors, and as far as the Jade Empire and Rassilon, it has no notable imports or exports. Work on the forts has required both stone and additional food, and expanding and reequipping the army requires armor and weapons. Kharijah has the resources to provide everything it needs, but pharaoh



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has opted to import materials instead. Her view is that while imports cost money, having everything produced locally would divert precious resources away from the city and its people—she has heard of the misery in Jizah, and has no wish to become a hated tyrant.

Some of the imported food is diverted to the city granaries—the raids have both resulted in destroyed crops and citizens abandoning their homes for safer lands closer to the city.

Once the line of forts is complete, Kharijah will be able to control land trade that would otherwise bypass the city, and thus import charges, by crossing the river. Every caravan would be required to cross at one of the forts and due levy would be assessed. The Bedu tribes affected by this can do little but grumble—sending goods by another port would still mean a loss of revenue.

## COINAGE

The justice system, while fair according to the demands of the ancient law, works in such a way that the poorer you are, the more likely you are to be found guilty if accused of a crime. Citizens refer to the one dinar gold coin as a Scale and the silver one dirham coin as a Sword. These are the only coins minted in the city. Smaller denominations of dirhams can be obtained by cutting a dirham in half or quarters. These are known as a Blade and Hilt respectively.

## LOCAL TAXES

Taxation has increased to help pay for the forts, but citizens still keep 50% of their wages after all taxation is accounted for. Increases in food prices have brought problems, but the problem is not severe enough to cause unrest. Swayed by the pharaoh's charisma, the citizens have, for now, accepted that the increases are temporary, and that the situation upriver will soon be resolved.

**Customs Duty:** General imports are charged at 5%, a value that helps keep locally made goods within the city and the markets full. Imports of armor, weapons, food, and stone for use by the military or in the construction of the forts is levied at just 1%.

**Docking Fees:** Ships docking at Port Kharijah are charged 20 dinars a day. Grain barges from the communities upriver pay 5 dinars a day. No charge is levied on ships docking in one of the fortified docks in the old city, but only vessels registered with the noble house currently in charge are permitted to berth there.

**Investigator's License:** Investigating crimes requires a license, even if one does not intend to work in the field full time. An annual license costs 250 dinars. Monthly licenses are available for 30 dinars a month. The latter is typically purchased by outsiders visiting Kharijah in the search for criminals from other cities.

**Gate Tax:** Use of the four city gates is charged at one-quarter dirham for pedestrians, one dirham for mounts, and one dinar for vehicles in Port Kharijah. In the old city, mounts cost one dinar and vehicles five dinars.

**Legal Tax:** Every citizen must pay an annual tax of one dinar. This assures them the right to an advocate should they ever need one in court. It does not cover legal advice for other matters. Visitors may also purchase legal insurance. This lasts for the duration of their stay or three months, whichever ends first. In order to qualify, they must pay one dinar and register with the city watch. As noted above, the quality of advocates provided for free is generally poor, but they are the best many citizens can afford.

Their details are then stored in the archives at the law court, to be brought out if the visitor ends up in jail. Access is supposedly restricted only to the judiciary and the clergy of Tammuz, but most scribes will track down a name if sufficiently bribed.

## Architecture

Kharijah is a city of two distinct halves. The old city was built as a fortress. Its original buildings are solid stone, with doors facing onto narrow alleys and arrow-slit windows facing the wider streets. The streets themselves run straight only for short distances, preventing an enemy from quickly reaching the palace. Large parts have been remodelled down the centuries to accommodate the sphinxes, but the basic design philosophy was retained. Port Kharijah, still over two millennia old, is far more spacious. Its roads are wider and straighter, there are public parks, and houses are roomier.

## Major Locales

Detailed below are a number of locations in and around Kharijah that the heroes may have cause to visit.

### CITY DISTRICTS

Though one of the great cities of Al-Shirkuh, the greater population of Kharijah could fit inside many other cities with room to spare. Within the city walls live just 41,600 people (40% of the total population). Two-thirds live in the old city and one-third in Port Kharijah. Unless otherwise stated, all the district described below are located in the old city.

**Legal:** The Legal District is home to the Temple of Law, the University of the Pharaoh's Code, and the University of Factual Information, as well as residential areas housing clerics, judiciary, and licensed advocates, and shops.

**Military:** Both branches of the city guard share the area part of the city. Barrack blocks face onto the parade ground on three sides, while the other is fronted by the armory and various logistical offices. Workshops are located outside this area, along with residential housing for the various craftsmen who keep the army supplied.

**Port Kharijah:** When locals speak of Kharijah they

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usually mean just the old city. Port Kharijah is a suburb, and is always referred to by its full name. The port is devoted to trade and catering for ships and their crews.

The wharf front is dominated by ships chandlers, mercantile offices, customs posts, lower-class inns, fish processing areas, and a shrine to all the gods. A ferry service runs from the wharves to the old city, with a boat leaving every 15 minutes during daylight hours and every hour after sunset. The price of a ride is one dirham by day and one dinar at night. Extending outward from the docks are low rows of warehouses. Beyond these are lower- and middle-class residential districts, the temple of Qedeshet the Divine Trader, more expensive inns and restaurants, workshops, and a small souk.

Thanks to the sudden influx of imports, Port Kharijah operates day and night. Ships arriving on the late tide are unloaded immediately, the goods carried to the warehouses by porters, mules, or wagons in preparation for being shipped to the old city or loaded onto barges come sunrise. Meanwhile, agents of the merchant houses call out the wares they have for sale in the hope of securing a quick deal.

**Palace:** The palace is almost a city unto itself, at least in terms of ground area. Behind its walls are separate areas for the pharaoh's personal quarters and rooms of state, the palaces of the noble sphinxes, the barracks of the pharaoh's bodyguard, and bureaucratic offices.

**Six Docks:** This district is the name given to the six colossal buildings that form the original port facilities. Every five years, the noble houses bid for the right to operate one of the docks. With galleys rarely used for trading, each dock can accommodate two merchant ships. Inside each massive structure are warehouses, barracks for two squads of soldiers (usually employed by the nobles as guards), workshops, a customs post, and a small souk, in which cargoes from the merchant ships are sold within hours of being unloaded.

Only merchant vessels owned and operated by the nobles or registered with the house as trading partners are permitted to dock here.

## CITY LOCALES

**Dhakwan's Pastries:** Hot or cold, sweet or savory, this pastry shop has something to suit all tastes. Starting for as little as one-quarter dirham each, the treats are freshly laid and generously stuffed.

Dhakwan is not the name of the owner. His name is Zaid. The shop is named after the founder and has carried the name ever since. Zaid is a worried man, and everyone knows why—he is the third shopkeeper to run the store in the last year. No one is sure what happened to the other two—rumors abound they just vanished from their beds. Zaid has run the store for five months without any problems, but last week two of his assistants went missing. He offers pastries for life to anyone who can get to the bottom of the mystery before he too vanishes like mist in the hot sun.

**Gates:** Kharijah has four gates. The old city has

two—Sea Gate (in the northern wall) and the Gate of Caravans (in the eastern wall). The ancient builders obviously feared invasion—once through the gates, visitors enter a passage flanked by high walls that turns through 180 degrees three times before reaching the city. Port Kharijah's gates are the Gate of Camels (west wall) and Gate of Reeds (southern wall). These are simple wooden gates flanked by small towers. All the gates are opened from dawn until dusk, though few pass through them—most traffic destined for the city comes via the river, and caravans are infrequent.

**The Golden Claw:** Nezafet, a female cakali, raises and trains lions for use as pets (normally by sphinxes) and as guards. Anyone can purchase one, but they do not come cheap—2500 dinars. The new owner must also spend two weeks at the store. During this time his chosen beast learns to accept him as his master and is retrained to respond to his verbal commands.

**The Oasis of Bounty:** A large inn built in the pattern of a caravanserai, the Oasis is in danger of going out of business. By day it is busy, but as soon as the sun begins to set locals finish their food and drink and beat a hasty retreat toward the door. Few guests stay more than one night. The cause of the problem is the Wailing Lady. She has haunted the inn for as long as anyone can remember, but until a few months ago she was merely a spectral shape, scary but not threatening. Then, without warning, she began emitting piercing wails that freeze the blood and cause even those of stout heart to quail in terror. The owner, Kadar ibn Faizul, cannot afford the services of the cult of Tammuz, but he is desperate to be rid of his uninvited lodger.

Kadar has recently lowered his room prices to one dinar for a private room and just one-half dirham for a shared room, making the inn attractive to adventurers in search of cheap lodgings. It is his hope they will solve his little problem themselves once the Wailing Lady makes an appearance (which she does every night of the Veiled Moon without fail).

**Private Advocates:** Citizens who want legal advice or a fighting chance of avoiding being found guilty avoid the state-appointed advocates like the plague. There are literally dozens operating in the Legal District.

The typical hourly rate for legal advice is equal to the advocate's Knowledge (Law) die type. Prices for helping in a court case are more expensive—double the advocate's Knowledge (Law) die per day, plus an extra 20 dinars per day if he has the Scholar Edge relating to Law. Wild Card advocates charge double these rates. Most cases are over in a few minutes (patrons still pay for an entire day), but more complex ones can drag on for several days. Most advocates can help track down witnesses and evidence while their patrons languishes in jail awaiting trial, but the daily rate applies.

**Sanctuary Inn:** No one quite remembers how it came about, or why its status has never been repealed, but Sanctuary Inn is the only privately operated building where the watch is not permitted to enter without permission of the owner and where city law does not apply. In short,



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

any person who enters is immune to prosecution so long as he stays inside. Despite not being required to pay any taxes, the innkeeper does so meticulously.

This is not to say it is a den of cutthroats and murderers. The innkeeper doesn't mind trade in proscribed objects, gambling, or drug taking to take place, but start beating up his patrons or stealing from them and he is quick to invite the watch inside. Only patrons with a room are provided sanctuary (everyone else is thrown out at midnight), and these do not come cheap. A sleeping space in the common room is 5 dinars a night, and private rooms cost up to 50 dinars a night. Set meals of average quality are covered in the room cost. Drinks are extra, but the prices are no higher than in other inns. As soon as a patron requesting sanctuary runs out of money the guard are called.

The watch may have no authority inside the walls, but it pays a close interest to who comes and goes. Guests are under no illusions they are not being watched—there is a guard house right across the street. What they don't know is that there is a secret tunnel running from the inn to a safe house operated by the thieves' guild. Use of this facility costs 500 dinars per person.

**Shrine of Ashtart:** This gnarly old oak stands in one of Port Kharijah's small public parks. Oaks are not native to Al-Shirkuh, and this specimen was almost cut down to make way for housing. It was saved by a cleric of Ashtart, who realized it was special and foretold that if it was cut down the then pharaoh would die. She made this omen up, but it served its purpose. Since then the tree has served as a living shrine to Ashtart. Citizens hang written prayers asking for healthy children, an easy pregnancy, fertile crops or loins, and other things connected to the goddess, from its branches.

The tree is in fact a venerable tree man. He has been asleep since long before the sphinxes came to power, quietly dozing as cultures rose and fell and a new city was erected around him. He stirs periodically, stretching his branches into a more comfortable position. Locals who witness this put it down to a spirit of Ashtart that lives in the tree. Some even claim to have heard it singing in a strange language.

**Statues:** Both parts of the city are replete with statues of sphinxes in typical seated position. The statues were unearthed several centuries ago in a cave in the foothills of the mountains, and dragged to Kharijah to make the city look more attractive. That they were free also appealed to the sphinxes' financial acumen.

The sphinxes believe the statues were created to honor their ancestors, perhaps meant funeral goods for a tomb, for written upon the paws of each in their tongue is a "magical" phrase more commonly found on ushabti figures. (Ushabti figures are small statues commonly used as grave goods by wealthy citizens. In the Afterlife, they are commanded to awaken and serve the deceased. Through them, a person can have an army of loyal servants and soldiers at his command.) The phrase reads, "If I be called to serve I shall answer."

What no one realizes is that the statues are actually

## EDIMMU

The rituals that go with Faithful burials are essential to ensuring that the spirit is both taken to the Afterlife, and that it remains there. Mortal remains not given proper funeral rites risk being trapped in the mortal realm. Vengeful toward the living, edimmus, as these spirits are known, vent their anger by spreading disease.

Because Devoted place no value on the corpse, it has become traditional for Faithful who happen across an unburied corpse to perform Tammuz's funeral rites as a matter of course, just in case the remains have given birth to an edimmu.

**Attributes:** Agility d6, Smarts d6, Spirit d10, Strength d6, Vigor d6

**Skills:** Fighting d6, Intimidation d12+2, Notice d12, Stealth d12+4

**Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 5

**Treasure:** None (though their grave may hold treasure)

### Special Abilities:

\* **Disease Touch:** Edimmus transmit diseases through a Touch Attack (+2 Fighting). Victims must make a Vigor roll or be infected with a majorly debilitating long-term chronic disease. Unless healing is cast on the victim within 10 minutes, his only chance of a cure is to make a Vigor roll each month. Victims are not infectious.

\* **Ethereal:** Edimmus are immaterial and can only be harmed by magical attacks.

\* **Final Peace:** A "slain" edimmu returns unharmed at the next dusk. The only way to rid the world of an edimmu is to find its mortal remains and perform a proper burial.

dormant golems, created long ago by a band of ushabti mages who hoped to use them against the sphinxes. Before they could awaken the golems, the sect was discovered and wiped out, leaving their creations to gather dust for centuries. Anyone who discovered the command phrase, which is still inside the cave where the golems were found, would not only be able to animate the golems, but he would be their master. With an army of stone sphinxes at his command, he would be a formidable threat to the city.

**University of Factual Information:** Rather than contact every private investigator when something needs doing for the state, the authorities stick notices on an obelisk outside the university. These are usually bounties for wanted convicts, but sometimes something more interesting comes up.

**Special:** Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; **Skills:** Investigation, Streetwise; **Edges:** Investigator.

**University of the Pharaoh's Code:** According to folklore, Muthrestha was a priest of Tammuz and an advocate.

It is said he never lost a single case, even during his years as a novice. When he died he was laid to rest in a stone mausoleum outside the university, where he spent his final days as a tutor. His tomb still stands, though it is heavily cracked by the passage of time. Citizens stuff prayers into the cracks in the hope his spirit will carry the pleas to Tam-muz. Many are placed on behalf of loved ones rotting in jail awaiting trial. Others are pleas for help from citizens who seek justice but cannot afford to hire a private investigator.

*Special:* Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; *Skills:* Knowledge (Law).

## CUT-FLESH MARSH

A swathe of marshes stretches along the western bank of the River Al-Shadu for 20 miles and extends as much as five miles inland. Forts are being constructed at each end, but the pharaoh has few worries attackers will attempt to traverse the mire. While the bog nearest the river is papyrus beds, further inland it becomes a twisted mass of thorny shrubs and plants with thick, serrated leaves. Movement on foot is extremely difficult, and using a mount is virtually impossible. Sinkholes, quicksand, crocodiles, and venomous snakes only add to a traveler's misery.

Papyrus harvesters sometimes go missing, but the authorities do not waste resources looking for their corpses. If they drowned, they will wash up at some point. Otherwise, they are probably inside an alligator or swallowed by the earth. What the authorities don't know is the marsh is home to a band of degenerate gators. They usually dine on the animals that roam among the vegetation, but occasionally they prefer something meatier into which to sink their teeth.

## MARDEH

Mardeh is a small farming settlement 60 miles upriver from Kharijah. Home to just 100 souls, it is owned by the cult of Ashtart, though a headman runs things on a daily basis, with a priest calling at the start of each season to check on the crops and perform ceremonies. Adventurers sometimes call here, for close by are several old tombs dating to before the arrival of the sphinxes. The locals are currently scared witless, for a ghost has been seen walking among the tombs at night, its glowing form clearly visible.

The ghost is nothing more than a tomb robber made luminous by an *elemental manipulation* spell. While the visible tombs have been thoroughly plundered, he and his band have heard rumors there are secret tunnels running beneath the mounds. Killing the villagers would attract the authorities, and acting openly would likely attract other robbers, so they dreamt up the ghost ruse to keep nosy locals away.

## THE MENAGERIE

Five miles upriver from Karijah is a truly massive walled compound. It is the private estate of Imy-Er Tegenenqed, an eccentric sphinx who collects dangerous and unusual

animals. These are kept in large caged compounds and, where absolutely necessary, are rendered (relatively). For instance, the manticores have had the end of its tail amputated, preventing it from firing its tail spikes.

What started as a hobby soon became an obsession. To help alleviate the astronomical cost of feeding his menagerie, the elderly sphinx decided to open his collection to the public. A privately operated barge ferries people between the city and the estate on a daily basis. Admission to the park costs one dinar per head. For an extra fee, visitors can purchase hunks of meat or sacks of food to feed to the animals.

Tegenenqed is always after new exhibits. These appease his insatiable hunger for exotic beasts and give visitors a reason to return. He is currently trying to find adventurers brave enough to capture and return a live thunderlizard. He doesn't care whether it is a herbivore or carnivore, but he offers more money for the latter. The fact that thunderlizards are found only in Rassilon and the Lands of the Lizardmen only adds to the difficulty of capturing one.

## PERSONS OF Note

Described below are a few of the city's many denizens the heroes may encounter while exploring the city.

### JASIM IBN NUHAID

Few people believe Jasim ibn Nuhaid (which translates roughly as "Huge, son of Big") is this merchant's real name. For a start, he stands 4' 1" in his socks. For another thing, he goes out of his way to look taller. He wears an enormous turban, sticking out of which are three peacock feathers. Everyone refers to him as The Big Man, a title to which he thoroughly enjoys answering. A wheeler and dealer, Jasim buys and sells anything he thinks will make him a profit, no questions asked.

### THE SILENT STORYTELLER

Until four months ago, Asalah bint Fida was a popular storyteller, courted by sphinxes to entertain their guests at feasts and a favorite with commoners, who she enthralled in the marketplace with tales of brave heroes and heroic endeavors. While returning from a visit to a Bedu tribe (she was a guest of the sheikh at his daughter's wedding) she was captured by a greater jinni who had heard of her reputation. Though she escaped with her life, the jinni, who greatly admired her voice and storytelling prowess, decided to keep both for himself. Asalah has been mute and unable to recall a single story ever since.

Now she roams the streets, desperately searching for someone prepared to track down the jinni and recover her voice for her. She can describe the fiend in detail, and knows he placed her voice and memories inside a golden jar (which he opens when he wants to hear a story).



## MIZDAH

### City of Power

One of the richest cities in Al-Shirkuh, Mizdah is also ailing. As the pharaoh grows more infirm from the mysterious illnesses that plague him, so the crops in the fields, seemingly in sympathy with the fate handed to the lord of the land, wither and die.

### Social Hierarchy

It is not just Pharaoh Montjuhirkopshef's physical health that is failing. With each bout of illness the mighty sphinx has become more paranoid. While every pharaoh keeps a wary eye on potential rivals, Montjuhirkopshef sees plots everywhere. He secretly blames a sinister cabal of mages who seek to overthrow the royal house for his spate of illnesses, causing him to take more draconian measures to root out the "unseen evil living in our midst." His wife, Queen Nuru, has failed to sire an heir to the throne, despite pharaoh's having proven his fertility through his concubines. Given that she is from a noble house, pharaoh sees her failure as a deliberate means of ensuring his royal line dies. Were pharaoh from a more productive line, he would have little to worry about. Alas, Montjuhirkopshef has no uncles, siblings, or nephews to assume the mantle of responsibility once Geb-Agni summons him to his celestial court.

It is no secret at court that Montjuhirkopshef is nearing the end of his days. Like vultures patiently waiting for their next meal, the nobles hover around the throne. They keep a steady distance, though, for any the pharaoh suspects of being involved in a plot to replace him are quickly removed from office, their titles stripped, their fortunes confiscated, and their name publicly shamed.

Acting as subtly as possible, each endeavors to have one of its own named as heir. Pharaoh's illnesses are not recent—his health has been deteriorating for centuries and his wife is not getting any younger. Many young nobles have been raised not in the traditional cult of their house, but the royal cult of Geb-Agni in the hope they might be chosen. It is not just the local nobility that seeks to ascend to royalty—Montjuhirkopshef's concubines include scions of from independent houses, as well as noble houses from other cities. Most of the latter hold Geb-Agni as their patron, though pharaoh has always favored physical appearance over religious leanings. While they lack a strong presence as courtiers, they are not without their means. After all, one of their house is a concubine who can whisper directly into Montjuhirkopshef's ear.

The nobles are extremely rich, though not as rich as

pharaoh. When the city was founded, the then pharaoh divided half of the mineral-rich hills and mountains between the various houses, to run as their private estates. The only conditions were that each house duly paid tax on its earnings, and that all ore (raw or processed) and gems had to be sold to the city.

Among the lesser races, the social strata are similar to other cities. The makeup of the lower-class has gradually shifted, though. Before the River Yemuni became toxic, the *harajam* was divided roughly equally between farmers and miners. Today, miners make up the great majority. With the farms unworkable, those who once relied on them have turned to whatever work they can find. Many opted to become miners, but the sphinxes were quick to exploit their desperation, offering them lower wages than those who already toiled in the dark, cramped, airless tunnels.

Those unable to find work, or too proud to accept a pittance for an honest day's labor, have been forced into occupations reserved for the *mushaf*. Beggars line the streets seeking alms from people more concerned about feeding their families than helping the destitute. Others collect human and animal waste to sell as fuel or fertilizer for the few remaining productive farms. Some stoop as low as gathering waste from the sewers before it empties into the river.

By far the largest portion of the *mushaf* are those who have succumbed to the toxins in the water and survived. The toxins leave them with ruined lungs, wasted muscles, and chronic lethargy. Unable to work, they are the lowliest of the beggars. Most wish the toxins had killed them quickly, for while death is inevitable (there is no cure), it will be many painful months away.

### Education

Education is a privilege in Mizdah, and one reserved for only a chosen few. For most, future prospects were limited to farming or mining, and one of these options no longer exists. Children seeking an apprenticeship with a master craftsman must have the three basic requirements—ambition, initiative, and patience—and a fair amount of luck. A "donation" to the master helps, of course, but no master is going to take on a student he thinks will fail. As with all apprentices across Al-Shirkuh, few will ever own their own workshops, but they will at least have a steady income and a useful skill.

For those rich or fortunate enough to have undergone a basic education, the city offers only one university. The

## RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in Mizdah.

\* **Food:** The price of all meals and rations is five times normal inside the city walls and eight times in settlements outside the walls. The mines do not sell food.

\* **Native Heroes:** A native character may choose to be a graduate of the advanced university. It grants a choice of two benefits, as listed below, but only during character generation and the hero must meet all other requirements. This school is open only to heroes with Smarts d8+, Rich or Arcane Background (Miracles). A maximum of one benefit may be taken.

**Underworld:** For one skill point, the hero may take two from Climbing, Survival, and Swimming at d4, or one of the skills at d6. Alternately, the character may reduce one required trait by one die type when taking the Dungeon Crawler Edge (see free download *Exploring the Underworld*).

\* **No Mages:** Heroes born and raised in Mizdah cannot take Arcane Background (any magic) without the GM's permission.

\* **The Price of Magic:** Golems, tomes of learning, and spirit relics are proscribed items. They are available on the black market, but cost double normal. Being found in possession of such items is punishable by torture and enslavement.

\* **Slaves:** A shortage of slaves, who do not require wages, means the cost of laborer slaves is doubled. Slaves sentenced by the courts to lesser periods than life fetch lower prices. For each year of sentence less than ten years (few slaves live longer), the price is reduced by 10%, to a minimum of 5% if sentenced to less than a year.

\* **Toxic Water:** Anyone who drinks the water without boiling it several times or eats locally grown plant matter that has not been repeatedly boiled to the point of being a tasteless mush lacking in nutrition must make a Vigor roll or suffer the effects of a Long-Term Chronic, Majorly Debilitating disease from the toxic residue in his system. *Healing* can remove the toxins, but must be applied in the first ten minutes.

Note that while *fatigue* spells remove the Exhaustion penalty and allow the character to function normally, they do not remove the cause. Eight hours after the spell first takes effect, the hero is again Exhausted.

University of Mizdah provides students with an advanced education, but its courses are far from exceptional. Many sphinxes opt to send their offspring to Faraf, City of Voices, leaving the student body to be made up of the scions of wealthy lesser races and clerics undergoing training in specific topics deemed core to their cult.

The hills and mountains are riddled with cave systems and mineral veins yet undiscovered. Skilled spelunkers are in great demand by the sphinxes, who are always searching for exploitable mineral wealth, and the cult of Geb-Agni has seen a means of cashing in. The University of the Underworld is not a charity, and admission requires one to be from a wealthy family, a cleric whose cult is willing to pay for instruction, or fortunate to have a rich patron. The latter typically requires five years service in return for his investment.

## Religion

Mizdah's pharaohs have always honored Geb-Agni. On the few occasions the royal house has been replaced, a younger sphinx, one yet to take a patron deity, has been nominated as heir and high priest so as to ensure a return to royal worship of the god of earth and fire as quickly as possible.

Although it is the royal cult, its largest powerbase is in the mining region, far from the city. Most miners care little for the tenets of the cult—they pray there are no rockfalls, for the strength to work, and for an seam that can be worked with minimum effort.

The cult has always held natural underground features in high esteem, and laments the destruction caused by the miners. Despite its standing, it has been unable to prevent wanton destruction on an industrial scale—pharaoh demands the ore keeps flowing, and his word is both civil and religious law. Pharaoh has ruled that allowing the desecration of Geb-Agni's work is not a sin (active participation is still a mortal sin), but whether or not the god sees things the same way is something a mortal learns only on his death.

Nergal, the lesser deity of subterranean exploration, enjoys patronage by all the noble houses save that honoring Ashtart. His clerics are ideally trained for sniffing out ore and gem veins worthy of exploiting, as well as combatting the various monsters that inhabit the darkness beneath the surface. They are also charged with rooting out cultists of Apep before they can use their fell powers to cause earthquakes that might collapse one or mines and threaten Mizdah's wealth.

While Geb-Agni enjoys popular support and royal patronage, many of the other cults are on the decline thanks to the mining that has made the city rich.

During the early years, the cult of Ashtart turned down the opportunity to exploit mineral wealth in return for possession of huge swathes of rich farmland. With much of that farmland now tainted, the cult of Ashtart is on the point of economic collapse. Seeking to salvage what little public support still remains and divert the anger of the citizens elsewhere, the high priest of Ashtart has spared no effort in blaming the cult of Geb-Agni for the cause of the pollution and the cult of Apsu for not ensuring the river water is cleansed of what are politely referred to as impurities.



Apsu's clerics are responsible for protecting the river. The pollution has caused many to suffer major sins, not that their miracles are of much use—no amount of earthly power can cleanse the water now, and the soil along the banks will likely never be free of toxins.

In secret, the sar-nesus of both cults have chosen to act against the cult of Geb-Agni in a bid to reduce the amount of pollution entering the river. Both cults actively support attacks against the mines and ore barges, supplying intelligence, money, and weapons to orc tribes and bandit leaders. Their actions are more than inter-cult rivalry—Geb-Agni is the royal cult, and thus the attacks are a crime against pharaoh. This is treason, and not even being a sphinx will spare the perpetrators from the executioner's block.

The sickness from drinking the water or eating tainted food kills most quickly. Those who survive inhabit shattered bodies that are not long for this realm. Outside of casting *bealing* in the first ten minutes after ingestion of tainted foodstuffs, there is no cure. Herbal remedies and miracles can alleviate some of the symptoms, but few can afford to apply these on a daily basis.

## LOCAL FESTIVALS

**Day of No Magic:** The inner chamber of the mage school was reached by the victorious sphinx forces on Tamith Yaus al-Maat Anshi Alak Arkhet. On this day, the then pharaoh declared magic purged from Mizdah. Each year, confiscated tomes of learning, spirit relics, and the like are burned in a huge bonfire outside the temple of Shamash. Citizens burn effigies of mages, a ward against their return. Clerics of Qedeshet boycott the festival—they may have no love for magic, but the destruction of any knowledge pains them.

**Sand-Shaping Festival:** The origin of this festival dates back to before the sphinxes came to power. In those ancient days, sand mages would work their art to entertain and awe spectators. These days, it is a local festival overseen by the cult of Duamutef.

During the day of Amt Yaus al-Niwt Baot Alak Shemu, clerics and laity alike work to create sand sculptures. The art is not as simple as many believe, for it requires both the right sand and specific amounts of water. Many clerics spend months tracking down the perfect sand and shipping it back to the city, while trying to keep their find a secret from their rivals. The use of miracles is permitted, but the creator must declare their use or face expulsion from the competition and loss of face for cheating.

Once the sun sets, the public are invited to view the sculptures. Admission costs one dirham. In return, the spectator is given two wooden tokens, one stained black and the other stained white. He places the black disc in a bucket in front of whichever sculpture created with use of miracles he thinks the best, and the white token in front of his favorite sculpture made without miraculous intervention. The creators of the two winning entries, one from each category, carrying the title High Sand Lord (miracles) or Sand Lord (non-cleric) for the next year.

## Military

The loss of agricultural land has actually benefitted pharaoh, at least militarily. With the once lush farmland now infused with deadly toxins, it provides nothing raiders might want to steal and provides a besieging army with no supplies. Furthermore, since the farmland does not need protecting, pharaoh has been able to divert the army to the mines, against which attacks have risen dramatically in the past few months.

### ARMY

The core of Mizdah's army stands at three infantry regiments and three cavalry battalions (1.9% of the population). Each regiment has one medium, six light, and three archer companies. The entirety of the cavalry is light.

Although each noble house has its own mine security, the bulk of pharaoh's infantry has been detailed to provide additional protection. The nobles deeply resent this intrusion. First, it means pharaoh has eyes and ears at the source of their financial bases. This is a direct threat, for not all of their shipments are sent directly to the city for assaying and sale. Second, pharaoh does not do this out of the goodness of his heart. Declaring the nobles unfit to protect the mines without his help, he charges the houses for use of his soldiers. One regiment and one battalion are stationed at strategic points along the river, protection against raiders and pirates.

Should Mizdah come under attack, it is unlikely the army would be much use. The troops are certainly well fed and well paid, which is good for morale, but they lack quality arms. For centuries their tactics have focused on static defence and skirmish lines, ideal against raiders, but not for facing a professional army on the open field of battle.

The pharaoh also has a specialist unit at his disposal. Known as the Earth Swords, they are trained to operate in rugged terrain and underground. Two companies strong and led by a commander, they answer directly to the general (the high priest of Karmelos). Their core duties are to patrol the remote southern hinterlands in search of independent mining operations in order to check their licenses, and hunt down small bands of orcs and bandits above and below ground. Short of manpower and with a huge amount of territory to cover, the commander sometimes resorts to hiring adventurers to alleviate the pressure on his men. These hirelings are most often used in the relentless war against orcs.

The city guard comprises three companies—two of light infantry and one of archers. Although food riots have not yet broken out, one company is assigned to guard the granaries.

Pharaoh is protected by the Red Lions, two companies of medium infantry. In order to join, a soldier must first kill a wild lion using only a dagger. The lion's skin, complete with head, is then dyed red to honor the pharaoh and worn as a cloak.

## NAVY

Mizdah maintains two separate naval forces. The Maritime Squadron has six light and four heavy warships, and is based in Mizdah. It had another six light warships, but these have been reassigned to the River Squadron. With a strength of 15 light warships, the latter is responsible for ensuring the barges carrying metal ingots reach the city safely and the barges carrying food to the mines arrive without incident.

## Law & Order

The three companies of the city watch have suffered budgetary restraints caused by the pharaoh's creation of specialist law-enforcement units.

In his paranoia, Pharaoh Montjuhirkopshef has ordered the creation of a secret police force, known simply as the Inquisitors. Their job is to root out dissidents and others who plot against the pharaoh. Many of those recruited are paladins of Qedeset. The Inquisitors have quietly infiltrated the cults, bureaucracy, and military. They have the power to arrest any citizen, regardless of occupation, standing, and race, and use torture to uncover the truth. Reports of their infiltration have been greatly, and deliberately, inflated. Citizens have yet to worry about careless words being overheard, though few are prepared to take the chance in public.

Magic is banned in Mizdah. Practitioners of the arcane arts caught in the city are subject to arrest, torture, and permanent banishment. Those caught casting a spell receive a harsher fate—they are subject to immediate extermination. Tomes of learning, spirit relics, and golems are proscribed items. Ownership is punishable by confiscation of the goods (which are then destroyed) and slavery for life. Selling such wares results in the culprits entire family suffering his fate.

Possession of alchemical devices remains legal. It is impossible to tell whether an alchemical device was created by magic or miracle merely by touch, and the cults, which make create and sell alchemical objects, have persuaded the pharaoh that declaring them illegal would weaken their standing with the people.

Rooting out and exterminating mages is the responsibility of the Guardians of the Faith. A company strong, they are a separate force from the city watch. Each member undergoes training in anti-magic techniques (all have the Arcane Resistance Edge). The company is divided into ten squads, each comprising nine soldiers and one cleric of Qedeset who knows both *detect/conceal* and *dispel*. The clerics cast *detect arcana* at random intervals. Any citizen who registers is subject to immediate arrest and thorough questioning.

The thieves' guild, the Three Hands, has benefitted from the banning of magic. Despite the harsh penalties, there are those who desire ownership of forbidden objects, and who are prepared to pay well. The guild both

smuggles items into the city, where it sells them at highly inflated prices, and wanted mages out of the city.

Those sentenced to slavery for life by the courts are sold to the highest bidder. Those considered fit for physical labor end invariably end up in the mines. Scribes are also sought after, for the sphinxes have need of people who keep track of financial payments and quotas. Criminals sentenced to shorter durations fetch lower prices. The sphinxes consider these unfortunates as expendable assets, to be worked as hard as possible so as their masters reap the greatest reward. Many perish, and even those who finish their allotted punishment may find they are kept working until a relative brings their plight to the appropriate bureaucratic official.

## Trade & Tribute

Mizdah claims every inch of land from the point where the Godhome Mountains touch the sea to an imaginary line 50 miles north of the river.

Until recently, the northern portion was renowned for its rich farmland. Under the direction of the cult of Ashtart, extensive irrigation channels were dug to bring water to the desert, ensuring the inhabitants of the mines and cities had full stomachs. These days it is a wasteland of stunted vegetation, clogged ditches, and deserted settlements, a toxic wilderness where only the hardiest creatures can survive.

Reliance on imports of food have seen prices skyrocket in the city. Sensing weakness, the other cities deliberately inflict shortages periodically so as to be in a stronger position to bargain over the price of metal and gems. Little food reaches the rural communities, and what does reach the markets is extremely expensive.

The most extensive mines are located near the sources of the River Yemuni. They are not necessarily the richest in terms of potential yield, but the presence of running water and ability to load ingots onto barges further downstream rather than rely on slower moving caravans makes them more economically viable. Travel some 50 mile south of the river, and the number of working mines drops to single digits.

Citizens are entitled to prospect here for new veins, but must acquire a license. Failure to produce a valid license when registering a claim automatically renders any claim the property of pharaoh, to do with as he wishes. (Failure to register a claim at all is seen as an attempt to rob pharaoh, and is met with slavery for life.) Those lucky few who find a vein worth exploiting must either keep their mining to a small scale, which means meager rewarded for hours of backbreaking toil, or seek wealthy investors. Given that the sphinxes hold the wealth, most are forced to sell the lion's share of their claim in return for capital.

The sphinxes rarely visit the mines in person. Daily affairs are left in the hands of an overseer. He is given a set amount of funds to spend on equipment and provisions



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

and strict quotas to meet. Their position is far from secure—a single missed quota, regardless of the cause, can mean dismissal (and potentially death). Many sell ingots on the black market to line their own pockets, insurance against being removed from office. The sphinxes know this takes place, but so long as the quotas are met they turn a blind eye—the quotas are so high that the theft is minimal, and overworking the miners is risky as this may lead to a loss of productivity in the long-term.

Workers in the gem mines are closely watched, but there is a small chance they can swallow a precious stone without being detected. Once passed through the body, this can be smuggled into the city and sold for as much as a laborer's annual wages. The punishment for being caught is loss of both hands, a fate guaranteed to ensure the only work the victim will evert get is as a beggar.

In theory, all ingots are taken to the temple of Geb-Agni, where the metal is assayed. The ingots are then stamped to indicate their purity, which in turn affects their value on the open market. Since the pharaoh controls the price of metal, it is kept artificially low. Many nobles have taken to using caravans to smuggle ingots to Jizah, City of the Sphinx, where they fetch considerably higher prices.

Despite having abundant mineral wealth on its doorstep, Mizdah has never developed much in the way of a metalworking industry. For sure it has skilled artisans producing everything from exquisite jewelry to common utensils to weapons, but not in sufficient quantities where metalworking is a noticeable export.

## COINAGE

Mizdah has plenty of metal to spare and mints a wide variety of coins. One side is engraved with an image of the pharaoh's head and the date of minting. The reverse is stamped with the name of the city.

The most common coins are the one gold dinar ("Hearth") and one silver dirham ("Ember") coin. Small coins are minted from base metals. The one-half dirham is made of copper and the one-quarter dirham of tin. Given the low value of these metals, they are larger than higher value coins. Other dinar coins are found in denominations of five, ten, 50, and 100.

## LOCAL TAXES

Mizdah makes its money from metal, and it makes a lot of money, at least for the pharaoh. The pharaoh buys ingots from the nobles at a set price and sells them for considerably more. This has not spared the citizens from heavy taxes, though. On average, a citizen loses around 40% of his income in taxation (including tithes).

As the price of food increases, so families have less and less to spend on replacing clothes, broken pots, and the like. Mend and make-do has become the norm, and cheaply made goods and second-hand products are now more popular.

**Customs Duty:** Imports of food are levied at 1%. Ex-

## NEW ARCANE BACKGROUND

### WORD MAGIC

**Requirements:** Novice

**Arcane Skill:** Word Magic (Smarts)

**Starting Powers:** 3

**Powers:** *Banish, beast friend, becalm, bladebreaker, bless/panic, burst, confusion, dispel, entangle, fatigue, fear, knockdown, lock/unlock, quake, silence, slumber, stun, voice on the wind*

It is said by those who dabble in such things that the mages of Mizdah developed many magical arts. Many of these are now lost, eradicated by the sphinxes or the jinn, and known only by name. One of the few arts still practiced in the modern age is word magic. Through shouting specific words, words that transcend any language and resonate through the higher planes, the mage calls forth and binds magical threads together into a cohesive spell.

**Casting:** In order to cast a spell, a mage must be able to shout. It does not matter what languages he knows—the words of power are a unique tongue.

**Edges:** Word mages cannot take the Alchemy or Delay Spell Edges.

**Trappings:** Only sound trappings are allowed.

ports of metal are charged at 3%. All other imports and exports carry a 5% levy. It is illegal to export food (not that anyone wants to buy potentially tainted produce), and few merchants from the other cities see any financial sense in importing metal.

**Docking Fees:** All ocean-going vessels pay a nominal five dinars per day. Barges and ships catering to the mines, and the few remaining rural communities, pay no docking fees.

**Gate Tax:** Use of either of the city's land gates costs a flat one dirham for all forms of transport.

**Prospecting License:** Any citizen who wants to prospect for minerals must have a license. These cost 500 dinars per year, a sum that places them out of the reach of ordinary citizens.

**Sales Tax:** All sales carry a 3% surcharge.

## Architecture

The sphinxes of Mizdah have long flaunted their wealth in public. Government buildings and their palatial homes are grand affairs, spacious even for sphinxes and with exquisite decorations of marble and beaten metal inside and out. Gold is favored for its lustre and value, but silver and polished bronze are equally popular for the contrast they give.

The homes of common citizens, while far less spacious

and extravagant, are decorated to a high standard, at least externally. Unwilling to reveal their worsening financial state to their neighbors, the citizens prefer to sell their possessions rather than strip the precious metal inlaid into their walls or sell off architectural features. Inside, many houses are furnished with secondhand furniture bought on the cheap or bare of all but the most rudimentary objects. While strangers to Mizdah see wealth everywhere, it conceals a growing state of poverty.

## Major Locales

This section details a number of locations in and around Mizdah that heroes may wish to visit.

### CITY DISTRICTS

Mizdah has a population of 89,500 (50% of its greater population). Until the river turned toxic the city housed 20,000 fewer citizens. With little money and even fewer prospects, the displaced farmers have been forced to live in slum districts. Of the rest of the population, most live in and around the foothills of the Godhome Mountains, the location of the mines. The rest are scattered in small pockets across Mizdah's larger territory.

**Docks:** Mizdah sits ten miles inland, on the northern bank of the River Yemuni. Rather than build along the riverbank, the sphinxes carved out a square basin in the heart of the city. Access to the docks is via two short channels. Each of these is protected by a massive gatehouse. Massive portcullises can be lowered in the event of attack or to prevent a rogue vessel leaving. The gates are always closed at night, leaving ships that arrive too late to anchor in the river and await the dawn. The gates are known as Upper Gate (furthest upstream) and Lower Gate (nearest the estuary).

**Fire:** Standing between the palace and the docks, this district is the surface precinct of the temple of Geb-Agni. Within its borders are the city's assay office, small warehouses for ingots awaiting assessment, workshops, the University of the Underworld, and residential areas for clerics and craftsmen. Beneath it is the sprawling temple, which descends four levels into the bowels of the earth. A wide avenue cuts through the district, a busy thoroughfare that links the southwest side of the city to the central districts.

**Granary:** Located adjacent to the northeast part of the docks, the Granary District has been surrounded by a wall to prevent looting. Within the compound are the massive beehive granaries, a small temple to Ashtart, and barracks for the company of city guard assigned to protect the district.

**Palace:** The pharaoh's sprawling palace is situated in the northwest corner of the city. Protected behind high walls, it contains the personal quarters of the pharaoh (including gardens), the barracks of his bodyguard, and important government offices.

**Warehouse:** The warehouses lie south of the docks.

Flanked by the shipping channels to the east and west and the docks to the north, the district is joined to the city by two wooden bridges. These are designed to lift when a vessel needs access to the docks or river.

The warehouses are windowless and have thick walls, but there is no extra special protection. Thieves who steal ingots from the sphinxes are quickly tracked down and ruthlessly punished. Even the thieves' guild has decided the rewards are not worth the vengeance of the nobles.

### CITY LOCALES

**City Walls:** Mizdah is surrounded by rectangular wall. The walls are 40 feet high and 30 feet thick, with octagonal guard towers placed every 150 feet. These double as barracks for the city guard. Atop each tower is a ballista. Alongside each is a metal chest containing the ammunition—ten *blast* bolts with fire trappings. Conventional ammunition is stored in the tower. As well as being able to move along the parapet, soldiers can move unseen along the perimeter wall by means of a narrow tunnel inside the walls.

**Ferry:** A ferry service runs between the city docks and the southern bank of the river. With the land largely deserted, the ferry now runs just twice a day, leaving the city an hour after dawn and an hour before dusk. It remains on the far bank for 30 minutes. Passage costs one dirham for pedestrians, five dirhams for mounts (elephants cost two dinars), and a dinar for wagons.

**Gates:** In addition to the dock gates, Mizdah has two land gates. In the north wall is the Caravan Gate. Although Mizdah is a port, caravans still cross the desert between the city and Jizah, City of the Sphinx. In the southwest corner is River Gate, which provides access to the farming lands that run along the northern bank.

Pharaoh has ordered the gates remain shut except for a two hour period after dawn and before dusk. Traffic unable to enter the city during this narrow time frame must wait outside until the gates are next opened.

**The House of Hibah:** The sphinxes of Mizdah have little interest in mercantile affairs, being content to grow wealthy from the their mining ventures. As such, lesser races have filled the void. House Hibah is one of the oldest and largest merchant families, with business ties to all the noble houses.

Corsairs are a constant problem, especially for ships carrying ingots of precious metal, gems, or food, but House Hibah's fleet has suffered a suspiciously large number of attacks compared to its rivals in the past year. Jawa bint Talal, the fierce and elderly matriarch of the family, suspects someone inside her organization is supplying details of cargo manifests and shipping routes to the corsairs. She is loathe to reveal her problems to outsiders, but she cannot trust anyone close to her and her business is close to financial collapse.

**Humam's Alchemical Ingredients:** Humam ibn Ma'ruf sells ingredients common in magical and miraculous alchemical devices—colored chalks, inks made of unusual plants, dried animal parts, special oils, powdered minerals, and the like.



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

Keen to attract the money of clerics, Humam sells ingredients for Novice spells at half price. Thus, it costs 25 dinars to fully fund a Novice alchemical device. Characters who purchase supplies here should make a note on their character sheet, recording “Novice Alchemical Ingredients” and *double* the value they paid for them (since this is their true value). When the hero wants to create a Novice alchemical device, he can use his pre-bought ingredients. For instance, a hero who spends 10 dinars on ingredients in the store has the equivalent of 20 dinars worth, meaning he can create a Novice device for just another 30 dinars. Each 10 dinars spent on ingredients weighs 0.5 pounds.

**The Mage’s Tower:** The mage school may have been the center of arcane learning in Mizdah, but practitioners lived across the city. One mage abode was a six story circular tower made of black stone. The day the violent purge began, the doorway to the tower vanished. Despite the best efforts of the sphinxes, the structure resisted trebuchets and miracles with equal disdain. Attempts to penetrate the interior through miracles failed in spectacular fashion—the mangled remains of one cleric of Upuaut who tried to teleport inside proved a suitable deterrent. Unable to destroy the tower, the sphinxes instead chose to ignore it. A watch was placed to ensure nothing got in and, more importantly, nothing got out.

Though the sphinxes refuse to admit it, *something* still lives in the tower, despite the passage of 13 centuries. Lights are sometimes seen in the windows, and shadow flitter pass the glass. Attempts to spy on the occupants have proven futile—vision through the windows is one-way only.

**Miners’ Guild:** The Miners’ Guild is a guild in name only, for it has no influence among the sphinxes. Members pay in a few dirhams each week. In return, the guild pays for medicine and healing if the miner falls ill or is injured (though this doesn’t extend to the effects of the toxic river) and ensures a basic funeral on the miner’s death, unless he has retired beforehand.

The guildmaster recently learned that one mine had seemingly closed, for its entire workforce was laid off and slaves moved to neighboring mines. Mines do run dry, but the guildmaster has learned that not only do shipments continue to flow from the mine, but production has actually increased. Even if he was brave enough, he has no authority to confront the sphinx who owns the mine. The entire site is now off-limits to outsiders, but his curiosity demands answers. More importantly, if the noble is breaking the law (such as by using golems or undead as workers), the guildmaster might be able to retire on a rich reward for his silence.

**Picks and Spades:** This small shop caters to the equipment needs of independent prospectors and miners. It sells climbing gear, grappling hooks, hammers, picks, rope, shovels, waterproof satchels and scroll cases, whistles, and the items detailed in the appendix of *Tales from the Sands* at 75% of normal. The owner also sells forged prospecting licenses for 300 dinars, though he doesn’t advertise this openly.

## MORGRIM

Morgrims are a race of savage subterranean humanoids. Perhaps they were once human, though scholars and savants cannot agree on their origin. One popular theory has it they chose to hide underground when the jinn appeared, though critics argue they must have been living in the darkness for considerably longer.

Morgrims are completely blind. Their eyes are milky orbs, which serves to protect them from the harsh glare of the sun so dreaded by other subterranean races. Naturally, their lack of sight and love of darkness has opened a debate on whether they are worshippers of Iblis or cursed by Shamash. They are well-muscled creatures, with pale skin, white hair, and teeth sharpened to points. Though their crude language (dubbed Mor by scholars) shares similarities with Earthtongue, it is unique.

Morgrims can be found in many caves and caverns across Al-Shirkuh, but congregate in greatest numbers in the Realm of the Medusae, where they serve as bodyguards and shock troops. Here, each clan worships the medusa it protects as a living goddess.

**Attributes:** Agility d6, Smarts d4, Spirit d8, Strength d10, Vigor d8

**Skills:** Fighting d6, Notice d10, Stealth d8, Tracking d8

**Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 6

**Gear:** Battle axe (Str+d8)

**Treasure:** Meager (per three morgrims)

**Special Abilities:**

\* **Acute Senses:** Morgrims lack sight, but have acute hearing and sense of smell. They suffer no penalties for poor lighting within 12” outdoors and 24” underground or inside buildings. Vigor rolls to resist spells with sonic trappings are made at -2.

\* **Bite:** Str+d4.

\* **Blind:** Morgrims are completely blind. They ignore the blinding/dazzling effects of darkness and light trappings. They ignore spells such as *obscure* and those based on visual effects (such as *fear* that generates illusions), but are otherwise affected normally by powers.

**Potions & Scrolls:** This shop is located in a quiet backstreet. The owner, Abu Bakr ibn Fath, buys and sells alchemical devices, though he is not an alchemist. His clients are primarily adventurers seeking to dispose of unwanted devices at a good price (Abu Bakr pays a flat 50% of the value) and purchase more useful ones (he has contacts among all the cults). Not everything Abu Bakr buys or acquires is destined for the shop. As well as being a legitimate businessman, Abu Bakr is a member of the Hands of Freedom and a friend to the local Unfortunate Souls.

**University of the Underworld:** The university stands above the subterranean temple of Geb-Agni. Although the university is run by the greater cult, most of the tutors are clerics or followers of Nergal.

The dean, Baykutay, a cakali, has urgent need of heroes. Three weeks ago, his daughter was part of an expedition intent on exploring a recently discovered cave system. Her last message, sent a week ago by means of a *voice on the wind* alchemical device, indicated that were preparing to descend into a large cavern. All attempts to contact her remotely have failed.

*Special:* Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; *Skills:* Knowledge (Alchemy); *Edges:* Dungeon Crawler.

## BUFOMI LAIR

It is not just the natives of Mizdah the toxic water has affected. That several tribes of bufomi live in the marshes flanking the river is well-known. While they occasionally snatched a lone traveller, they were timid creatures, content to dine on snakes and lizards and remain in their dank homes. In return, the pharaoh didn't waste resources trying to eradicate them.

Their numbers severely culled by the toxins, the remaining bufomi have banded together and grown increasingly belligerent. Inspired to righteous fury by the slime lord (see *Creature Guide: Bufomi* or *Hellfrost Rassilon Expansion*), they have abandoned their ancient homes and migrated into the agricultural lands of Mizdah. Here they wage war on the remaining communities, killing any and all farmers and livestock they come across without remorse. Montjuhirkopshef has no interest in the fields and has refused to send the army to fight a guerilla war, leaving the settlements to look to their own defence.

## MASIAF CASTLE

Situated a mile upstream from where the River Yemuni ceases to be navigable even to barges, Masiaf Castle is a small castle surrounded by a village of some 400 souls. It is a major transit point, where ingots carried down from the mines by porters and mules are loaded onto barges and food shipments destined for the hungry workers unloaded. Two squads of medium infantry and three squads of archers occupy the castle and keep watch over the wharves.

## THE STEPPED PYRAMID

The land south of the River Yemuni is most a barren wasteland of dunes and rocks, inhabited only by a few small Bedu tribes and prospectors hoping to strike it rich. The last Bedu caravan to visit Mizdah reported a terrible sandstorm had swept across the land. After it had passed, the nomads spotted a feature they have not seen before—four large tiers of stone ending at a small platform.

Digging away the sand, the Bedu discovered only more stone tiers. They have no idea how far it descends. Atop the stepped pyramid, for such the structure must be, they discovered a stone trapdoor. Too superstitious to disturb the dead, no matter how richly they are adorned, the Bedu have since given the site a wide berth—those who sleep nearby are troubled by dreams, in which they are being chased through a labyrinth by an unseen pursuer.

## PERSONS OF NOTE

Described below are a few of the city's many denizens the heroes may encounter while exploring the city.

### MANY-COLORED SHIELD HABBAB IBN JAMAL

The cult of Ishkar, minor goddess of magic (see *Realm Guide #2*), is outlawed in Mizdah because of its desire to study magic. As far as Montjuhirkopshef is concerned, this makes them little better than mages, and certainly means they are sympathizers who cannot be trusted. This does not mean the cult has no presence, only that its adherents must hide their activities.

A paladin of Qedeset, Habbab was inducted into a secret cabal of Ishkar's cultists operating in the city. Vocally and publicly opposed to all study and use of magic, he has attained the rank of sergeant in the Guardians of the Faith. Habbab does hate khem-hekau mages, who he sees as dabbling in dark forces, but he has no desire to see all mages persecuted.

Mages he *detects* are never arrested immediately. Instead, he has a trusted agent follow them to their lodgings. He later makes contact with the mage, questioning him about the art he studies. Khem-hekau mages are quickly reported to his superiors. Otherwise, and if he deems the mage to be of good characters, he offers them a (not guaranteed) safe way out of the city by means of *conceal arcana*. (Habbab has *Spell Finesse: Arcane* with regard *detect/conceal*.) All he asks in return is for the mage to track down a cleric of Ishkar and help with his studies by answering any questions they might have regarding matters arcana.

### MONA BINT BAHIJ

Beautiful, exotic, and fully aware of her charms, Mona is both a member of the Sisterhood of Seven Veils and a priestess of Tamarni. She uses her wiles to seduce weak-willed males into furthering the goals of her sisters. Mona keeps her cards close to her chest and plays a careful game. She never gives her many paramours direct orders. In order to maintain her innocence should a plan backfire, she makes off-hand suggestions, leaving it to the dupe to act on what he thinks is his own initiative.



## MUQLAD

### City of Woes

The black stains that mark the once gleaming limestone streets and walls are mirrored in the hearts of the noble sphinxes who run the city. While Muqlad's many problems are natural in origin, they are exacerbated by the nobles' lack of cooperation and inbred arrogance and lust for power.

### Social Hierarchy

That the body of Pharaoh Djedamunhotep has not yet been found lies at the root of Muqlad's problems. Across the Kingdoms it is common religious doctrine that whereas all sphinxes are blessed beings, only the pharaoh is the divine representative of his chosen deity. Until he is buried with proper funeral rites, his spirit cannot leave the earthly plane and return to the god's side, whereupon it is cleansed of any sins and returned to the world of mortals to inhabit the new pharaoh's body. Even in the event of a coup usurpers have waited until the predecessor's corpse was duly interred. While claiming it was an act of respect, it was really the fear the spirit of their forebear would remain among mortals and seek out vengeance.

Regardless of what actually happened, pharaoh's disappearance threw the city into political turmoil. The sphinxes had weathered many regime changes down the ages, but never had the entire royal family been wiped out in a single event. With no one noble house having the outright influence or strength to seize the throne without initiating a bloody civil war, the sphinxes were reluctantly forced to convene a council of regents.

The council was doomed from the start, and the city became a battlefield overnight. No war of swords and spears was fought on its streets, for this was a subtle war fought using politics, religion, and economics.

The situation would not be resolved even if his corpse were found. Sar-Nesu Akhnetre may have unearthed a means to ascend, but he has not shared this information. In the event another house locates the corpse, he would have no reason to speak out. The entire royal family is dead, there is no historical precedent on which to draw, and the *status quo* is not sustainable—even if the citizens don't revolt, the regents' yearning for power will force one of them to act sooner or later. When that day comes, the resulting chaos is likely to make Muqlad's current problems seem pale in comparison.

Sar-Nesu Akhnetre's outlandish plan to steal the royal regalia appears to have one obvious flaw—his peers are fully aware the regalia is stored in the palace vaults, for pha-

raoh wore it only on official occasions. In order to work, the theft must be perfect, the thieves leaving absolutely no evidence of their presence. This will enable the regent to claim the gods have intervened to save the city and acclaim the new pharaoh. As insidious as the plan is, it may actually be the best hope for a smooth transition of power.

While the sphinxes argue and plot at court, the common people suffer. Many see the current woes as a sign of divine displeasure. Clerics of all races and cults have suffered a loss of status, the people seeing them more and more as tools of the sphinxes rather than upholders of religious tenets.

The loss of agricultural land to desertification and floods has given rise to a new underclass—the dispossessed. Their homes abandoned and their possessions sold, they exist somewhere between the *mushaf* and the *barajam*. Some earn a living as day laborers, hired for a pittance to work long hours, but the work is irregular. Others rely on charity, but as the hardship continues so that is steadily drying up.

### WHERE'S THE BODY?

Three years have passed since Pharaoh Djedamunhotep's disappearance. During this time countless rumors as to his fate have been birthed.

One rumor that refuses to die is that the storm was created by vengeful jinn, who then kidnapped the pharaoh seconds before the crash. The nobles have repeatedly tried to quash this, arguing that no ransom has been demanded. If it *were* proven, they insist they would move mountains to free their imprisoned lord. It has not gone unnoticed, however, that since the initial search no one has bothered to look for pharaoh's body with any fervor.

More outlandish theories exist. Some insist he was murdered by his bodyguards at the behest of his eldest son. Again, this scenario has the crash an accident, though some hint it may have been divine retribution. Another story has it that pharaoh survived the impact but lost his memory. He now wanders the desert, unaware of his status. That he might have chosen to remain in the desert to search for Hamapta's tomb is a possibility, though why he would do so in person and without a bodyguard makes it an unlikely scenario.

Another says pharaoh was never on the barque. Having had a divine revelation while in the desert, he had chosen to live out his remaining days as a hermit. The crash was an unfortunate accident. Now dwelling at some remote oasis, Djedamunhotep has yet to hear the news, hence why he has not reappeared.

## RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in Muqlad.

\* **Disease:** Outbreaks of sickness are common when the river floods the city. During such times characters must make a Vigor roll to avoid contracting a generic Short-Term, Debilitating disease. On a critical failure, they contract a more serious Long-Term Chronic, Minorly Debilitating disease.

\* **Food:** The price of all meals and rations is four times normal.

\* **Native Heroes:** A native character may choose to be a graduate of *one* of the advanced universities. Each grants certain benefits, as listed below, but only during character generation and the hero must meet all other requirements. Unless otherwise stated, these benefits are only open to heroes with Smarts d8+, Rich, or Arcane Background (Miracles).

*Hunters' Academy:* For one skill point, the hero may take Knowledge (Area: The Salt Marsh) and Knowledge (Monsters: Gators) at d4, or one of the skills at d6. Alternately, he may treat Favored Foe (Gators) as a Novice Edge.

*Natural Arts:* For one skill point, the character may take both Healing and Knowledge (Alchemy) at d4, or one of them at d6. Alternately, he may lower one required trait die by one die type when taking the Hedge Magic Edge.

## Education

As the city slides toward poverty so education has become more prized by the lesser races, though no less affordable. Few children have the raw intelligence or wealth necessary to attend formal schooling, meaning they are destined to end up as unskilled laborers (of which there is a glut), enlisting in the military (which promises little wealth or social promotion), or being fortunate to secure one of the handful of apprenticeship with a master craftsman on offer each year.

Aside from its basic university, the University of the Western Kingdoms, the city has two higher education establishments. Both are run by cults, though they are open to Devoted students. Highly specialized, neither is seen as prestigious as the main university.

The Hunters' Academy is run by the cult of Taweret, minor deity of crocodile hunting. Muqlad may lie over 500 miles from the Salt Marsh, but it is the closest major city, and thus supply base, for those who wish to study or hunt gators and large crocodiles (small specimens can be found on the River Damasc). Indeed, outsiders make up the bulk of its student body. Basic courses cover known facts about the gators and their homeland. The advanced course focuses on how to fight gators.

The University of the Natural Arts is run by the cult of

Marqod. The basic courses cover mundane healing and a broad knowledge of alchemical practices. The advanced course is devoted to herbalism.

## Religion

The royal cult of Ashtart is a body without a head. With the entire royal family dead, the Steward of the Temple, Asha bint Yahmoud, has become the *de facto* head of the cult. There are sphinxes from other houses among the clergy, but without the pharaoh's blessing they cannot become high priest. Despite this, Asha has no position on the ruling council.

The loss of agricultural land has caused the cult's core worshippers to turn away from the temple, but Asha is not prepared to sit on her hands and let her goddess take the blame. She has pointed the finger at Apsu, for causing the floods, and Duamutef, for the encroachment of the sands, accusations that have earned her covert support from the other noble houses.

Most nobles know that once a new pharaoh is appointed and the canal system complete, agriculture will quickly prosper. Thus, while a new pharaoh will mean a new royal cult, his successor is very likely to adopt Ashtart as patron. Asha is very unlikely to still be alive when this occurs, but the nobles (outside of those following Apsu and Duamutef) see sense in keeping her on their side for now—although a lesser being, her approval as the highest ranking member of what is officially still the royal cult would help legitimize their claim to the throne.

Having the royal cult speak out against them has done the cults of Apsu and Duamutef no favors. The former has earned few friends among the populace by blaming delays on the canal building on his noble peers—the canals may be the solution to the problem, but flooding is the cause. If Apsu is angry, the people demand to know, why has the cult not done anything to appease him?

No pharaoh in any city has ever worshipped Duamutef, and the noble houses who honor him are traditionally among the weakest. That he is honored at all is because he is the god of hospitality, hunting, and archers—the sphinxes may once have been wanderers in the desert, but they are now thoroughly settled. In Muqlad, the cult, and thus the associated house, has gone from being largely ignored to targets of hate as the desert swallows more and more former agricultural land. So far the cult has failed to come up with any theological argument for the problem that does not besmirch the royal cult (which would lessen their authority over the people and slight the dead pharaoh's name).

Marqod has gained few worshippers, but her cult has benefitted from the disease that follows each flood. While its healers can do little to alleviate the misery, its herbalists earn good money supplying antibiotic and antibacterial herbal remedies. The sar-nesu has not raised prices (nor has he lowered them) in order to profit. As usual with sphinxes, compassion toward the lesser races



is the last thing on his leonine mind—he has kept the prices low in order to garner support among the common people.

The citizens grumble, but social unrest has yet to affect the city. That may soon change, for the cult of Erra, minor deity of civil and military disorder (see p. 62) has sensed a ripe opportunity to work its insidious charms. For the best part of two years a handful of clerics have been sowing the seeds of unrest, directing resentment not only at every noble house but at various elements of society (such as the dispossessed, who have flocked to the city, taking food and jobs from hardworking city dwellers). Simultaneously, they stir up trouble among the sphinxes, insinuating that rivals are preparing to make their move for the throne or are engaged in non-existent plots to destroy the other houses. Tensions are simmering beneath the surface, and the cult is busily working toward the day they boil over into social chaos.

## LOCAL FESTIVALS

**Day of Masks:** The Day of Masks is devoted to the ancestors. While Remembrance Day marks the traditional day to remember the names of one's ancestors and ensure their continued existence in the Afterlife, this festival calls upon the ancestors to bless the family in the coming year. It is held on Tamith Yaus al-Nefar Alak Neteru, the last day of the calendar year.

From midnight through the midnight, citizens don funeral masks. Now standing between life and death (figuratively speaking), they are close to their ancestors, allowing the departed to pass on blessings to the living. Most masks are generic and made of leather or wood. Others are inscribed with the names of ancestors who possessed a particular skill, or are fashioned from more expensive materials.

**Day of Tears:** Added to the civic calendar three years ago, Baot Yaus al-Ittrou Tamith Alak Paret marks the date of the fateful crash. Citizens spend the day calling out Djedamunhotep's name, beating their chests in anguish, and weeping. Many of the tears are real, though few are shed in memory of the pharaoh. Rather, their presence is grief for the city's declining fortunes. The sphinxes make a great show of attending the temple of Ashtart to pray for a sign that pharaoh has ascended, their faces marked with tear-shaped henna tattoos for a week afterward.

## Military

Once known as the Western Bastion, Muqlad's army proudly defended the northern cities against potential threats emanating from the Great Northern Desert. No danger has reared its head from that direction in over a thousand years, nor is it ever likely to—the Desert of Deception is a natural barrier. The border forts are long abandoned, their bricks reduced to dust by time and wind. For generations, the army switched its main

duty to protecting the farmland on which Muqlad relied, but that has now been taken from them. Fortunately, the sphinxes still have a use for soldiers, more now, in fact, than ever before.

## ARMY

Despite the city's ailing fortunes, the army has actually doubled in size over the last two years. At present, Muqlad boasts four infantry regiments (each with seven light infantry and three archer companies), four battalions of light cavalry, and two battalions of chariots.

The expansion of the army is not due to any external threat—the regents are so involved in their plots that they have utterly failed to notice Kharijah's overt fortification of its western border, yet alone the more subtle (and arguably more threatening) expansion of Muqlad's immediate neighbor, Talawdi, City of Sails. Rather, the regents have enlarged the army partly to control the population should their restlessness turn to violence and partly to further their own plans. The latter has not been entirely successful.

The army is no longer unified. Pharaoh's second son served as general, and the appointment of a new general has stalled in council. Entire companies are in the pay of various houses, and some to more than one. Instead of protecting the borders, units have been quietly maneuvered to protect the interests of their paymasters and place them in a position where they can strike against rivals when the time comes.

The city guard stands at four companies, an increase of one company in two years. Control of the captains is extremely important to the nobles, for whoever controls the city guard controls the city. Unfortunately, the situation of who the captains will ultimately answer to is just as murky as with the regular army, with one taking bribes from no less than six houses.

The pharaoh's bodyguard is known as the Green Shield after their colored cloaks and crowns of flowers. Formerly two companies strong, it currently stands at just 120 men—30 perished in the crash that killed the royal family, those drawn from the cult of Ashtart have returned to the temple, and 14 few have died under mysterious circumstances in the last three years. All of the deceased were present on the escort barque. Since the unit has declared it will remain loyal to Djedamunhotep until his corpse is retrieved, the regents have refused to fund recruitment.

With the pharaoh's apartments deserted, the captain of the guard, Royal Captain Abdul-Sattar ibn Hamdan, has focused his men's attentions on protecting the regents (a task he loathes) and ensuring the pharaoh's personal treasury is not plundered by the nobles. Fortunately, the law of the land is on his side with regard the latter. The reason he has ordered the treasury sealed is to hide his theft of thousands of dinars, something not noticeable at a casual glance at the vast wealth but that would become apparent if an audit was undertaken. He intends to leave the city soon, taking his ill-gotten gains with him.

## NAVY

Muqlad's navy has escaped the corruption endemic to the army simply by dint of its pathetic size and it playing no major part in the sphinxes' plans. With no hostile neighbors in the west or north to guard against, the fleet is just eight light warships. It is very much a token force, for if Talawdi decided to invade by sea it would brush aside Muqlad's fleet in moments.

Ignored by the regents, the ship captains have decided to get rich by dabbling in piracy. Lacking the strength to attack convoys, they prey on lone vessels. In order that their identity is not reported back to Muqlad or its major trading partners, the corsairs are forced to eliminate any witnesses.

## Law & Order

Muqlad's population has increased dramatically in the past three years, yet the regents refuse to expand the city guard from its current two companies. Lack of resources means the watch cannot hope to provide adequate safety, yet alone investigate crimes.

The watch is corrupt, but not overtly so. Citizens can escape arrest by paying a bribe, but few watchmen demand one as matter of course. Most sergeants are in the pay of the noble houses, taking large sums to ensure their watch patrol is nowhere near a certain building on specific nights or ensure incriminating evidence is found on, or at least in the home of, citizens who financially or vocally support a rival house. Since the sphinxes always work through agents, the sergeants actually have no idea who is paying them (not that they care about the little details), something the thieves' guild has been quick to take advantage of.

Neighborhood watches have sprung up across the city. As citizens, they have no powers to arrest suspects. With the watch largely uninterested, justice is meted out through beatings. Unfortunately, the watch can be rather overzealous, preferring to beat first and worry about whether a crime was actually committed afterward. Some have started demanding payment from shops and craftsmen in their neighborhood.

The Brotherhood of Unfortunate Souls struggles not only to defend the growing number of destitute citizens from predators seeking to rob them of what little wealth they have, but citizens falsely targeted by the neighborhood watches.

The courts have proven equally corrupt, though the cult of Tammuz is trying to stamp this out. Clerics are duty bound to enforce the law, of course. The noble house honoring Tammuz is keen to maintain its grip purely so it can manipulate trials when it suits them.

Thanks to its willingness to bribe the watch, the thieves' guild, the Black Cloaks, operate almost with impunity. Common citizens may have fewer valuables worth stealing, but business is still good. Aside from hashish

and khem-hekau artifacts, the guild has little interest in smuggling—food is too bulky to smuggle past inspectors in sufficient quantities to make much profit—though it works on an as-needed basis when wealthy citizens need something small but valuable delivered to them without the added burden of paying customs duty.

## Trade & Tribute

Stuck out on the western flank of the Kingdoms, with no viable overland trading route, and with the mercantile powerhouse of Talawdi as its neighbor, Muqlad has struggled to develop a serious trading network.

Another factor limiting its mercantile prospects is that while Muqlad sells a wide variety of goods, it has no notable major exports. As far as the merchants of Ostmark, the city's main trading partners, are concerned it offers novelties (in that the wares are of foreign design), but nothing residents of the frozen north either truly need or desperately desire.

Once able to feed its population and export surplus, the city now relies on ever-increasing imports of grain and vegetables from Ostmark. In order to meet growing demand, Ostmark's merchants are themselves beginning to import food from neighboring realms, further increasing the price the hungry citizens of Muqlad must pay. Food prices have doubled in the past year as local farms vanish beneath the sands or produce poor harvests, and are likely to keep rising for the foreseeable future. Local agriculture is further hampered by crop thieves. They have always been a nuisance, but until recently they never harmed the farmers. In the last year the raids have turned into violent attacks that have left no survivors.

The sphinxes' rivalries are not helping. Customs officials are routinely bribed to ensure merchant vessels owned by or loyal to other houses undergo thorough inspections, delaying them from loading or unloading cargo. Often a captain may find his ship impounded for breach of some minor (and possibly fictitious) law until he pays a stiff fine.

## COINAGE

The pharaoh may be missing, presumed dead, but his head is still stamped on newly minted coins. The reverse carries a stylized beehive and ear of wheat, a sad reminder that agriculture was once big business in Muqlad.

Just two coins are minted as standard. The one dinar piece is known as an "Ear," its color being similar to that of ripe wheat. The one silver dirham coin is known as a "White." This comes from its unusual white color. In an effort to curb the cost of importing silver, a previous pharaoh decreed the coins should be a silver-tin mix. Since they are not pure silver, they are larger than dirham coins found elsewhere.

Smaller denomination coins are still legal tender, though none have been minted in over 100 years. Again,

# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

this was to save having on imports. When half or quarter dirhams are required, modern citizens simply cut existing one dirham coins as appropriate.

Gold and silver scields are so common that they carry the same nicknames as native coins. When trade with Ostmark first began, the locals were perplexed and fascinated by the unusual shape and strange markings. The thieves' guild promptly set about creating forgeries of base metal with a thin coating of precious metal, which it used to buy all manner of goods.

Once the truth got out, the city treasury was quickly flooded with them as citizens paid their taxes in forgeries. Most fake scields have now been destroyed, but some remain in circulation, and there are unscrupulous shopkeepers and merchants prepared to cheat strangers by slipping forgeries into their change.

## LOCAL TAXES

For all their flaws, the regents have earned a modicum of respect by not putting up taxes. Not that the average citizen has much cause to celebrate—he loses 50% of his annual income to taxes. The city is far from bankrupt, but the treasury is rapidly diminishing. Imports of food account for some of this, but much of the wealth has vanished into the private coffers of the nobles.

**Customs Duty:** Imports of food are charged at 0.5%. All other imports, and all exports save for honey, are levied at 3%.

**Docking Fees:** Ships are charged 10 dinars per day.

**Excise Duty:** Muqlad doesn't export honey in any great quantity, especially these days, but what it does sell is of the highest quality. The pharaohs have long known this, and imposed a 30% tax on all exports.

**Gate Tax:** Access into the city costs one dirham for pedestrians, two dirhams for mounts, and five dirhams for wagons. Citizens have the option of paying two times this amount in dinars on an annual basis, allowing them to use the gates as often as needed without paying any extra. Wooden tokens are issued and must be displayed on passing through a gate.

**Sales Tax:** A 7% levy is charged on all sales.

## Architecture

Everyone agrees that the old city, one still fondly recalled by elderly citizens, was a thing of beauty, its white limestone streets and facades glittering in the sun. Today, the city is two-tone in color, with the black stain of mold at ground level and gleaming limestone at higher levels. No amount of detergent or hard work has managed to remove the stains. Few citizens even bother to try.

Citizens fortunate enough to own two story houses have mostly migrated to the upper floor, away from the stench of mold and the damp. The lower floors have become home to the city's poor, who pay the householder rent for the privilege of having a roof over their heads.

Some citizens are charitable, charging only a nominal (but much needed) sum. Others care little for the plight of their fellow man, and charge as much as renting an entire house in good working order. Those who can't or won't pay are forced to live in crowded slums, often with an entire family crammed into a single room, or live on the equally damp and filthy streets.

Few of the poorest citizens (many of whom suffer chronic chest infections) bother with buying furniture—come the next flood it will be ruined, and if they need something "new" they can always scavenge from the items thrown out by the rich, many of which have minimal damage.

Things are different for the rich. After each flood, the tarnished limestone facade is carefully chipped away and replaced with fresh stone. Thus, it has become easy to tell who has wealth (or at least wants people to think that) and who does not.

## Major Locales

Detailed below are a number of places in and around the city that heroes may have cause to visit.

### CITY DISTRICTS

Muqlad's ancient founder built the city 20 miles up-river of the estuary, so as to take advantage of the closest flat ground to the sea. Although divided by the waterway, the two halves of the city do not have separate names.

Built to house 65,000 people comfortably, the modern city has a population of over 80,000. Refugees from the failing agricultural belt have flocked to the city in search of work, leading to the creation of new slums.

**Docks:** Both sides of the river are lined with wharves, warehouses, merchants' offices, small shops, customs posts, restaurants, inns, taverns, and watch stations. By day, the bustling but narrow streets echoes to calls in Saxa and Trader, with ships' captains announcing their wares and local merchants touting for business in what have become the *de facto* languages of the district. By night, traditional Ostmarker songs echo along the streets, emanating from the many inns and taverns now catering to northern tastes.

**Garden:** The fertile banks of the Damasc allowed Muqlad's founders to create public parks and gardens. Due to flooding, much of the district is now coated in a thick layer of dry mud, which blows through the streets in miniature sandstorms in summer and becomes a sticky quagmire after the spring regular floodwater recedes. Plants grow here, but many are succumbing to rot following years of floods. Large areas are now covered in tents, makeshift homes for recent arrivals to the city.

**Palace:** The palace dominates the western city. Behind its walls lie the silent apartments of the pharaoh, the royal court (now home to the council of regents), government offices, and private gardens. The core of the palace is deserted, its marble floors ringing out only with the occasional tread of a sentry or servant.



## ERRA

**Titles:** Mouth of Iblis, Enemy of Shamash, Lord of Unrest, Creator of Trouble, Father of Lies, He Who Rallies Against Order, the Disorderly One.

**Aspects:** Civil and military disorder.

**Affiliations:** Iblis.

**Symbol:** A whip with a broken handle.

**Priesthood:** Inciters (priests); Insurrectionists (paladins).

**Herald:** None.

**Holy Days:** None. Any day the cleric helps cause a riot, mutiny, or other form of civil or military disorder is a personal high holy day.

**Duties:** To create civil and military disorder.

**Sins:** (Minor) not breaking a law once per week, speaking out in favor of a ruling authority unless doing so would create disorder, failure to create civil or military unrest when the opportunity presents itself; (Major) failure to support civil or military disorder; (Mortal) actively participating in putting down civil or military disorder.

**Signature Power:** *Boost/lower trait* (Smarts, Spirits, Intimidation, Persuasion, and Streetwise only).

**Powers:** *Charismatic aura, disease, fear, panic* (no bless), *puppet, speak language, voice on the wind*.

**Trappings:** Clerics shun showy trappings, so as to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Erra considered himself a free spirit. At every opportunity he rallied against Shamash's strict order by stirring up dissent. The God War might have ended sooner and with fewer casualties had not Erra interfered. Many Faithful scholars accept that it was he who caused great numbers of celestial beings to flock to Iblis' side and weakened the morale of the gods' armies. After the War, Iblis offered Erra sanctuary from Shamash's wrath, and rewarded the godling with promotion to the status of minor deity.

Erra has no temples and very few shrines. As champions of disorder, clerics rarely cooperate. Indeed, they have been known to actively work against each other when it furthers their deity's cause. When depicted in art, Erra is shown with a serpent's head and protruding forked tongue.

Clerics thrive on creating large scale social chaos. Priests tend to stick to civil matters, whereas paladins favor military unrest. Sly words and false rumors are their preferred tools. A priest may start a rumor that food stores in a city are running low, and that the nobles are stockpiling reserves so as to be able to sell them later for huge profits, or that the city is about to be attacked. He might inform a ruler that the people are restless, encouraging him to crack down hard to crush any dissent (knowing the people will fight back). A paladin, on the other hand, may try to cause a company to desert the field of battle at a crucial moment, insinuate that officers

**Stink Town:** A notorious slum, Stink Town is home to most of the city's sand goblin population. Lying close to the river, it is more susceptible to flooding. City workers make no attempt to clean the streets after each flood, and the limestone pavement is caked in dried sewage and slick mold. Poverty is rife, and the slum has a reputation for being a den of thieves, swindlers, and beggars. The goblins are mostly allies of the Brotherhood of Unfortunate Souls, offering safe refuge (if one doesn't mind the stench and filthy conditions) in return for protection.

**The White City:** The local name for the residential district close to the palace and dominated by the sphinxes' palaces, the White City is the cleanest in Muqlad. During Djedamunhotep's reign, the nobles were forced to buy fresh limestone from their own coffers. Since his disappearance, the gleaming surfaces have been financed by money siphoned from the city treasury.

## CITY LOCALES

**Ashtart's Bounty:** While the floods have destroyed many crops, the damp conditions in the city's basements are perfect for growing edible fungus. Rich in protein, fungus is a cheap alternative to meat and is growing in popularity. This restaurant serves a wide variety of fungus dishes, as well as raw and dried fungus for home use, and has developed a good reputation.

Not all the fungus is as innocent as it seems. The higher land flanking the river is riddled with caves and tunnels. At first, Tamadur hint Rasul, the restaurant owner, who grew up in a rural community, was content to harvest the bountiful fungus that grew in the dank caves. More recently, she has taken to harvesting the creatures responsible for cultivating the fungus—fungals. Tamadur sees the fungals as edible mobile plants, and the succulent flesh fetches high prices for its unusual, meaty taste. Although plant life, fungals are sentient beings. The normally pacifistic beings have taken offence to being hunted and are taking out their vengeance on the outlying farms.

**The Black Palace:** The fire-blackened walls of this abandoned sphinx palace sticks out like a sore thumb. Folklore says it was built by a noble, though his name and house has altered down the centuries. Shortly after it was finished, it burned down, killing the owner and his family. A relative inherited the property, repaired the damage, and moved in. He too perished in a fire. Arguments rage over how many sphinxes lost their lives before the palace was finally abandoned, but all agree the site has been deserted for at least a century. What made the fires all the more mysterious is that the flames never blackened the surrounding walls, nor did they spread to neighboring properties. Although the grounds could provide living space for hundreds of citizens, not even the lowliest beggar considers spending the night inside.

**Boutaq the Alchemist:** Boutaq, a jinn mage specializing in earth, fire, and water, is long-sighted and forgetful. The mage knows a wide variety of Novice and Seasoned spells and he sells his devices for just 70 dinars

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per spell Rank. Boutaq's infirmities have lead to a growing number of errors in his creations. While they register as the intended spell to the touch, some backfire or otherwise go awry when used. When a hero uses one of Boutaq's creations, the GM should draw a card from the action deck. On a Club suit, there is a mishap of the GM's choosing. Examples include *armor* causing the intended target to glow brightly, *fly* creating a swarm of biting flies that attacks everyone in sight, an offensive spell that targets the caster, or a spell lasting just three rounds.

**Embassy of Ostmark:** The second son of Marchand-Jarl Tradawoman Helga Wealth-Hound, ruler of Lieska, Ostmark's second town, Hagdar Ivansunu has been ambassador to Muqlad for the past two years. Although the title carries some prestige both locally and back home, it is very much an inferior posting compared to that of ambassador to Talawdi.

Young, eager to escape his domineering mother, keen to increase his personal wealth, and not too bright, Hagdar didn't question why the previous ambassador resigned his post. The regents' political games are slowly stifling trade and fuelling corruption, leaving the young ambassador frustrated. Another census is due next year, and Hagdar knows his career may be cut short when the new Trada Council convenes. To ensure he returns home rich, Hagdar has started smuggling hashish to Ostmark for the thieves' guild and relaying the cargoes of merchant vessels to corsairs.

Having detected the influx of drugs, the Trada Council has authorized agents to track down and eliminate the source. Foolishly, they introduced themselves to the ambassador on their arrival out of courtesy. Hagdar is currently hiring bodyguards. He is quite prepared to have the agents murdered if they come close to discovering his involvement.

**The 'Gator's Tale:** A popular inn for adventurers returning from the Salt Marsh and locals who enjoy a good story, the 'Gator's Tale is easily recognizable by the mummified alligator nailed over its door. Adventurers who bring back the tail of an alligator or gatorman and recount the story of how they acquired it are rewarded with free food, drink, and accommodation, to the sum of 20 dinars. The tails are used to make the inn's specialty soup, a meaty broth seasoned with plenty of herbs.

**The Herb Garden:** In order to increase production of herbal remedies easier, the cult of Marqod cultivates large patches of common herbs within the temple precinct. Protected by the walls of the precinct and grown in raised beds, the herb garden has weathered the worst of the floods largely unscathed. The cult sells fresh plants to herbalists. Rarer herbs are grown as well, but these are reserved for the clerics. Prices for fresh herbs start at 16 dinars for +0 rarity, and halve in price for each +1 modifier, to a value of 1 dinar per batch for +4 rarity. Remember, a high rarity modifier means the herbs are harder to work with.

**The Honey Bazaar:** Muqlad has long been known for its honey. Quantities and quality have diminished, but the sticky food is still considered the best in the King-

doms. The Honey Bazaar stands within the compound of Ashtart's temple. Honey can be purchased by the spoonful (normally spread on bread and pastries supplied by the customer) or in clay pots. Dozens of types of honey are available, ranging in color and flavor based on the season it was harvested and the diet of the bees.

Rarely do they ever act as ringleaders. Clerics prefer to speak as a friend or fellow concerned citizen, gently guiding others toward disorder, but never openly suggesting it—nudging a soul to sin is much more satisfying than ordering it. The cult has no interest in the outcome of the unrest they create. Once the unrest begins, they quietly slip away and watch the usually brutal repercussions from the sidelines.

**Character Guidelines:** Words are a cleric's most powerful weapons. Persuasion is ideal for stirring up the masses through direct speech, whereas Streetwise can be used to start rumors. Edges such as Attractive and Charismatic should be favored over Combat Edges, even for paladins.

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**The Hunters' Academy:** As well as providing education, the school arranges for safaris for rich citizens who want to kill alligators or gatormen. Few of these have any experience of life outside the city, yet alone the dangerous environs of the Salt Marsh. The academy is always after experienced adventurers prepared to serve as guides and bodyguard to its patrons.

**Special:** Students must be able to speak Sphinx. Literacy is not required; **Skills:** Knowledge (Area: The Salt Marsh), Knowledge (Monsters: Gatormen); **Edges:** Favored Foe (Gatormen); **Languages:** Lesarde.

**The Naked Dragon:** This inn is unusual for its tables, all of which are polished sand dragon scales. The decor dates back centuries. According to folklore the first owner was a retired adventurer, though whether he was a dragon-slayer or discovered the legendary Dragon's Graveyard (see p. 64) is still debated. Although they are hard wearing, tables sometimes need replacing. The current owner pays 100 dinars for usable dragon scales.

**The Soilmen's Guild:** Muqlad's growing population has placed pressure on the sewage system. In a bid to prevent total collapse, soilmen collect human and animal waste from houses. They also cut thick mud from the exposed riverbed at low tide. Their harvest is then shipped up the river in barges, where it is sold to farmers for fertilizer. The Guild is unofficial and has an unsavory reputation. Not only do its members stink of the produce they collect, they threaten those who refuse to hand over their waste or try to cash in on their monopoly



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with violence. Valuable objects (or at least objects worth a few coins) recovered from the river are sold from a small booth outside the guildhouse.

**University of the Natural Arts:** Slime and mold is nothing special in Muqlad. For the most part they are harmless. The cult of Marqod, which runs the school, has heard disturbing reports. Locals speak of mold whose spores are deadly to inhale, or slimes that corrode flesh if touched, and even patches that move of their own accord. The reports might be nothing more than fanciful imagination, but they might also indicate the presence of cultists of Steriklus, demon lord of ooze and decay (see *Realm Guide #45*). With the clerics busy tending to the growing number of paupers, the cult is seeking outsiders to investigate.

*Special:* Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; *Skills:* Healing, Knowledge (Alchemy); *Edges:* Hedge Magic.

**Weapons of the World:** This small shop, located in a dark corner of the main souk, sells weapons from distant lands. The shop is owned by Tamira, a partially blind, mute old woman whose ancestors hailed from the Jade Empire. She is helped by a team of trained monkeys, who fetch goods for customers and even haggle, using their fingers to display costs and show disdain for ridiculously low offers. Rumors abound the monkeys know how to use the weapons, though no one has ever witnessed this.

Tamira has never revealed the source of her stock, but is likely illegal—the Jade Empire does not permit exports of its native weapons. Most of the weapons are merely foreign versions of standard arms, unusual only in their design, but she does stock more exotic tools of war.

*Fighting Fan:* This fighting fan has a thin, metal edge running along the top, which allows it to be used as a slashing weapon. The fan, when spread, can be used to distract and confuse foes. When performing the Defend maneuver, the user receives a further +1 Parry bonus. *Stats:* Damage: Str+d4; Weight: 2 lbs.; Cost: 250 dinars.

*Repeating Crossbow:* This is a lever-action crossbow which fires bolts from a magazine. *Stats:* Range: 15/30/60; Damage: 2d6, AP 2; Weight: 10 lbs.; Cost: 1200 dinars; Notes: 10 shot magazine, uses conventional quarrels.

*Return Stick:* A curved wooden stick that returns to the thrower if it misses its target. It comes back at the start of the thrower's next turn. Catching is automatic so long as the thrower has a free hand, but counts as an action. If not caught, it deviates as an area-effect weapon, landing on the ground at the indicated spot. *Stats:* Range: 3/6/12; Damage: Str+d4; Weight: 2 lbs.; Cost: 300 dinars.

*Spear-Thrower:* This shaft with a spur at the end is not a weapon, but is designed to allow short spears to be thrown greater distances. The short missiles, which Tamara also stocks, are treated as throwing spears but cost 40 dinars. Used with a spear-thrower, their Range is increased to 5/10/20. *Stats:* Weight: 1 lb.; Cost: 50 dinars.

*Whip-Chain:* A series of short iron bars linked by chain, the weapon can be used to make Grapple attacks at its full reach. It is also very effective at looping around shields to strike foes. Opponents lose any Parry

bonus from their shield. *Stats:* Damage: Str+d6, Reach 1; Weight: 9 lbs.; Cost: 700 dinars.

**The White Baths:** For citizens who want to remove the stench of mold and sweat of a day's work from their skin, there is nowhere better than the White Baths, so named for the white limestone interior. Responsibility for keeping the fires that heat the water burning falls to a frail old man. No one knows his true name, but he is affectionately known as the Tagine Man.

A common take-out meal is the tagine. Raw meat, seasonal vegetables, and cold gravy are placed inside a sealed clay pot, which is then heated on hot coals over several hours. Many patrons purchase a tagine before bathing, paying the Tagine Man a quarter-dirham to cook their food while they wash. Those who share their fare with the old man are rewarded with local gossip. Despite spending much of his day underground, he knows a lot about people's private affairs.

### THE DRAGON'S GRAVEYARD

Every continent has a story of a dragon's graveyard it seems, a fabled place where dragons have gone to die since the dawn of time. In Al-Shirkuh, it is said the bones of countless sand dragons lie scattered in a remote valley in the Prophecy Hills, not far from the source of the Damasc if the tales are to be believed, but not easy to find. Some stories say the dragons lie on biers made of the treasure they amassed in life. Others insist there is not a single coin to be found in the graveyard.

Dragon bones and scales have long been used as ingredients by alchemists, but collecting them is not without its perils—the site is supposedly watched over by live dragons, as well as a fanatical cult devoted to the worship of the magnificent and terrifying beasts.

## PERSONS OF NOTE

Described below are a few of the city's many denizens the heroes may encounter while exploring the city.

### ZAHIR STONEBORN

A man obviously in immense physical pain, Zahir has somehow manages to keep a smile on his face, or at least half of it. He claims his infirmity is the result of an encounter with a medusa, though other suspect he was either cursed by a jinni or is half-majin. Although Zahir managed to escape death (he claims he only saw the medusa through his left eye), he did not emerge unscathed—his entire left side is made of stone. The damage, which has left him without use of his limbs, blind in one eye, and with a poor constitution, is permanent. Zahir survives by begging, earning a few extra dirhams by recounting his sorry tale. Zahir, largely ignored as he sits in his favorite spot, acts as an eye and ear for the Brotherhood of Unfortunate Souls.



## TALAWDI

### City of Sails

Talawdi's remote location has never been seen as a barrier to success. The most widely connected gateway to lands beyond Al-Shirkuh, Talawdi has prospered down the centuries, rebuilding itself to take advantage of new routes and changes in circumstances. The sphinxes still rule with an iron fist, but Talawdi is viewed as a city where dreams can come true, if one is prepared to work hard and willing to take some risks.

### Social Hierarchy

Pharaoh Weret-Imtes is middle-aged and ambitious (some might say power-hungry). Guided by one of her courtiers, an agent of the Puppeteers, she has failed to realize that her plans to create a new trade road could be a catalyst for war, especially with Jawf, City of War, which currently controls major access to the Sphinx Road. All she hears are his whispered words of trade dominance, which will bring her increased power and vast wealth. Such is the extent of her secrecy that not even the nobles are aware of her plans.

Sphinxes are intelligent creatures, though, and talk of extensive mining operations has been met with veiled skepticism. If there are thousands of miners at work, they muse, why has the city not seen a boom in ore production? And why are only criminals sentenced to life-long slavery sent there? Most suspect Weret-Imtes is searching for the true tomb of Hamapta. Some figure she is planning her own tomb, a vast necropolis in which the immense wealth of the royal house will be stored for eternity. The idea that she is constructing a vast tunnel through the mountains is just too far-fetched to even enter their collective minds.

The nine noble houses don't devote a lot of time to pharaoh's plans, nor do they show much interest in playing politics—the royal line has several branches, and while Weret-Imtes has yet to declare an heir, there is no hope of staging a successful coup. Every house commands a trading empire, and the mighty sphinxes spend their time enjoying the vast riches their businesses earn them. They are among the laziest and most hedonistic sphinxes in the Kingdoms.

Talawdi is a city devoted to the acquisition of wealth, and even the haughty sphinxes openly respect those with, or who make them, money. Employees who run the sphinxes' mercantile ventures are highly regarded individuals. They are gifted with honor titles, good salaries (often based on profits), and invited to feasts at the palaces. Those of exceptional skill (or luck, for it plays

its part in trade as well) may be offered lucrative deals to switch allegiance. As a result, the *mak-shabrum* is dominated by merchants.

Talawdi's beggars fall into three main camps (though the people see only two). First, there are those informed by ailments of the flesh or mind, or who have suffered loss of limb. They are duly pitied and given alms. Second, there are those who are seemingly fit for work but who refuse to find employment. Aside from one day a year when citizens have to show them charity, they are routinely ignored.

The third group is a subset of second group. These are men and women who have gambled and lost everything. Some came to the city in search of becoming a merchant. Others invested everything in a mercantile venture. Through fate, bad management, or corruption they have ended up destitute.

### Education

Talawdi has four advanced educational establishments. The Golden University is the largest, and offers a wide range of courses.

The Merchants' Academy is part of the temple of Endursaga, minor deity of trade and an aspect of Qedeshet (see *Realm Guide #10*), and thus enjoys royal patronage. Many of the faculty are clerics, though this is not a requirement for employment. Students learn the essential skills of business in the hope of securing future employment with one of the merchant houses or gaining the knowledge required to start their own enterprise. The cult exists to make money, and students are expected to benefit the temple, even if they have no intention of becoming clerics. Grades are not awarded based on academic prowess. During their final year, students are given 500 dinars to invest. The greater the profit the higher the grade, and the more likely it is a student will be noticed by one of the mercantile houses.

The cult of Upuaut rarely dabbles in educating the masses, but as part of the royal cult it has invested its wealth in a university—the Wanderers' School. It trains students in both riding and seamanship, though most students are interested only in the latter.

The newest university is the University of Ostmark. Founded just ten years ago, it was created to teach the citizens of Talawdi about Ostmarker culture and language in the hope of fostering stronger trade links. Take up has been sparse—the merchants already speak Trader, and they are interested in profit, not customs and culture.

## RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in Talawdi.

\* **Native Heroes:** A native character may choose to be a graduate of *one* of the advanced universities. Each grants certain benefits, as listed below, but only during character generation and the hero must meet all other requirements. Unless otherwise stated, these benefits are only open to heroes with Smarts d8+, Rich, or Arcane Background (Miracles). A maximum of skill point may be spent on these perks.

**Merchants:** For one skill point, the hero can take both Knowledge (Stewardship) and Streetwise at d4, or one of the above at d6.

**Ostmark:** For one skill point, the hero gains Knowledge (Ostmark) d4 and is fluent in either Saxa or Trader (his choice).

**Wanderers:** For one skill point, the hero can take both Boating and Riding at d4, or one of the above at d6.

\* **Trade Center:** The docks and markets are full of goods from across eastern Rassilon and the Jade Empire. Special availability goods can be purchased outside the usual places, but cost double. Village Availability items cost 50% of normal, Town items 75%, and City items 90%. Heroes selling goods in Talawdi have +2 to Streetwise rolls to find a buyer.

\* **Transport Hub:** Talawdi has an extremely busy port. The characters can find a ship departing in 1d4 days with a successful Streetwise roll, or later the same day with a raise.

trade, aids in negotiating trade deals and settling disputes between merchants (in return for a small percentage), and sets prices for imports and exports.

Upuaut, normally a middling deity at best given his clerics' habit of moving on regularly, has prospered thanks to royal patronage. In order to avoid sins for living in the same place for extended periods, pharaohs honoring Upuaut regularly conduct lengthy tours of the kingdom. In order that they might enjoy suitable accommodation, they reside in the country palaces of the nobles. While this is considered a great honor, it is a massive drain on the nobles' finances—the royal entourage numbers in the hundreds, and feeding them falls to their host.

The lust for wealth has led some citizens to turn to worship of Graethig, the demon lord of covetousness (see *Region Guide #45*). The fell prince offers worshippers prosperity without the necessity for hard work, a tempting deal, especially for the poor, who labor long hours for little reward while their masters reap the reward. Even clerics of Endursaga have been tempted—while the deity expressly forbids fencing stolen goods, theft, and tax evasion as means of making profit, his tenets say nothing about offering human sacrifices.

The cults of Shamash and Tammuz have created a joint task force charged with stamping out worship of Graethig. The former tolerates no trafficking with the denizens of the Bottomless Pit. The latter argues that the balance of the universe is in danger—that a small number of citizens own most of the wealth balances against the majority having very little. An increase in the number of prosperous citizens threatens this. Their efforts are hampered by the fact that the sphinxes who honor Shamash and Tammuz are immune from temptation—money for no, or at least very little, personal effort has always appealed to sphinxes.

## Religion

Although many pharaohs have married nobles whose house worshipped a different deity, Talawdi is the only city where two deities enjoy equal status as the royal cult. A theological oddity, it has nevertheless served the pharaohs well for many centuries. The system is not perfect—despite every pharaoh being the living representative of two deities, not one has been able to invoke miracles from both. Merging the cults into one has been mooted several times, but it has never been attempted—the sphinxes are arrogant, but not even they would dare to redefine the gods to suit their image.

Although Qedeset is proclaimed as having divine patronage, it is his only trading aspect the pharaohs consider important. Thus, while pharaoh is high priest of Qedeset, the unofficial royal cult is that of Endursaga, minor deity of trade. Formally acknowledging Endursaga has been considered several times, but to publicly proclaim a minor deity over his patron is a step too far, even for the sphinxes.

The cult's power should not be underestimated. It is responsible for setting and collecting taxes relating to

## LOCAL FESTIVALS

**The Beggars' Parade:** With last year's stores running low and winter crops not yet ready to harvest, Anshi Alak Arkhet is regarded as the month when shortages hit hardest. The pharaohs have long displayed their generosity and charity by gifting food to local beggars on Anshi Yaus al-Hamala. While pharaoh personally hands out the food, little of it comes from her larders. During the previous week, the city guard calls on the citizens for donations of food. Much of the food is the worst a family has to offer, but prepared properly it is still edible. The beggars don't complain—a free meal is not to be turned down, and a frugal beggar can make a few withered onions and a pouch of dried grain last several days.

**Day of the Celestial Fleet:** Sacrifices offered as part of religious festivals are gifts for the deity. The object, destroyed as part of the ritual, reforms in the spirit world, allowing the deity to make use of it. In most cases, size does not matter, the sacrifice being symbolic.

Each year on Amt Yaus al-Ittrou Amt Alak Paret, citizens launch model boats in the harbor. Those that sail out of sight without being sunk ascend to Upuaut's

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realm, where they join his fleet. The offerings of peasants are simple wooden affairs, crudely carved but no less effective as offerings. Richer citizens not only have larger boats of far better quality, but they have ushabti figures on board, thus ensuring the celestial fleet has adequate sailors.

## Military

Talawdi has never had a large area. Protected by thick walls, the city has focused its attention on its navy, essential for keeping the sea lanes free of corsairs and warships of rival cities. As events unfold, it is a decision the city is beginning to regret.

### ARMY

Talawdi has three main areas it wants to protect but lacks the troops to provide adequate security. Its primary focus is the city—so long as the harbor remains safe, the navy and merchant fleet can keep the city supplied indefinitely. Kharijah's massive fortification project has not gone unnoticed. Pharaoh has been forced to divert troops into the eastern wastes to block any invasion. Similarly, the trouble brewing in Muqlad, City of Woes, could spill over into civil war. Equally, the regents may decide to unite the kingdom by declaring war on its more prosperous neighbor. The dam is almost complete, but it must be guarded from enemy saboteurs. Finally, constant orc attacks on the trade tunnel are hampering construction.

The army comprises two infantry regiments (both with six light infantry and four archer companies), three battalions of light cavalry, and one battalion of chariots.

Pharaoh Weret-Imtes is beginning to lament her forebear's reluctance to spend money on equipment. Light infantry has proven adept at skirmish warfare, favored by orcs, but thin armor and light weapons are no match for the orcs' dense muscle and hard steel. Similarly, while light cavalry are ideal for harassing other cavalry units or routing archers, they are little use at smashing enemy infantry formations. The pharaoh's reluctance is not because of a shortage of funds—the city treasury is in a very healthy state. Had they had the foresight to upgrade the army, though, she would not have to shoulder the financial burden.

The need to protect its borders has meant troops have been pulled away from rural communities. Each settlement has been ordered to raise a militia totalling 1.5% of its population. Pharaoh has supplied no weapons or armor, meaning the militias are poorly equipped. Many soldiers have no armor and are armed only with pitchforks and slings.

The city guard is made up of four companies, more than sufficient to protect the well-fortified city. Two of the companies are light infantry, one is archers, and one is artillery with rudimentary archery training.

Guarding pharaoh are the Raging Storm, two companies of medium infantry. One (known as the Thunder Company) wields two maces simultaneously, while the other (the Lightning Company) wields two short swords. Unusually for a sphinx, Weret-Imtes has several mages in her bodyguard. As befits the guards' fighting style, these are dervishes.

### NAVY

Talawdi's navy is impressive—30 light and ten heavy warships divided into ten squadrons of equal size. They have no interest in patrolling the river—their sole purpose is to keep the sea lanes open and trade flowing.

Each ship has just 10% of its full complement of marines. Fully manning every vessel would require a force totalling 5000 men, or 3.6% of the greater population. This would be a massive drain on the city's treasury and reduce the number of available workers. Captains are permitted to hire additional marines, but must do so from their own pockets. Fortunately, there is a way captains can earn extra money.

The pharaoh turns a blind eye to captains who engage in piracy, so long as the targets are not warships of a rival kingdom or trading with Talawdi, and the captain is not flying Talawdi's colors. In return for her tacit approval, Weret-Imtes demands half of any booty.

## Law & Order

It has long been said that nothing in Talawdi is free, as evidenced by the city watch. While they patrol the streets and arrest criminals they see committing crimes, crimes against persons or property reported to them are investigated only if the victim has paid a specific tax. Even then, there is no guarantee of success, and crimes reported by wealthy citizens are always given priority. The charge, while not overly excessive, is beyond the reach of the poorest members of society. With the watch funded in part by the tax, the city has invested in six companies of watchmen. Those who lack financial means must rely on the goodwill of the Brotherhood of Unfortunate Souls.

Except when sanctioned by the court, slavery is illegal in Talawdi. Those who fall foul of the law become the property of the state, and the pharaohs do not line their own pockets by selling them to the nobles. Instead, they are put to work in the fields or, if under a life sentence, constructing the trade tunnel. So as not to offend Upuaut, rigorous checks ensure that slaves are duly released from their bondage when their sentence expires. Of course, many are worked to death, but such is the fate of those who transgress the pharaohs' laws.

Slaves owned by foreign masters who enter the city are not automatically freed from their shackles. Under an ancient law, citizens of Talawdi are spared from sinning by having the temptation to own slaves removed, but foreigners are not. This cynical law has very little to do with



doctrine—it was put in place so merchants from other cities need have no fear their investments would be forcibly stripped from them, thus not deterring them from visiting. Not every cleric accepts the law—some see it as their divine duty to educate others as to the wrongness of keeping slaves, while a few seek to actively liberate slaves not sentenced by the courts from their bondage. Pharaoh tolerates the former, but not the latter.

The city's sole thieves' guild, the Black Sails, has given up trying to run a protection racket. Instead, it has devoted itself to smuggling (customs duties may be low, but there are merchants who would rather earn a little extra by avoiding them, and there are still proscribed goods) alongside its more traditional occupations. Having already made deals with the yakuza (thieves organized around familial lines) of the Jade Empire, the guild is now developing a network of contacts with the various thieves' guilds in Ostmark.

## Trade & Tribute

Talawdi's focus is trade, and it has served the city well. While the pharaoh and the sar-nesus have the largest mercantile enterprises, every sphinx worth his salt has at least one merchant in his employ.

Trading is not the exclusive preserve of the sphinxes, however. Talawdi has long been a free-trade zone, a city where any citizen with the inclination, and money, can become a merchant or investor in a private venture. Most independent mercantile houses are extremely small—a single ship plying the long and dangerous sea routes in the hope of making it rich.

The sphinxes are always interested in expanding their businesses, especially if they can spare themselves the investment of time and money. Private merchants who prosper may be approached by an agent of a noble house, who bears an offer to acquire the company and its assets. Large sums of money rarely change hands. Instead, the merchant is invited to retain his position as head of the company, but becomes a well-paid employee of his new patron. Given the deal means access to a wider trade network and a steady income, many choose to accept.

Talawdi benefits from having a wide range of exportable goods and no reliance on imports of common goods. It does nothing to excess, though. Its farms and workshops are productive enough to meet the demands of the local population and provide goods for export, but not in any great quantity that they stand out.

## COINAGE

With regard coins, only the one dinar and one dirham piece are routinely minted and used. While one face always carries the name of the incumbent pharaoh, the reverse design varies as it is the holy symbol of the ruler's patron deity. Locals refer to them simply as "Gold" and "Silver."

The currency of the Jade Empire is known as the yuan.

Instead of coins, the citizens use paper money, with values ranging from 1000 down to 0.1 yuan. The currency is not used in Talawdi (merchants normally trade imports for exports or deal in gold bars of set weights, and no common sailors ever enter the city), but it has inspired the pharaohs to create a similar system.

Instead of storing and carrying round large quantities of coins, merchants can deposit money with the city treasury. In return, they are issued one or more credit notes, a formal document declaring the appropriate value and backed by the gold stored with the treasury. There is no charge for this service—the city invests the money in trade deals and benefits from the profits.

## LOCAL TAXES

In order to make the city attractive to merchants, customs duties are kept low. Unfortunately, this has placed the burden of financing the bureaucracy and military on the shoulders of the people, who lose 40% of their wages in taxes. On the plus side, the bazaars and souk are always full, and food is reasonably priced.

**Customs Tax:** All imports and exports are charged at 0.5%.

**Harbor Fees:** Keen to stop ships loitering for long, the city charges 50 dinars a day. Fortunately, the docks are extremely efficient, and captains running regular routes with standard cargoes can often unload and load in time to catch the late tide. In a bid to encourage this, harbor duty is collected after the evening tide, rather than when a ship docks.

**Gate Tax:** There is little of interest outside the city, and the pharaoh wants people to stay within its walls. Locals pay no gate taxes (and goods from upriver are delivered by barge), but foreigners must hand over 2 dinars if pedestrians, 10 dinars for mounts, and 50 dinars for a vehicle.

**Sales Tax:** 3% is added to all purchases.

**Tithes:** With two royal cults to support, the division of tithes is different than in other parts of the Kingdoms. Half the tithe goes to the cult currently patronized by the pharaoh and one-quarter to the other royal cult. The remaining quarter is given to the citizen's nominated cult.

**Watch Tax:** Citizens who want crimes against them or their property investigated must pay 130 dinars per year. This covers one family and one building. Additional buildings can be added to the cover for 50 dinars a year per building, regardless of size. Naturally, this favors the sphinxes, whose palatial homes could easily accommodate hundreds of ordinary citizens.

## Architecture

Little remains of the original city. When it became apparent trade with Rassilon would only increase, Weret-Imtes's father ordered the city rebuilt. In a project that lasted ten years, every structure was systematically torn down and rebuilt. The modern city is custom built, with wide streets

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in and around the docks to facilitate the rapid movement of goods and narrower streets in residential districts.

Buildings were built for function rather than for aesthetic reasons, and little wealth was spent on making them look attractive. Houses, for instance, are large enough to be comfortable, but not enough to be luxurious. Neither is there much adornment in the way of statues on the streets. The only noticeable pointer toward the city's wealth is that the streets are clean and buildings are well-maintained. Even the sole slum, inhabited almost entirely by sand goblins, is semi-respectable.

## Major Locales

Described below are some of the interesting locals in Talawdi that visitors may have reason to visit.

### CITY DISTRICTS

The city of Talawdi has a population of 98,000, or 70% of the greater population. Not every citizen who lives within the walls works in the city—thousands work in the surrounding fields or upriver, where barges ferry them to and from work each day.

**Crafting:** From carpenters to sculptors and alchemists to weaponsmiths, craftsmen practicing every art known to man work and live in the district. Few sell directly to the public, having agreements with shopkeepers in the souk, though most accept private commissions for bespoke pieces. At night, the streets are largely deserted save for watch patrols and thieves.

**Docks:** Despite having two docks separated by the Crafting and Mercantile districts, locals refer to them as a single entity. The bustling wharves and crowded streets are abuzz with shouts in Sandspeech and Trader. Han, the official language of the Jade Empire, is never heard here—the merchants and captains use Sandspeech, and common sailors are never permitted to enter the city.

**Mercantile:** Unlike the majority of the citizens, the merchants who live and work here have homes styled in the courtyard design favored outside the Kingdoms. As well as being their homes, they are places of business, with one wing set aside for offices and storing samples of goods to show to customers.

**Palace:** The palace is immense, taking up roughly one-quarter of the city. Very little is dedicated to the pharaoh's personal needs, though. Within the walls are located the usual government offices, as well as the temples of Endursaga and Qedeshet, the great shrine of Upuaut, and the city's two official universities. Though no students (save sphinxes) live here, there are residential districts for clerics and tutors.

### CITY LOCALES

**The Ale-House:** Run by Stengar Wihtsigsunu and his family, the Ale-House is a traditional Saxa drinking hall. Out of place in a city of whitewashed stone and brick

### SLAVES REVISITED

The price for slaves in the core book is fairly basic. Expanded costs are given below for those who want more variation in the abilities and prices of slaves, as are new types of slave. Where costs in other Realm Guides (including individual city entries) differ from those below, those entries take precedent. All prices are cumulative and are in dinars. Wild Card slaves cost double the final amount.

\* **Courtesan/Bed Wife:** *Base:* 500; *Edges:* Houri (+150); *Other:* +250 per point of positive Charisma.

\* **Domestic Servant:** *Base:* 200; *Skills:* If the slave has a relevant Knowledge (Craft) skill, such as cooking, add +25 per die.

\* **Educated:** *Base:* 1000; *Skills:* +100 per die in Knowledge skills except Craft; *Edges:* Investigator (+75), Sage (+100), Scholar (+200).

\* **Entertainer:** *Base:* 500; *Edges:* Acrobat (+150), Contortionist (+50; see p. 36), Master Storyteller (+50), Legendary Storyteller (+50), Storyteller (+200).

\* **Eunuch:** *Base:* 300.

\* **Gladiator:** *Base:* 50; *Skills:* +100 per die in Fighting over d6; *Edges:* Appropriate Combat Edge (+100).

\* **Laborer:** *Base:* 150; *Edges:* Brawny (+200); *Other:* +100 per die of Strength over d6, +50 per die of Vigor over d6.

\* **Scribe:** *Base:* 50; *Languages:* +100 per language after the first; *Special:* Scribes cannot be Illiterate.

### NOTES

Sphinxes do not sexually cavort with lesser races, but they still enjoy being surrounded by attractive creatures. Thus, they still purchase courtesans. These slaves are sometimes used to reward favored lesser race employees, and on rare occasions even other slaves. Similarly, eunuchs are bought to protect courtesans from the advances of lesser races.

houses, it was transported from Ostmark beam by beam and loving rebuilt. The inn offers only Saxa food, drink, and entertainment. Compared to the inns of Al-Shirkuh, it is dark, noisy, and smelly. Those who seek rooms are often horrified to find that there is only a communal hall where kings and paupers must sleep together, the bedding is straw and furs, and there is a total lack of washing facilities beyond a bucket and a shared bowl of cold water. As a result, it is frequented mostly by homesick Ostmarkers.

**Cala's Chariots:** A master chariotmaker, Cala bint Jibril learned her trade from her late father. Everyone agrees that she has surpassed him in her craft. Although she has been approached by many sphinxes and offered a position in their household, she has refused in favor of retaining her



## THE PRICE OF FOREIGN GOODS

Unless otherwise stated, there is no difference between items made in Rassilon and their equivalents in Al-Shirkuh—both backpacks and chain shirts, for example, have the exact same stats. Most have the same price. In reality, there are differences—differences in design and manufacturing techniques. Foreign made goods, even things as simply as eating bowls, are typically considered novelties or exotic in different lands. GM's who want to simulate both the scarcity and unusual designs of foreign objects can do so simply by modifying the price.

Village Availability objects from a different land cost 25% more, Town ones 50% more, and City items 100%. Special objects are typically 100% more than their local equivalents, but may be even higher. In addition, the Availability code increases one step, with City items becoming Special. The latter are only available in major cities, and then only from specialist shops with extensive contacts.

Because the stats are identical, there is no game mechanic benefit from purchasing foreign objects with a local equivalent. However, foreign objects may well become a talking point. For instance, no one from Al-Shirkuh is going to bat an eyelid at a battle axe made locally, but one from Rassilon, its head engraved with dragon, knotwork, or runic designs is an unusual object and likely to attract attention. Similarly, Bedu might be very curious about a saddle made in the frozen north, despite its function being identical to those of their own mounts. Even offering a pouch of one of Rassilon's native strains of pipeleaf, with their unique aromas, may be enough to turn a potential hostile nomad into a friend.

independence. Her racing chariots are light but durable, and have +2 Handling. Her war chariots are very sturdy without affecting handling or speed. They have Toughness 11 (2). Both designs cost 50% more than normal. Due to demand, there is a two month waiting list.

**Embassy of the Jade Empire:** Talawdi is the only city in Al-Shirkuh the Jade Empire has graced with an ambassador (Jadid, City of Trade, only has a trade delegate). The walled compound that houses the ambassador and his miniscule staff lies inside the palace grounds. The position is currently held by Mandarin Chang Ho Jei, who says very little but sees and hears all.

Despite being an ambassador, the Mandarin has little direct contact with the pharaoh—he attends her only on her birthday to give a token gift. When he needs to communicate with the pharaoh about matters of state, he does so by written message. Most sphinxes wonder why he is even here.

**Embassy of Ostmark:** Jormund Wiglafsunu has been ambassador to Talawdi for 24 years. Since his appointment by the Trada Council he has retained his post by ensuring suitable bribes are paid to each new council member.

Gregarious, popular, and well-versed in local customs, he has grown rich by introducing Ostmark merchants to local contacts. He knows he cannot remain in his post forever, and while he likes the city, he plans to return home just before the next census is held. His amassed wealth is such that he could well secure a seat on one of the councils, and his contacts guarantee that when he becomes a merchant in his own right his business will prosper.

The ambassador has intimated that should Talawdi ever need military support, Ostmark would be more than willing to supply mercenaries at a very generous rate. In this regard he has overstepped his authority, though it is unlikely his masters back home would renege on the deal—it would raise revenue and cement already healthy relations with the local merchants.

Many of the accountants are actually clerics of Var, here to provide their expertise in negotiating trade deals and develop close relations with the cult of Endursaga.

**Faithful Mamisa:** This small shop is run by Mamisa, a sand goblin. Her only wares are religious symbols. Since only the cults can legally sell those of the deities of Al-Shirkuh, her wares hail from foreign lands. Prices range from 10 to 50 dinars, depending on their size and the materials used. She also has a small stock of Norn charms, though these cost 400 dinars apiece.

A few of her wares are stolen, lifted from visitors by a thief and fenced to Mamisa. Some are sold to her by merchants. Most, though, are forgeries, created in the city and roughed up to look more authentic. Mamisa has very little knowledge of the deities the symbols represent, though she knows the names and major aspects of those from Rassilon, having learned them from merchants. The rest she just makes up as needed to make a sale.

Two pieces are both genuine and highly unusual. One is carved from a black stone that feels slimy to the touch. It takes the form of vaguely human face with tentacles sprouting from its mouth. A talisman created by a now extinct cult, it is for sale for 100 dinars. The other takes the form of a dragon biting its own tail, but it is like no dragon known in Al-Shirkuh or Rassilon. Uncle Wu (see the Jade Pagoda below) has informed her it is a heraldic seal used by the warlords of the Dragon Clans, a kingdom bordering his homeland that refuses to bow before the Emperor. It is for sale for 250 dinars.

**The Frozen Forge:** For nine months a year this shop is closed. During winter, it is the home and workshop of Snorri Rockbreaker, a frost dwarf blacksmith. His presence attracts a large crowd, here to gawk at both the diminutive craftsman and his forge, which burns with a coldfire flame. Snorri has made no attempt to fit in, refusing to learn the language or acknowledge local customs. When he isn't working, he drinks heavily at the Ale-House and bemoans his fate. No one is entirely sure why he makes the long voyage each year, as he has done for the past 35 years, but apparently it has something to do with a geas laid down by Kenaz, the northern god of heat and fire who, it seems, has somehow gone missing from the heavens.

**Hippodrome:** While the sphinxes of Jawf enjoy bloody gladiatorial contests, those native to Talawdi pre-



# The Kingdoms of the Sphinxes

fer camel, horse, and chariot races. Races are held every week, and are open to anyone with their own mount or chariot. Spectators pay one dirham, while contestants pay 20 dinars. The only legal gambling permitted on the races is controlled by the cult of Tamarni, which operates booths inside the main gates. Naturally, betting takes place across the city.

Many sphinxes own stables of thoroughbred mounts and champion jockeys. Most citizens who take part do so in the hope of winning not money (the returns are small) but the attention of a sphinx or other rich citizen. Magic and miracles are forbidden in general races, but form part of special races. In these, the riders may employ their powers only on themselves, only after they have completed the first lap, and then only once per lap.

**Jade Island:** This small island sits 500 yards off the seaward harbor. The only structure is a caravanserai, purpose-built to accommodate crews from visiting Jade Empire vessels. For anyone else to step foot on the island is an automatic death sentence (assuming they survive being arrested by the guards).

Cargoes are left on the wharves, which are cleared of personnel except for guards, their faces hidden behind jade masks, before barges from Talawdi are permitted to dock. Some barge captains claim to have seen the foreign sailors scurrying back to the caravanserai, their faces, so they say, are concealed behind porcelain masks.

**The Jade Pagoda:** From the outside, this building looks like any other in the city. Inside, though, it is a wonder to behold, being furnished with objects from the Jade Empire. Similarly, the dishes prepared by the chef and owner all hail from that distant and enigmatic land. It is very popular with the locals, with dishes ranging from simple bowls of flavored noodles costing a quarter-dirham to bountiful feasts that cost as much as 50 dinars. The ability to use chopsticks, the only utensils provided, confounds most citizens.

The owner is known only by the name Wu. From his appearance and dress it is obvious he hails from the Jade Empire, but he never speaks of his homeland. Everyone who knows the old man calls him Uncle Wu, for if they ever need a helping hand they know they can call on him. All he asks in return is a future favor, and the favors are never taxing. Most involve only delivering a sealed letter or package to an address in the city. Despite being the only employee, Uncle Wu has never had trouble with rowdy customers or thieves. His thin frame belays a hidden strength, and his ability to disarm or disable foes using only his hands and feet is legendary.

**Many-Lands Souk:** The city's main souk is huge. It has over 500 shops, all crammed inside a single domed building. It is divided into four quarters. One of these is devoted entirely to goods from Rassilon and one to wares originating in the Jade Empire. The other half is for goods produced in Al-Shirkuh.

**The Merchants' Academy:** Merchant Lord Lablab Fair-Trader, dean of the academy and a priest of Endursaga, is seeking heroes. His son, Nibras, was arrested while on a trading mission to Jizah, City of the Sphinx, and has

## HERBS & SPICES

What a meal is flavored with might not matter to the average adventurer, but it matters to the citizens of the various continents. Desire for herbs and spices (among other things) fuels trade, though it is mainly driven by the nobility, for only they can afford to purchase imported goods. Using a herb or spice's name in an adventure can also add flavor (no pun intended). For instance, helping a merchant recover a stolen shipment of saffron sounds better than searching for a shipment of generic "herb" or "spice," and can help players visualize the precious treasure they seek.

Below are some of the more common herbs, spices, and spice mixes by continent.

### AL-SHIRKUH

Anise, asafoetida, baharat, borage, black cardamom, carom seeds, caper, caraway, carob, celery seeds, chives, coffee, green cardamom, coriander, cumin, fennel seed, golpar, jasmine, kimba pepper, lavender, lemon balm, mahlad, mint, mustard, oregano, parsley, poppy seed, rosemary, safflower, sage, sesame seed, sumac, tamarind, thyme, za'atar.

### JADE EMPIRE

Anise, asafoetida, basil, bay leaf, black cardamom, camphor laurel, cassia, celery seeds, chives, cinnamon, fenugreek, fingerroot, garlic, garlic chive, ginger, green cardamom, jasmine, kaffir lime leaf, lavender, lemongrass, liquorice, mint, peppercorn, perilla, poppy seed, rice paddy herb, safflower, saffron, sesame seed, sorrel, star anise, tea, thyme, turmeric, wasabi, watercress.

### RASSILON

Apple mint, caraway, celery seeds, chervil, chives, dill, elderberry, elderflower, fenugreek, garden angelica, hops, horseradish, juniper, lavender, liquorice, lovage, marjoram, mint, mustard, peppermint, ramson, safflower, sorrel, spearmint, tarragon, thyme, watercress.

been sentenced to five years slavery. Lablab knows this is effectively a death sentence, and is prepared to pay very well for his safe return.

**Special:** Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; **Skills:** Knowledge (Stewardship), Streetwise; **Edges:** Expert Haggler (see *Realm Guide* # 13).

**The Northern Temple:** In order to appease the northern merchants, and because the two deities are very similar to those of the royal cults, the pharaoh has allowed the creation of a temple that honors both Freo and Var. Due to pressure from the nobles, who have no

control over the foreign cults, the high priestess, Profiteer Hedwig Skulidottir, has been unable to build much of a following among the native population.

**The Shipyard:** A large part of the shipyards was recently remodelled to accommodate the construction of a massive ship for the pharaoh. Rumors abound whether it is intended as a pleasure yacht, a warship, or a trade vessel. Until work begins on the interior layout, no one outside the palace knows for sure, and they aren't talking. Even the shipwrights have no yet seen the full designs.

**The Square of Sorrow:** Citizens down on their luck gather here before dawn in the hope of securing work as a day laborer. Work is not guaranteed and the pay is poor, but it is better than a beggar's wages. The truly desperate hope to find a master willing to take them on as "limited citizens." Although adventuring work is dangerous, there are those prepared to take the risk of serious harm and sign on as lantern-bearers or porters.

**The Temple of Trade:** As well as being the largest religious building in the city, the temple of Endursaga acts as a moneylender. It loans money only to those who put up suitable collateral. Much of the money it lends is to independent merchants, who risk losing their home, possessions, or ships if they default. The temple also invests money from depositors. This is invariably used to sponsor trade deals, the investor earning a small percentage in return. Typical rates are 2% monthly compound interest on loans and 0.5% interest on deposits.

**University of Ostmark:** The university is actually a propaganda center, teaching Ostmarker culture in the hope that future generations of merchants will automatically think of the distant realm when it comes to trading with Rassilon. As well as providing education, it hires skalds to sing traditional songs (about Ostmark heroes) at free concerts.

*Special:* Students must be able to speak and read/write Sphinx; *Skills:* Knowledge (Area: Ostmark); *Edges:* Detailed Area Lore (Ostmark); *Languages:* Saxa, Trader.

**The Wanderers' School:** The school has a good relationship with the wandering explorers of the Brotherhood of Sinbad. While it doesn't offer Brothers free training, it does allow them to earn credit toward instruction by acting as tutors. The credit for teaching a specific course is equal to the cost of studying it.

The school is part of the temple of Upuaut. Prospective students can earn credit (never hard coin) by donating maps and travelogues to the school's library. It counts as a specialized grand library regarding the geography of the various realms of Al-Shirkuh. The librarians are keen to expand the collection with maps and travelogues detailing the lands beyond Al-Shirkuh. It is especially interested in the Jade Empire, a realm in which outsiders may not set foot, and the Lands of the Lizardmen.

*Special:* Students must be able to speak Sphinx (literacy is not required); *Skills:* Boating, Riding; *Edges:* Forced March, Master Mariner, Pathfinder, Sand Walker, Improved Sand Walker, Sea Legs, Wall Runner.

**Winter Wares:** Winters along the northern coast are cold and harsh, with nighttime lows regularly dropping

below freezing. Snow is more common on the distant hills, but the city sometimes wakes up to a white blanket. Visitors from the other realms of Al-Shirkuh find it a harsh environment. Fortunately, this shop specifically caters to their lack of suitable winter gear. It sells furs and winter clothing, skates, skis, and snowshoes, and even pots of whale blubber. Prices are 25% higher than in the *Hellfrost Player's Guide*.

## PERSONS OF Note

Described below are a few of the city's many denizens the heroes may encounter while exploring the city.

### ABU THE THIEF

Abu is legendary, his name and deeds known to every citizen. Stories of his crimes are retold by storytellers, including how he robbed 20 houses in one night and walked out of the temple of Endursaga with its annual ledger tucked under his arm. That his name is known at all is down to the fact he places a calling card at the scene. Some suspect he is a jinni, for what else could account for his crime spree? Other claims he is a spirit, for the authorities have, so they say, arrested and enslaved several thieves calling themselves Abu. Abu is very much flesh and blood, though "he" is actually "they." Abu is the name used by every member of the Black Sails, a nod to the most famous guildmaster of old (who really did steal the holy ledger) and a means of concealing their identities.

### SHIELD GRIMHELM BEORTHSUNU

The fate of Sutmark hangs in balance, but all is not yet lost. With enough mercenaries, Ostvik could yet be saved. A nobleman and priest of Tiw, Grimhelf was despatched to the Kingdoms after his cult agreed to find mercenaries in return for an annual payment. Grimhelf chose Talawdi not because it has a large army, but because of its trading links with Ostmark. His message has been a simple one—lend us soldiers and, once victorious, Sutmark's ports will not only have plentiful goods for export, but using them will cut 1000 miles for each leg of the journey for your merchants.

The Ostmark embassy has not reacted well to his presence. While Grimhelf beseeches Weret-Imtes for support, Ambassador Wiglafsunu tells the pharaoh of Sutmark's crippling debts, treacherous overland links to the rest of the continent, and its divided nobility. All in all, he paints a very grim (but not entirely inaccurate) picture of the beleaguered realm. Despite the ambassador's best efforts, Weret-Imtes has asked Grimhelf to stay in Talawdi while she makes up her mind. To send part of the army overseas would weaken her realm, more so if they fail to return, but another trading partner would surely work in her favor, with both Ostmark and Sutmark offering favorable rates to secure her business. A long-term trading agreement would also adversely affect her neighbors.

## THE ASSASSINS

### Dealers in Death

Once thought wiped out, the Brotherhood of Assassins has risen from the sands to strike fear in the minds of citizens across Al-Shirkuh. Few have true reason to fear their blades, but the Assassins thrive on the paranoia mere mention of their name causes. In *Land of Fire* supplements, “Assassin” refers to a member of the Brotherhood, while “assassin” refers to any killer for hire.

### History

In their first incarnation, the Assassins were nothing more than expendable assets of the scorpionmen, *puppet* dominated tools to be wielded by the scorpionmen as they saw fit. These unwilling murderers received no training in the ways of stealth, and only rudimentary combat instruction. Their purpose was simply to get close to their victim when the opportunity arose and kill them. Whether or not the Assassin survived was irrelevant to his masters, for there were countless others ready to unleash on an unsuspecting world. Following the destruction of the Scorpionman Empire and their retreat from the surface world, assassins were employed far less frequently.

Of the brainwashed Assassins already trained and sent into the world to await orders, most lived out their lives without ever realizing their dark purpose. Those who willingly sided with the scorpionmen and survived the downfall of their masters passed down what they had learned of the death-dealing arts and the tenets of Chactinax’s cult to successive generations. Though never great in number, the day would dawn when their deadly knowledge would again be put to use.

The next incarnation began during the Anari occupation of what is now the Free Emirate States. Unlike their predecessors, these killers were trained in stealth, subterfuge, and melee combat. Driven by a fanatical hatred of the invaders, who they feared would sweep across the desert and impose their barbarian laws and customs on the Bedu tribes who had escaped the attentions of the jinn, they took it upon themselves to murder Anari leaders. What these Assassins lacked was a formal structure. Indeed, there were scores of brotherhoods and sects involved in plaguing the Anari, and not all were on friendly terms with each other.

One sect, though, saw strength in unity, and through unity a long and prosperous future. Over time it contacted rival bands and offered them a simple choice—join with them or die. By the time the jinn were defeated, the Brotherhood of Assassins as known today had taken shape. Though its masters operate from a single fortress,

its shadowy reach extends to the four corners of Al-Shirkuh, and possibly to lands further afield.

### Structure

The Brotherhood of Assassins is ruled by The Black Scorpion. Concealed beneath a black cloak and his (or her) voice masked by magic, the identity of the organization’s supreme master is known only to his most trusted advisors, and they have no wish to reveal anything about him. Naturally, many rumors abound, even among outsiders. Some say he is permanently bestowed with an *armor* spell that gives his skin the appearance of black scorpion chitin (hence his title). Others say he has a poisonous stinger for an index finger, or can summon scorpions without use of magic or miracles. The most outlandish theory is that he is in fact a scorpionman.

Though the Black Scorpion is an autocrat, he is neither a tyrant nor uneducated. The few visiting Assassins who have had the honor of meeting him (and surviving) have all been surprised at the breadth and depth of his knowledge, and his eloquent manner of speech. Based on his voice and knowledge alone, one might think him a scholar, rather than the master of a body of dedicated killers. A capable leader, he fully understands the need to let others voice opinions, and for him to hear them.

Serving beneath him are seven Grand Masters. Four of these are responsible for overseeing a single aspect of training—combat, religion, stealth, and subterfuge—one is responsible for maintaining the Brotherhood’s impressive library, one the retrieval, security, and handing out of relics, and one the middle men who organize the contracts. Together, they form the Black Scorpion’s advisory council and hold the only true meaningful ranks in the Brotherhood. Each carries the title *rafiq* (“companion”).

When a patron wishes to hire the Assassins, he must make contact with a *lashiq* (“adherent”). Often, a *lashiq* makes contact first, seemingly able to know when their services are required. This is often attributed to a supernatural talent, and the Assassins have done nothing to dismiss such rumors. In truth, the Brotherhood relies on the old-fashioned means of having well-paid eyes and ears in all places of power. Powerful spells placed on them through a relic in the Brotherhood’s stores ensures that no amount of torture, trickery, or magic can force them to reveal what they know about the Brotherhood, its inner workings, or their extensive network of contacts and informants. Such attempts are assured to be met with utter silence, for if his will breaks, the *lashiq* is killed by the enchantment.



Of those who perform the killings, there are two ranks—assassin (*fida'i*) and master assassin (*sidi fida'i*). To rise to the latter, which is more an honorific title than one bestowing any true privileges, an Assassin must successfully complete ten missions for the Brotherhood and be a paladin of Chactinax.

There is no mundane way of identifying fellow Assassins—secrecy is paramount to the organization, and one day a brother may be called upon to strike down a colleague. Thus, friendship is not a trait the order likes to promote. As a member, every Assassin is given a new name. When his services are required, his superiors contact him using *voice on the wind* spells if he is not a permanent resident of a great city known to one of the *lashiqs*.

## EMBLEM

The emblem of the Assassins is a scorpion. Every Assassin carries such an emblem on his person, though what form it takes depends on personal choice. Some favor a tattoo, while others wear a pendant or ring engraved with the creature. Being caught wearing such an emblem does not immediately mark one as a hired killer—scorpion pendants are commonly worn in Al-Shirkuh as a means of protection against venomous stings.

## Playing an Assassin

Though they are greatly feared, Assassins are not wanton killers or crazed psychopaths. Assassins whose idea of infiltration is to slaughter anyone who gets in their way rarely survive for long—if their bravado does not end their lives, their masters likely will.

Most times you won't be on a mission. Indeed, there are Assassins who have died of old age waiting for a contract to be delivered to them. Until such a call comes, you are free to do whatever you wish, even take on other killings for hire. Only those specifically trained to handle negotiations may accept missions on behalf of the Brotherhood—common Assassins are permitted only to work as independent freelancers. However, when the call comes you are expected to drop everything and work ceaselessly toward your goal. The Brotherhood does not accept excuses for tardiness, nor does it tolerate Assassins who put personal goals before those of the organization's patrons.

Naturally, it is important to keep one's identity a closely-guarded secret. Should you be discovered, you will be arrested. Torture and execution are likely to follow, assuming your fellow Brothers do not discover your mistake and take steps to permanently silence you first.

When it comes to carrying out a contract, the key to success is extensive planning and information gathering. Wise Assassins spend more time on their exit strategy than their entry plan, for there is much that can go wrong, and never act rashly. Typically, once a contract is accepted by the Brotherhood, the Assassin chosen to complete it is given at least a month for planning unless the contract

stipulates a strict timescale. Individual Assassins are paid only a small portion of the contract fee. The remainder goes to the organization's coffers in the deep desert.

## COMBAT ADVICE

Assassins need to be competent fighters, but they are not warriors. Neither are they expected to be expert marksmen. Their primary weapons and strengths are fear and stealth. While any fool can kill with an arrow or poison dropped into a drinking vessel, true skill lies in penetrating an enemy's protective cordon and delivering the lethal blow at close range.

Entering a fight (at least when on a mission) usually means you have been detected by sentries. Unless you can strike quickly enough to silence any alarm, your best bet is to flee—being drawn into a protracted fight only increases the odds of further detection. When fleeing is not an option, strike fast and strike hard. Doesn't waste time with Tests of Will and Tricks unless your intended maneuver is intended to silence your opponent (such as a throat strike Agility Trick to prevent a guard calling out) or to aid in an escape (such as cutting a curtain so it falls over your opponents).

## ADVANCES

As an Assassin, you'll find there are many useful Edges. Unfortunately, you likely won't be able to take all of them until you're at a high Rank, so choose wisely early in your career.

When it comes to combat, Frenzy is very useful for ensuring your target meets a quick death, while Sweep allows you a chance to even the odds when outnumbered. Ultimately, you should aim for One Step One Kill, as this can stack with the modifier you gain from your Assassin Edge if circumstances allow.

Do not neglect non-offensive Edges—being able to move unseen is vital to your occupation, and there is little point being an expert swordsman if you cannot get near your intended victim. Fleet Footed combined with Fast and Silent allows you to move stealthily at a rapid speed. Acrobat, Thief, and Wall Runner are all very handy for gaining entrance to a target's location. Extraction and Fighting Withdrawal, coupled with Block, allow you to break from combat with a reduced risk of injury. Since your Stealth die should be high, you might also wish to consider Lurker. If you're a cleric of Chactinax, take the Disciple Edge (see *Realm Guide #14*) as early as possible.

## NPC Reactions

The Assassins may not be a truly evil organization, but they are greatly feared and despised. An Assassin whose true identity is revealed can expect swift and merciless justice at worst, and being completely shunned at best. As such, NPC reactions are based on the Assassins alternate identity.

## APPENDIX

### Unique Military Companies

In most campaigns, military companies are faceless entities, their members most likely encountered as roving patrols. Companies have a default type, such as medium infantry, crossbowmen, or light cavalry, but the stats of members are identical to other units of the same type. With a little work, companies can be made into unique entities, something likely to make them more memorable when heroes recall their interactions with them.

The simplest way is to give the company a unique name. Even in the Caliphate (where companies are named after one of the gods) and the Free Emirate States (where companies are numbered), companies may have unofficial nicknames. Names might relate to the troop type, a notable captain of old, a specialized fighting style or maneuver, an historical deed, or some combination of the above.

Another quick means of differentiating companies is to give either all the troops, or just the officers, an Edge. The Edge should make sense in relation to the troop type—a heavy infantry company has no need for Mounted Combatant, for example.

Some example companies are described below. These are not assigned to any specific culture, region, or city, allowing the GM to use them wherever he wants.

#### ARCHER COMPANIES

**The Dragon Killers:** The company earns its name centuries ago, when it managed to bring down a long dragon with concentrated missile fire. Although it has never repeated the feat, the name has stuck. The captain and junior officers have the Coordinated Firepower Edge.

**The Hares:** Like the desert hare, archers are weak in melee. Like its namesake, this company has learned to rely on speed to avoid confrontation. It also allows them to rapidly redeploy around the battlefield. Members have the Fleet-Footed Edge, while the captain and junior officers also have the Forced March Edge.

**The Manticores:** The company is named after the fearsome beast renowned for its deadly tail darts. The captain and junior officers all have the Take Aim Edge.

#### CAVALRY COMPANIES

**The Bone Pounders:** A heavy cavalry company, the Bone Pounders and their mounts are trained to smash through enemy infantry formations and keep going. When charging, the rider may elect to perform a Knock Prone Push maneuver instead of a regular Fighting attack. Since the mount must move at 6", this initial roll is made at +2. If the Push is successful, the foe is trampled

beneath the mount and suffers damage equal to 2d6 + the mount's Size.

So long as the mount has Pace left, it can keep moving forward in a relatively straight line, repeating the maneuver as it progresses. For each additional foe after the first, the Push roll suffers a cumulative -1 penalty. Should any opponent successfully resist, the charge automatically ends, even if the mount has movement left for the round.

The maneuver cannot be repeated until the mount has a clear run of at least 6" at a fresh target—the charge has run out of steam.

#### INFANTRY COMPANIES

**The Asps:** A veteran medium infantry company, the Asps prefer to let enemies come to them. Once the foe is close, the front rank reacts with lightning speed, slashing at flesh and bone with their wickedly sharp scimitars. Soldiers have the First Strike Edge.

**The Golden Scarabs:** This medium infantry company takes its name from its scarab-shaped medium shields. Save for the captain, whose shield is covered in a thin veneer of beaten gold, the shields are painted yellow. In combat, the shields are formed up similar to the tortoise formation. Every member has the Shieldwall Edge.

**The Knights of Suleiman:** Anecdotal evidence claims the first Knights served under Suleiman during the War of Copper Jars, where they earned a reputation for slaying jinn. Although they have not faced a jinn army since the end of the war, they still train to fight their ancient enemy. Soldiers have the Favored Foe (Jinn) Edge.

**The Porcupines:** A light infantry company, the Porcupine's main weapon is a long spear. In addition, each soldier has three throwing spears. These are usually thrown to soften up the enemy as the company advances. Each soldier has the Running Throw Edge.

**The Unshakeables:** This tough company has proven itself time and time again in battle. Whether the soldiers' ability to shrug off blows that would stagger other men is a result of brutal training or sheer stubbornness is much debated. The company is comprised of veteran soldiers (and so have Combat Reflexes) made more resilient by the captain and junior officers having the Inspire Edge.

**The War Rams:** Although they wear sheepskin cloaks and have a ram's head design on their shields, the medium infantry company is actually named for a battering ram. Their function in battle is to charge into, and smash through, the enemy line, allowing other companies to move through the gap. Soldiers are equipped with heavy shields and have the Shield Strike Edge (see *Realm Guide* #20).