

Quoth the Raven



In the Ruins of Eternity

Seas of Burning Sand

Standing at the Edge of Eternity

There's nothing on earth quite like Egypt, nothing so ancient, so timeless, so grand. True, there are older civilizations, but which amongst them has lasted so long as that great nation. Pyramids and desert sands are just a fraction of the story, a small fraction at that. Millennia before the Greeks, before Rome, before China, Egypt stood as the pinnacle of civilization. It's a little known fact that the Great Pyramid was the tallest structure on Earth until the construction of the Eiffel Tower in 1889, just one example of the level of grandeur that this civilization possessed.

Beyond the obvious achievements, Egypt has always been an immortal civilization. Time and time again the sun set upon the Egyptian nation as it fell to foreign invasions. Yet time and time again it rose up from the ashes. Even after Egypt's heyday, the land of the Nile has held powerful influence. When you consider the story of Cleopatra and Mark Anthony, you realize just how close Western Civilization came to falling beneath Egyptian dominance. Spooky, no?

What really sticks in the collective unconsciousness is the Egyptian death rituals. No culture on Earth has ever devoted more energy to the dead than the Egyptians. If mummification weren't enough, the elaborate tombs and grave goods certainly show that the Egyptians took burial very seriously. The Egyptians were obsessed with death, just as we all are and perhaps what really makes the Egyptians special is that their culture is the only one to fully articulate their own thoughts on death.

In truth, Egypt is really just the starting point for this story because somewhere in those mists we love, there is a place called the Amber Wastes. In that land an ancient people slowly die away, as cruel gods watch and the dead slumber fitfully. The Amber Wastes are a place of convergence, where the European gothic theme is reflected in Egyptian style. With its harsh climate and dreadful denizens, the Amber Wastes are to Ravenloft natives what the Demiplane is to outlanders. It's a great place to send wayward travelers when the DM is feeling cantankerous.

In this issue you will find everything you need to spice up the Amber Wastes and burn the seas of sand into the nightmares of your players. With new monsters, new non-player characters and even a relic or two, you'll be checking your shoes for sand before you're finished. So fill that canteen and brush up on your hieroglyphs, because you're taking a trip to a place where brave men fear to tread.

ScS.

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Quoth the Raven®

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The Reapers of Ashkazeer

Original Fan Fiction

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Tametet looked down on all before him and smiled; and the gods smiled on him in turn. Well, something did. For when he looked about the hall beneath him, and saw how the lords and priests stared from one to the other, wide eyed and stern faced, examining such objects –statues, sculptures, and stuffed beasts- as were left for their amusement, he could not restrain a feeling of self-fulfilment. He could almost read their thoughts; but then their expressions already told the whole story: they were jealous of him; and the fresh scent of it rose up to the palladium.

The young lord toyed with the chain about his neck, and nibbled at the edge of a fingernail. They all wanted his secret, of course, though none dare ask. He had been out in the desert with his brothers, a mere boy, scouring the dusty sand for anything to sell, when they caught sight of something uncovered by a recent storm. They had all run toward it, but young Tametet ran fastest, ignoring the angry cries of his brothers and beating them to the prize.

Before him lay the remains of some forgotten soul, doubled over and twisted, its gap-toothed jaw still echoing mock enjoyment at some slow and painful demise, while its sand bleached hair danced feebly on the breeze. There were gnaw-marks on the bones, some of which were half-crushed. And yet, even in death it continued to hold something, its skeletal fingers wrapping around it as though bonded thereon. It was an old bronze amulet, covered in all manner of symbols and signs. Tametet had recognised the obvious value and broken it free, wriggling and twisting it from the bone prison, claiming it for his own. His brothers were furious; they hated him for his success, wanting something themselves. But there had been no time to search the rest of the remains, for a storm appeared, forcing them back to the town.

Happily, that was only a faint memory; and the only thing that reminded Tametet of it was his final, troublesome brother. Tametet used to wonder how something so small could do so much, but after a time he had stopped caring. Now he kept it on a chain, where it rested close to his heart. It had taken some time before he fully realized the power of it, or learned how to make use that power, but once he had things began to happen.

Things had been this way now for a number of years: Tametet would gain influence over those around him, would pull through when others failed, and always without any sign of stress or toil. Some of the townsfolk considered it strange, even conspicuous; but then there were those that accused or hinted at something more. Occasionally Tametet heard a comment about how strange it was that these all disappeared. Some people never learned.

Tametet's mistress, Mezat, stood beside him, stroking a hand down the back of his kalasiris. Her face, he knew, was a mask of contentment, all sweetness and smiles; for

Tametet had taken her with him, from the depths of obscurity, from the poverty of the little limestone houses and to the heights of majesty itself. She had everything she could have dreamt of as that lowly serving girl, and could yet fulfil the dreams of any princess. But for now, the future remained undiscovered; for the moment he would have to survey his new home, and deal with any potential threats to his position. Fortunately, Tametet knew just how to do that; and the more he did, the greater the benefits he reaped.

How many had there been? Tametet could not even recall. He remembered Batrah, the pig-headed noble; and Xendros, the overzealous priest, as well as several others. And all of them sent off to the tomb.

He had no idea what first put the idea of using it into his head –nobody ever mentioned it or went there of choice; moreover, none of those he sent there ever returned. Some of them, however, ran away, and when they did, Tametet profited by nothing more than their absence. Consequently, he now asked for a forfeit, an insurance to assure their return. At least in this way, there was gold to the bargain.

“Are you content now my love?” said Mezat laughingly, brushing her cheek against his shoulder. “Is not this assembly the most impressive you have ever seen.” Mezat paused, before continuing quietly. “Or do you still want more?”

Tametet did not respond immediately; he did nothing more than close his eyes, remaining where he was with his hands resting upon the balcony; he seemed caught in a reverie. More and more guests entered the hall, and it was now comfortably full. Tametet, as always, had left an open invite to every inhabitants and visitors alike, and several merchants and stone workers found it in themselves to attend; he knew that most of the lower orders would not be so presumptuous, and cared very much to know the few that were. After a short while, Tametet spoke.

“When I am finished, my love, my name shall be revered across all lands...and you shall be at my side.”

“But I am content, my lord.” whispered Mezat. “I have more than I shall ever need...and to think of all the friends we have already.” When Tametet failed to answer, Mezat turned to look at him. He was preoccupied, looking toward the western door beneath. She followed his eyes down to an area of polished marble floor, to a corner where some of the guests seated themselves apart from the main throng. There were a huddle of men there, including several priests and Tametet’s only surviving brother, seated on goatskin stools, drinking wine and whispering. But it was not they that captured her attention, rather the robed figure that stood before them, tall and lithe. He remained motionless, entirely hidden within his vestments, with the exception of some fine white hair that spilled from the hood.

“Does he disturb you, my love?” she said. “His hair is like none I have ever seen, so many strands, and whiter than the moon.” Tametet turned and glared at her, his eyes boring through her for a moment, until he shook himself and they broke back into recognition. A kiki-lamp spluttered on a wall beside them.

“Did you not see him?” he stuttered. “Did you not see my brother, sitting there? His presence is unwanted, and he is talking with those priests. I will not have it.”

Mezat moved to brush the back of her hand against her husband’s cheek, but he stepped aside and continued to observe his brother.

“Come, my husband,” she said, “are you so perturbed by your sibling these days? And, I thought it was the stranger you were watching...does he not look strange?”

Tametet did not respond; instead, he strolled down the wide staircase, nodding to any acknowledgement he deemed deserving of response: “a wonderful occasion...Ra bless our host...May good fortune befall you”...and on and on. Mezat stared after him, and then to his brother. She smiled weakly then turned away, aware that the entertainment would soon begin.

With the arrival of the host, a drum was beat three times, and all of the assembly fell silent. “My friends,” began Tametet, “I bid you welcome to my home.” Several cordial utterances broke loose, but Tametet cut them short. “Once again we are together, sharing in the bounty that is our friendship.” Applause echoed throughout the hall, and Tametet paused enough to hear it fade out.

“I hope it will always remain this way: friends calling upon friends, enjoying a company that has fermented over years into the most delicious of wines.” Tametet turned about slowly, his arms held high and wide, smiling brilliantly toward every wall of his home, resting in the direction of the stranger. “But where are my manners? There is a fresh grape among us, a true guest that may yet sweeten our cask, and we have not even chanced to sample his flavour.” Tametet moved forward into the isolated space between the two parties.

“Caertok, my brother,” he said, “are always to horde the sweetest fruit for yourself alone? Come, let him step now before us that we may measure his worth.”

“Judge not lest thee be judged, brother.” said Caertok.

Tametet moved yet closer to the figure and looked him up and down. The stranger’s robe looked faded and held the lingering scent of herbs. Deep within the hood, the face remained beyond scrutiny, with only a few strands of downy white hair protruding into the lamplight. Having contented himself, Tametet turned to his brother.

“Since you are the mouthpiece for our guest,” he said, “care you to introduce him, that we may know him at least a little?”

“His name is his own business, and I should recommend that you attend to yours,” replied his brother. “Do you not have responsibilities?” Caertok looked about him, at all of the people focused on him, and then at his brother. “It does not have to be this way,” he whispered. “There is still time enough, brother, I implore you to consider.”

Tametet smiled at Caertok, before turning his back on him and returning to the centre of the hall. Smiles emerged wherever his gaze fell, only to fade as it passed.

“My friends, shall we play a game this evening?” said Tametet.

There was a murmured agreement, at which Tametet clapped his hands and called for more food and wine. The guests then began to gather about him; the minor nobility secured the most prominent spaces, with the other guests filing in behind them. “Bring me three urns and a cobra,” cried Tametet. “No, make that seven and four...and bring some dice.” A fragile quiet occupied the hall as servants brought forth the urns. Several of the nobles edged their way aside, and one priest began to raise a hand, but then forgot what for.

“Do we have any players?” said the young lord, grinning inanely. “For anyone that plays and draws an empty urn, I shall pay an ingot. If you do not, then I should not worry for then the matter is in the hands of gods.”

Silence fell across the hall, and was only broken by the half-choked sound of a stonemason, half dragged, half pushed to the front of the assembly. Tametet walked up

to him, embraced him, and said, “Brother, today you welcome hope into your heart.” Tametet then looked about him, but there was no sign of movement.

Eventually, Tametet threw his arms into the air. “Hah,” he said, “are you all still at the nipple? There is a world out here, growing old without you.” Nobody spoke or moved, until Tametet turned towards his brother.

“My companion has indicated that he wishes to play,” said Caertok, “...unless you have something you would rather do, and in that case he can be on his way.” Tametet nodded toward the robed figure and made his way toward the centre of the hall. A servant finished positioning the final urn as Tametet arrived, and quietly informed his master that all was set.

The contestants moved forward, the stranger making slow uncertain movements, and then Tametet explained the rules. It was a simple game, and one more of chance than skill: each contestant was to select a chosen number and then roll a die. If the number obtained matched they could step up to the urns, listen for a moment, and then order a fellow contestant to reach into one of their choice; otherwise, they would have to reach into it themselves. In all by one urn were gold ingots, each of which would become the property of any contestant that claimed them. In the other urn was a large ruby, and the finder of this could either keep it or request anything of any contestant they so wished. Finally, to make things interesting, some of the urns contained cobras. The hall erupted into cacophony, and Tametet raised his voice to overcome it.

“Friends! Friends, please. It is a game. If anyone now feels they do not wish to play, they may step aside.” All looked from the stonemason to the robed figure; the stonemason shook slightly but remained where he was; the robed figure stood motionless, facing the urns.

“Excellent,” said Tametet. “Let us begin.”

The game started and both the mason and the lord called out their chosen numbers. The figure, however, said nothing. The mason rolled first, making his choice, but over excited as the poor can be when confronting great wealth, simply stood by the urns with a cocked head, wringing his hand in earnest.

“Well,” said Tametet eventually, “what is it to be? Do you pick the stranger...or me?” The mason looked from the stranger to Tametet’s feet a number of times and eventually pointed to the stranger.

“I choose that he pick from this urn,” said the mason animatedly.

Tametet smiled. “So be it. Stranger, you must do as you are asked.”

The crowd whispered as the robed figure lurched toward the urn. When he reached it, he bent forward and placed his arm inside. After a few moments, he withdrew his hand; he was holding a small gold ingot. The crowd clapped and cheered with relief – perhaps this once a game should end without incident. But even as the clamour continued, a sound echoed about the hall, finally turning all other noise to whispers: it was that of metal hitting the base of the urn.

Tametet stared at the figure and then at his brother –*did this stranger not value gold, was he stricken by madness?*

The stranger rolled next; it was an awkward gesture, made more so by his deformity; he clutched at the die with a twisted hand, finally capturing it within three curled fingers, where it sat as though hanging in a broken crib. The action completed and

the urn indicated, he staggered across the floor and drove his arm within. Again, the stranger withdrew it with an ingot. Again, it was forsaken.

Tametet weighed his die, allowing it to roll between his fingers. Then, eyeing his rival, he rolled himself. Missing his chosen number, he sauntered across to his urn, and placed his arm inside. Tametet's eyes widened and he released a terrific howl that echoed about the hall. Some of the women screamed and many of the men exchanged confused glances. It was only when Tametet's healer burst through the crowd and to his aid that the lord withdrew his arm from the urn; he was holding the ruby.

It took a few moments for the guests to compose themselves sufficiently well, and this time was filled with hushed voices and no small applause. As it faded, Tametet moved towards the stranger, saying to him:

"As the victor of our little game, I will it that you go now to the tomb of Ashkazeer, and once inside paint your name upon the central wall. And, to ensure completion of this small task, I ask that you leave a thing of value behind."

Caertok then strode toward his brother. "Please Tametet..."

"Enough," snapped Tametet, "I have listened to your rubbish before. This I deserve." Caertok made to speak again, but the stranger raised an arm to silence him. Tametet turned towards the robed figure, who simply nodded.

"Well, stranger, what is it to be?" said the lord. "What will you leave me as assurance?"

The robed figure's head fell forward for a moment, and a long sigh escaped his hood. From within his robe was produced a pouch; it glimmered a soft gold in the light. Tametet's eyes fixed on it; it was actually made of woven gold, and decorated with malachite, ruby, and lapis –*what on all of the earth could be contained inside that it was of more worth than the purse that carried it?*

"All that I have is now yours," said the stranger, his stony voice cutting through the assembly to resound off the walls about him. "Everything. Will you take responsibility for it?"

"I will do that much," muttered Tametet. "Yes. Until you return for it, it shall now be considered as my own."

Reaching forward, Tametet took the pouch from the stranger; but as he pulled the stranger's crooked hand broke free of its long sleeve, and the lord saw the puncture marks on its back.

As soon as the robed figure released the pouch, he turned and walked out of the hall. He did not stop to consider those in his path, whether noble, priestly or commoner, but brushed them aside as he passed.

Tametet stood motionless for a second, examining the incredible workmanship on the pouch –*nothing like it existed, the kind of artifice involved had been lost for countless years*. Breaking free of his thoughts, Tametet stared after the stranger. The pouch felt empty. "Wait," he cried, but the figure had already gone.

"Mason," cried Tametet.

"My lord," came the reply as the worker, although behind Tametet, drew a little closer.

"Mason," Tametet continued, "I understand that the competition may have ended unfairly to you, and..."

"Oh, no. No lord," broke in the mason, "I..."

Tametet turned and glowered at the stonemason, who began to prostrate himself on the ground. "Please, good lord, do not send me," began the mason. Tametet smiled and, walking over to him, pulled him to his feet.

"Poor man," said Tametet, winking, "I insist that you are rewarded. Please, take from any urn of your choosing."

The mason's dull wits slowly came to him, and as he stood there, a smile grew on his face. Quickly, he moved across to one of the urns visited by the stranger and reached inside. A terrible scream echoed about the hall, then repeated and magnified by a number of the guests. White faced, the mason pulled his arm free of the urn. Attached to it was a large cobra, which continued to thrash about wildly. Servants and guests backed away, watching in horrid fascination as the man slowly sank to the floor. Tametet too looked horrified, but he was staring out into the night. "Guards," he screamed, "find that man and return him now."

Servants removed the stonemason, and recaptured the snake with a noose. But there was no sign of the stranger; and as guard after guard returned empty handed, the young lord became more frantic. When the last guard arrived back, Tametet demanded of him the whereabouts of the stranger.

"What stranger, my lord?" came the reply.

"Where is he?" screamed Tametet. "People don't just disappear!"

Unnerved, the guests began to whisper and shuffle uneasily. One of them, lifting a goblet to his mouth, immediately spat the contents onto the floor and dropped the remainder. Tametet watched, horrified, as a thick black-red liquid spread slowly across the marble. Others too sniffed at their beverages and screaming, sighing, or otherwise exclaiming their disgust, threw their goblets down. Several of the priests moved across to the casks and, examining the contents, pushed them over; a torrent of foul-smelling liquid surged across the marble hallway.

Tametet sank to the floor and looked about him; his guests were leaving in droves, walking upon a sea of blood, glowering down at him. They looked like dark, maniacal gods, laughing at him from the shadows. He called for his mistress, searching her out through the commotion of servants and fleeing guests, from the thinning sea of faces that looked down on him with contempt. When there was no response, he searched again, this time finding his brother. Caertok was staring toward the stairway, a smile playing on his lips. Tametet followed it and screamed; Mezat stood there, her eyes wet with emotion, smiling back at Caertok.

Tametet realized that nobody was listening to him. What ever he had done required undoing, and he felt that if he did not do it quickly there would be little point trying at all. Running from the hall, Tametet made his way around to the stables. There he found himself a camel and mounted it with some difficulty, moving it out into the courtyard and utilizing a wall. It was jittery and uncertain of what he wanted it to do and made all manner of noise, snorting and calling, exciting the other beasts into a great din.

Tametet finally drove the camel beyond his courtyard, and observing some of his guests as he did so, called out to them. They appeared not to hear him and walked on, moving away from him more quickly than his camel could gain; Tametet could not believe he had chosen such a ridiculous beast.

He rode on through the streets, calling out, chasing down anyone with the slightest resemblance to the stranger. But all he received were cries of alarm – "that camel is

possessed...call the guards and have it killed.” So Tametet would ride on again, even more flustered than before.

Eventually, the young lord found himself at the edge of the desert. There he looked out across the dark golden expanse, dimly lit by the yellow moon. “The pouch,” muttered Tametet, into the night. Removing the pouch, Tametet beheld it again; it was surely the most beautiful thing he had seen. Inside was nothing but a coin –a dull metal disc with the inscription *Ashkazeer*.

Spurring his steed on, Tametet moved across the dunes, searching the horizon for the tomb. He had not been travelling many minutes when saw it, caught in the moonlight, and larger than he remembered; but there seemed something vaguely familiar about it, something else, as though the very act of moving toward it was the most natural thing possible.

By the time he neared it, Tametet was convinced of his action: here was where he would resolve his problems; he would soon understand what to do. Dismounting, he made his way to the entrance; the stone door was ajar, leaving just enough room to squeeze beyond it. Tametet did not hesitate, moving into the cool corridor without reservation. He stood there for a moment, taking deep gulps of air and stretching his limbs.

Blue-flamed kiki lamps illumined the passageway; but their light was feeble, leaving the deep shadows untouched at the room’s extremities. Tametet walked along the passage, drifting slowly down, gazing about him at the beautiful artwork that lined the walls. Most of it was of figures –men and women, their smiles crooked and their eyes bright, staring out at him, seeming to following him down on his journey. Several looked especially familiar.

At the end of the passageway, Tametet stepped out into a large chamber, where a great weight of shadow pressed down upon him; it seemed irrepressible, forcing both him and the light down in prostration. Tametet laid himself in the dust, face down, remaining there for several minutes.

When he arose, Tametet moved toward the end of the room, to where a large sarcophagus rested again the wall. It was empty, and surrounded by hundreds of signatures.

“Reaper?” said a stony voice from the shadows. “Reaper, your time has come.” Tametet wheeled about, peering into the darkness. A hissed laugh echoed about the chamber.

“You have done well, little man,” continued the voice, its sandpaper intonations flowing smoothly, “Your greed and ambition has provided me with this.”

“With what?” stuttered Tametet.

A great shuffling commenced and Tametet backed away towards the passage. Into the dim light lurched a semi-bandaged figure, grotesque and malformed. “This,” it hissed, continuing toward the retreating man. “From sand and paper, I have flesh.”

“What do you want of me?” screamed Tametet, falling backwards.

“Your purpose has been served, Reaper,” said the voice, “and now you must return to the desert. Too much attention has been drawn here, so I shall sleep again, until the time is right for your next incarnation.”

Tametet found his feet and ran, fleeing up the dim passageway toward freedom. He could hear his panicked camel calling, over and again. Beneath him, a grating laughter

echoed. “Until the next time, Shiblo Aldaer Rishanon...Tametet.” The entrance remained as he had left it, and sighing, Tametet pushed his way through and out into the night. Thankfully, his camel had stopped calling.

Moving over the dunes, Tametet searched for the animal but could see nothing; around him was sky and dunes. Tametet stopped and listened; he could hear crunching, ripping and a dull murmur. It was as he moved towards the noise that he saw it, laying on its side, unmoving, its body torn open in several places. About it squatted and bent more than a dozen figures, each slow and cumbersome, reaching into the beast’s decimated carcass and feeding on the flesh.

“Thanks for the meat, Tametet,” called a familiar voice.

“Yes,” called another. “This is the first thing you have done for us in years.”

Tametet back away; perhaps he could still make it back to the town on foot; then this nightmare would end. There had to be a rational explanation.

Slowly, but with great purpose, the figures rose up from their kill. They groaned as they moved, as if the effort caused them great pain. Slowly they came, staggering over the sand towards Tametet.

Tametet ran. He ran as fast as he could, kicking sand up in front of him and sucking in great lungfuls of air; but he was not as fit as he once was and before long he began to tire. Bending over to recapture his breath, Tametet paused. Then, reaching inside his kalasiris, he brought forth the amulet. Behind him, the zombies drew closer, slowing flanking him.

“Here,” screamed Tametet into the night. “This is what you want isn’t it. Well, have it back. I don’t want it anymore.” With that, Tametet launched the amulet into the air and watched it disappear.

Some of the zombies moved toward it, but the others continued to move in around Tametet, forming a circle about him. “Damn you,” he cried. “What do you want?” The zombies moved in on him, rotting hands reaching, grabbing. Tametet screamed and tried to run, but flailing arms barred his way. They grabbed him, snapping bones, twisting, turning, biting, his blood spilling crimson over the sand. When they were finished, they dropped Tametet’s broken form and turned away, moving back toward the tomb. All that was except one, who, bending over him, pressed the amulet firmly into his hand, bending the fingers about it with tremendous strength.

“Until next time,” it croaked, and staggered off after the others.

Face Value

Original Fan Fiction

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The thin man's hands scraped across the roughly hewn stonewall as he led them, descending down the darkened spiral of stairs. Heinrich's arms flailed wildly to ensure no frightful spiders would descend upon his person. Herschel led in front, waving his blazing torch from side to side, causing the ghostly cobwebs to melt away in silent protest. Tucked under one arm, Herschel held a large leather-bound tome, trimmed in tarnished brass, of which he clung to with the utmost care. Rolf and Gunther brought up the rear, shouldering various packs filled with supplies and pots, clanking noisily with each step.

Having decided enough, Herschel stopped midway in decent, scolding,

"Rolf! Gunther! Is it your chief goal in life, to wake the very dead?! Rid yourselves of those infernal pots at once!" Rolf, obviously the most robust of the men twitched his neatly groomed moustache in frustration, whispering harshly,

"We have to eat! Do you know how much it will cost to have these pots replaced?", as Gunther nodded in agreement.

"Just plop them down when we get to the base of the stairs you twits! With the find we're after, I fancy you could purchase a whole storehouse of cooking utensils if your heart so desires!" spat Heinrich as he continued eyeing the ceiling suspiciously. Rolf and Gunther grumbled as the men continued down the stairs until finally reaching an open alcove. They plopped down most of their equipment save for a wineskin, two empty packs, and their sabres. Herschel surveyed the room with interest as he handed his torch to Heinrich, while cradling the tome in one arm as he opened it carefully. Heinrich knew Herschel was a scholarly individual, completely reliable and well respected among the scientific community. After all, that is why he worked with him, because he was one of the best.

The blazing light from the torch flickered across Herschel's small spectacles, that sat neatly on the end of his nose, as he read carefully, a string of ancient and long-forgotten tongue. Herschel looked up a couple of times, as if in an attempt to regain their bearings, before finally pointing his hand at one of the four arched openings that lie at the opposite side of the room, announcing,

"There".

The four disappeared into the their new path through the arched doorway, down a slim hallway, in which the walls contained hundreds of intricately carved designs, spiralling into images of various flowers, and trees. All the images seemed to flow from a central carving mirrored on the opposing wall, that of a man, holding what appeared to be the sun in one hand, and a serpent headed staff in the other. Heinrich's eyes were roving across the surface ensuring no abnormal movement would catch him unaware from those blasted spiders.

There were several holes in the wall, Herschel noted, where possibly some jewels or gold trinkets lay at one time adding to the beauty of the craftsmanship. They sat empty now, probably housing only insects of which would only send Heinrich into a comatose reaction, had he decided to disturb their mysterious homes. The book hadn't mentioned anything special about this hallway, adding to the relief of Herschel. One couldn't be too careful in these tombs, for traps often claimed the lives of would be thieves, leaving only their ghastly remains as an eternal warning for any greedy successors. Herschel was glad as well, for this book seemed to have been written by an individual extremely knowledgeable of the most-minute details they had encountered, at least so far. The hallway soon twisted to the right, opening into a grandiose chamber.

Massive columns the width of a great oak connected the ceiling and floor adding to the grandeur in this chamber. Each pillar wore thousands of lines ancient text along with ancient drawings that were mostly still intact, in of itself a scientist's treasure. Large granite squares spread out covering the floor with a top layer of thick dust, indicating that no one had traveled this path in quite some time. The ceiling was very high, revealing only blackness in return to their curious gazes. Several doorways connected to this room, each containing a stone carving mimicking that of the man holding the sun and the serpent staff. Gunther whispered, "wow" unconsciously, as he scratched his head in awe. Herschel began inspecting the book once more, eventually announcing,

"Step only where I step fellows." Herschel elbowed Heinrich gently taking his attention from the ceiling as he reaffirmed, "Step only where I do."

Following the pattern mapped out in the tome, Herschel began the slow progress of carefully choosing the grand tiles in which they would set foot. As Rolf clumsily hopped from one tile to the next, soon a sparkle flashed from the darkness to his right. Almost falling over, he squealed,

"Wait! There's something here!" as he struggled to maintain his balance. "Pass me the torch!"

Heinrich sighed knowing arguing with this sort would be an exercise in futility, as he hesitantly handed the torch to Rolf. He stretched out the torch straining his eyes in an attempt to make out some image, but none would come. Gunther smiled snatching the torch from Rolf's hands saying,

"Gimme Dat! Lemme show ya something I learned in the circus!"

"The Circus?!" asked Herschel in disbelief as he looked to Heinrich for some sort of explanation.

"Ah...good help is hard to find these days. They *seemed* to have half their wits about them too!", sighed Heinrich incredulously.

"Cease this nonsense at once I tell you!" spat Heinrich as he watched Gunther loosen the top from his wineskin with misunderstood curiosity. Gunther drank deep filling his cheeks with "Bugbear Rum" as it was so affectionately named, as he placed the torch in front of his face, turning only to smile, then turning back to spray the alcohol through the fire creating a massive streak of flame that illuminated only briefly, the lifeless skeleton of a would be thief, laying prone, grasping a glittering star ruby in one hand and clutching his chest in the other where a large spear protruded from it, pinning him to the ground and most surely ending his life. Wiping the rum from his face on his sleeve, he tossed the torch back to Heinrich burping loudly, exclaiming, "Poor Bastard."

“Yes, and quite clever Gunther.”, commended Herschel, thinking he had misjudged him prematurely.

“Nahh it weren’t nothing!” as he burped loudly again

“A good lesson for us all. Let not your greed speed you, ...and the rest of us to the grave.”, assured Herschel confidently. “We must continue on.”

Slowly, they made their way to the end of the chamber where only one highly decorated archway stood, where a large stone portcullis remained sealed within its boundaries. The disturbing sight of another skeleton lie here as well, only this time in halves. Something had severed this poor soul in two, leaving his remains on either side of the doorway. Again, the top of the archway contained the motif of the man holding the sun and the serpent staff. There were two openings on both sides of the door way as well, small carved out openings, in which small onyx figurines sat on one side—that of a Raven, and that of a cat—both facing one another. Underneath each opening was a sort of badly faded transcription. Herschel opened the tome and began reciting what seemed to be a translated riddle:

*“The hunter never takes his eyes from the prey, for
he is constant in flight away”*

The faded transcription underneath each opening could not be read, for time had badly eroded the writing rendering it illegible.

“Damnation.”, sighed Herschel disappointingly.

“What? What is it?” asked Heinrich

“It’s just that both are hunters, and both are prey depending on the situation. Without the identifying script below them...it is a gamble.”, Herschel said motioning towards the skeletal remains grimly.

“Thoughts gentlemen? Any ideas?...I feel that the hunter is the cat. They are hunters by nature.”, concluded Herschel

“Makes sense.”, shrugged Rolf

“What about the bird?” asked Gunther

“In constant flight far away...” muttered Heinrich

“My guess would be to place the Bird into the opposite side of the wall facing away from the cat. What do you think gentlemen?” asked Herschel

All nodded in agreement, as Herschel agreed, “Fine. Let’s have a go then shall we?”

Herschel walked over to the figurines placed together in the same opening and blew into his sweaty palms, and wiped them on his pants. Assuming a precarious stance, he began to reach into the opening. He picked up the cold onyx figurine of the raven and carefully walked over to the second opening and placed its feet onto the stone as a loud “Doom!” sound echoed throughout the chamber.

“What was that?” spoke Heinrich uneasily

“The room is readying itself...”, replied Herschel

“For what?!” pressed Heinrich

“For our success or failure...be ready...”

Herschel then turned the figurine facing away from the Cat with a series of clicks, causing a series of “whirring” to occur. The stone door rumbled as the sound of many

gears reverberated throughout the chamber as the men drew their swords and set themselves for action while another “*Doom!*”, echoed loudly again.

The door had opened, releasing pressure for it had probably contained the original air it had been sealed with from ages ago. A gentle breeze sighed out of the openings forming a small cloud of dust to fill the air. With a wave of relief quickly rising, Herschel commanded,

“Quickly, assist me with the door.” The four men then slid the great stone door back into its crevice feeling the cold fresh air from within. Herschel looked into the blackness with keen anticipation as he turned to his comrades with a smile, “This is it Chaps! We have finally arrived and apparently succeeded where others have failed! Come now!”

The men followed Herschel into the darkness closely as he took the torch to the front illuminating the surprisingly well preserved state of the floor and ceiling—in fact if it were not for the dust, it would have appeared new. Gunther almost knocked over something but blindly caught the clanking contraption before it created too much commotion.

“Shine that thing over here would ya!?” hushed Gunther as Herschel shed the torches’ light upon a brazier.

“You fortunate man!”, exclaimed Herschel as he leaned forward to light the already steadied brazier. As the light flooded the room, more braziers could be seen, and so went Herschel lighting each.

This room was absolutely stunning. Along the walls, purple velvet drapes trimmed with gold hung from elaborate gold rods in contrast to the finely hewn stonewalls. In the center of the room was a table, used to recline against while dining. Surrounding the table were all sorts of colorful velvet pillows and fine linens. The table was set meticulously, as if these people never reclined to eat this meal. To the side of the table stood several chests, some being open exposing more treasure than the men had ever seen in one place.

Near the back wall in front of the table, stood a grand throne. The throne itself must’ve cost a king’s ransom. Formed from solid gold, it was indeed most impressive, bearing various priceless gems and silver inlays designing intricate patterns. The head of the throne had the symbol of a blazing sun, while the arms reflected the heads of poisonous snakes, of course harmless and lifeless, just as its long ago deceased inhabitant.

“King Hauh-rhiz the Cruel”, or rather his skeletal remains, sat peacefully in his throne in blood red fine linen robes. No signs of age or decomposition on his clothing showed, which was odd, for nothing in this room seemed to have decomposed very much at all. Around his chest was a shining gold amulet in the form of a blazing sun, and in his hand rested an onyx and gold marbled Stave, spiraling in form, leading to the top of the stave, which resembled the head of a deadly Cobra. Its jewelled eyes and silver fangs still shone brilliantly after all these years.

“There they are!” cried Heinrich excitedly, “The Staff and Amulet of Hauh-rhiz! We did it!!”

“We are not out of the woods yet, Heinrich. We must take care to gather only what we came for, and even then, there is no guarantee that we will all make it out of here alive...”, reminded Herschel coldly

“We made it here with little trouble at all Herschel. I should think that our predecessors might have cleared out most of the traps set long before our arrival! Today we celebrate! We are going to be rich beyond our wildest dreams!”, grinned Heinrich with glee

Rolf smiled widely exposing the many gaps in his teeth as he set down the empty packs and began humming quietly to himself, entertaining visions of wealth and prominence, and just how many sweet rolls and pastry cakes his share would enable him to purchase.

Herschel thought to himself “Heinrich is probably right.” After all, they had no trouble at all passing through the many corridors to get here, and a tomb as grand as this one would be well protected with many traps...unless they were all sprung.

Herschel found himself glancing at the serpent headed staff, enchanted by its beauty. How did the craftsman weave the Onyx and gold together like that? It certainly resembled a real serpent, and its beauty only served as a distraction for its true purpose...power. Its jewelled eyes seemed to possess an inner flame, instilling a serene calm within the scientist. Herschel felt his hand reaching for the Staff unconsciously, but couldn't seem to resist. It called to him, begging him to grasp his slender hands around it. The power within yearned for a master, a worthy master.

The leather-bound tome fell to the ground with a “Whump!” opening as it lay still. Heinrich began ordering Rolf and Gunther to begin filling their packs with any valuables they could find, taking care to get the more valuable ones, when he noticed Herschel dropped the tome.

“You dropped your book Herschel...”, Heinrich said as he walked over to pick it up to return it to him, noticing the pages that the book opened to when it fell.

The page contained a detailed diagram showing a kneeling man in obeisance to the throne. The page opposite then showed the Staff and amulet in the man's possession in triumph.

“Herschel...look at this...I think you should see this...” lamented Heinrich as he looked up from the pages in horror only to see Herschel's hand closing around the staff.

Herschel whispered softly, “...Power...I shall live again...”

“NOOO!” Heinrich screamed at the top of his lungs as the lifeless skeleton's eyes began burning with an otherworldly flame. Puppet like in movement, its mocking jaw hissed open, bellowing an evil malevolent laugh that sent Gunther scurrying for the door. He nearly bowled over Heinrich as he collided into him, knocking the book from his arms into the air, as it plastered itself onto Gunther's chest from the sheer force of movement he was creating in flight. Using one hand to regain control of the book, his other hand quickly plucked an unlit torch from the wall, dipping it into a brazier without stopping as he fled from the chamber.

Rolf froze, stricken with fright, as he witnessed Herschels' body glow with a pale red light while the air heightened with an evil magical power. Herschels' form trembled violently with convulsions, as he seemed to age with frightening speed. Within mere seconds he crumbled to dust leaving only a small red cloud in his stead. The Skeleton stood slowly with pride, looking down at the remains of this would be grave robber cackling morbidly. Herschels' skeletal hand still remained wrapped around the staff as

King Hauh-rhiz tapped the serpent staff to the ground watching the hand slide down its remaining length, shattering shrilly against the harsh stone floor.

Heinrich quickly regained his balance as every fiber of his being bolted into action speeding towards the door. Rolf still remained anchored to the ground in sheer terror, as the Lich turned toward him uttering a string of echoing ancient words, raising his spidery hand in condemnation against the fear stricken man. Rolf turned to run, feeling all of the sudden incredibly hot. He managed to get only a few steps as his very flesh began to melt away, dropping him to the ground in agony. Heinrich turned for a brief moment as he neared the doorway seeing Rolf's skinless, bleeding body, refusing to admit defeat as it kept crawling for the door, screaming for help.

Gunther heard the screams as well, as he recounted the tiles he was supposed to tread on, concentrating with uncanny precision. Heinrich glanced back in horror once more at the laughing evil being before grabbing his torch and exiting the chamber in an all out sprint.

"Faerhnin preserve me!!" shouted Heinrich as he leapt from tile to tile seeing Gunther disappearing down the narrow hallway they had traveled from moments earlier. The chambers shook with rage, as the Lich King bellowed in hate, rumbling the very foundations of the sunken temple in answer to his will. The voice echoed throughout the walls, seeming to fill Heinrichs' chest with reverberation. Still, he hopped along in panic, setting off traps behind him, barely escaping the cruel grasps of each. He did not care, adrenaline commanded him now, driving and pushing his body to its very limits. He neared the narrow hallway skidding into its walls, slamming hard into its stone surface as the last arrow whizzed past him, missing its intended target, rebounding off the thick granite.

Gunther rounded the corner, bounding several steps in a series of combined leaps as he held the book tightly under his arm while ascending the spiral stairs. No amount of treasure was worth his life, that much he was sure. He grunted with each leap until he got to the top of the stairs, flying past the entry they had came through earlier and making a series of quick turns as he navigated through the smaller, low rooms. He was almost out!

Heinrich caught his breath for only a second as he started running down the long narrow hallway hearing a sort of heavy grinding noise as if stone were moving against stone. Then he heard it again, only this time, a giant slab of stone flew forth from the wall in front of him trapping him. He screamed in disbelief turning around seeing the same wall behind him...*trapped*. He pounded his fists in futility against the unforgiving stonewalls that held him prisoner, bloodying his hands in the attempt. Soon though, the noise had died down. He listened intently, past his own laboured breathing, and heard nothing—*sheer silence*. He inserted his quickly dying torch into one of the many holes in the wall and waited.

Gunther burst through the opening, landing on the sands of the surface, gasping for air. He lay there for a few moments covered in cobwebs as he laughed aloud hysterically, before breaking down into tears. He sobbed uncontrollably, trying to force the agonizing screams from his mind as he prayed to his god to protect him from the unspeakable evil that they had encountered. The sun was beginning to set, and it was too dangerous to be out at night, for darkness held all sorts of dangerous creatures, waiting, simply waiting for a foolish traveler. Gunther wearily stood up and started off toward town, stopping

suddenly—remembering he had forgotten the book. He stood for a moment in silence and in hatred, before finally deciding to bend over and tuck it under his arm as he stumbled off down the sands toward town.

Sweat poured from Heinrichs' panicked body as he called out.

"Is anyone there?! Gunther! Help me!...Hello?...Hello?"

Silence.

Heinrich slumped down the wall as he ran his bloodied hands through his hair in despair. His eyes began to wander aimlessly over the intricately carved walls, containing many designs. It must've indeed taken someone many years to finish the work. The designs melted from vast forest scenes detailing leaping deer, to hunters stalking their prey using their primitive weapons, to various animals, to...spiders? Heinrich kicked the stone spider carving out of sheer frustration for his self-imposed predicament.

Had Heinrich not seen it with his own eyes he wouldn't have believed it. From the hole next to the spider carving, came a white spider—a cursed, wretched, filthy *spider*. Heinrich raised his boot back to smash the infernal thing as he watched in horror as yet another appeared from another nearby hole. Heinrich froze as they sat, waiting, waiting for something. Heinrich dropped his leg and slowly rose to his feet, as several more spiders emerged from the holes in the intricately carved walls, waiting, not moving at all except for the taunting clicking of their mandibles. Soon, the entire wall would be covered with them.

Carefully, Heinrich turned around in horror, as the wall behind him was now solid white with the terrifying things. Heinrich stood in silence, as the clicking grew louder, penetrating his sanity and piercing his soul. His lip trembling profusely, Heinrich looked to his torch, or what was left of it, as a single tear escaped and trickled down his exhausted dirty face, concentrating on its' fading embers, knowing soon the light would flee and he would be left alone with them. He drew in a parting breath as darkness enveloped him whispering softly,

"...Oh...my..."



Shrouded in the folds of his black cloak, the man entered the quaint bookstore as the bell over the doorway sang of his arrival. An older woman, appeared from the back carrying her steaming cup of herbal tea, noticing the stranger with common interest.

"May I help you?" chimed the old woman happily

"...Yes...the sign out front says you buy books...that so?" asked the stranger

The old woman replied, "Well it depends upon the book of course...Do you have a book you'd like to sell perhaps?"

The stranger reached within the folds of his cloak producing a worn travel pack as he knowingly unfastened the hasp and produced a large leather bound tome, trimmed with tarnished brass edges. He set the book carefully on the counter saying, "It's very old."

The old woman knew deep within her heart of hearts that this book was special. She had seen many books come through her door in her lifetime, and she had read almost everyone one—at least the *special* ones. She even had separated the special books from the normal ones, so there would be no mistake in value. She cleared her throat in an

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attempt to regain her composure, for she dare not let the seller know of its potential value, if he didn't already, for the cat and mouse game of buyer and seller was one she played all too often.

Setting her cup down gently, she rubbed her hands together softly explaining to the man,

"You see, I would have to, of course, read it first to see how valuable it is. I couldn't possible price it at face value, for what's *inside* books are what is most important...why don't you leave it with—"

The stranger chuckled interrupting the old woman's sentence, with narrowed eyes saying,

"Not dis book. Dis book is worth somethin'—I know it—an' so do you. O' course, I can always take it ta the wizards' tower on the outskirts o' towne...bein' sure that he'd pay a pretty penny fer it."

The old woman sighed in defeat. She had misjudged this individual, taking him to be unknowledgeable in this area, not knowing that he had learned a lot of lessons during his lifetime... Hard lessons in fact...

The old woman recalled to mind of one her most favoured sayings.

"You can't always judge a book by its cover"

Smiling softly, she said, "...How much?"

Not Just an Ordinary Trip to Muhar

Original Fan Fiction

By Tami Sammons aka Hadis Deadstalker

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The clear night sky was dotted with stars. No fire burned to sate the chill in the cold desert night air, for fear *he* would find them. *He*, Diamabel, flew through the night sky in his demonic form. The caravan, not wishing to attract his attention, camped near the western border of Pharazia by Sebu. They planned to enter Sebu tomorrow at daybreak, travel across to the oasis in Anhall the ruined city; gather water, legumes and vegetables that grow along the oasis banks. Then they would depart quickly traversing the pass in the massive rock formation that marks the western border of Sebu; and on into Har' Akir to sell their wares. For this was how the caravan traveled when Muradin Rashaan, third son of Sheikh Allahn el Rashaan, led the caravan. Muradin had no patience. That was why most in the caravan did not like him, rush, rush, rush. Even when the sheikh told him to wait. He barely left them time to rest. His impatience would be the death of him, or of others trying to save him. Although he was an excellent fighter, fearless in battle, he hated to sit around and wait. Why the sheikh sent him with the caravan no one knew. Muradin was always in such a rush to get back, that they usually didn't get the best prices for their wares in the Muhar marketplace. But this time the sheikh warned him that if he did not get as good a price as the last caravan, he would be very angry. And no one wanted to make Sheikh Rashaan angry.

Ahmed, on the other hand, had enough patience for both of them. He liked to take his time, enjoy things. When in battle he would hesitate, seeking a weakness in his enemies, before attacking. Some believed he was a coward, some believed him lazy, some believed he just didn't like to fight, some believed he just preferred to make the least amount of effort. Whatever it was, it was effective.

Ahmed stood in the centre of the dark camp, looking up into the night sky at the stars. He tried to connect the dots of light in his head to make pictures. He knew he should go to his tent and sleep, for his cousin Muradin was a hard taskmaster. But Ahmed couldn't help but enjoy the night. He preferred to sleep under the stars, instead of the tent. Ahmed has been a member of nearly every caravan that has traveled to Har' Akir. He loved to travel, more so than the others in the nomadic tribe he called his family. He enjoyed meeting new people, seeing new things, experiencing new sensations. Or was this just his desire to find a place. He wasn't sure. He always felt there was somewhere else he should be. For although he called these people family, he never really felt like he was truly a part of them. Partly because they always whispered he had tainted blood. Never to his face of course. They whispered that his father was an outsider, one from beyond the borders of Pharazia, beyond the Amber Wastes. When he would ask, no one would talk about it, telling him it was nonsense, don't think of such

things. And since his mother, sister-in-law to the sheikh and widowed before he was born, died when he was five, he could not ask her. His uncle, the sheikh, promised to talk about it someday, when he was ready. Ahmed, who just celebrated his 28th birthday this past summer, if you can say a desert has a summer that is, wondered if he would ever be ready.

Despite the cool night air, something other than the stars kept him awake. He felt anxious, like something was going to happen on this trip, though he didn't know what. It wasn't a bad feeling, just something new, something different, something exciting. But all that would have to wait, for he realized he could no longer feel his fingers and toes. He had been standing in the cold desert night so long they had gone numb. He whistled once and a small bird flew quickly up to him and landed on his shoulder. It was an owl with talons twice the size of normal owls. He tore his eyes away from the heavens and wrapped his jellaba over his aba, tightly around him. The aba is the traditional desert robe. He strode to his tent for sleep. Ahmed also wore a turban with a long piece hanging in the back.

But sleep would not come easily for Ahmed. He dreamt of strange people with painted faces playing strange music that spoke to his soul, and a child that followed him like a shadow.

Ahmed awoke to the sound of an argument. He emerged into the bright light of the noonday sun to see an argument between Muradin and an older man. Muradin was angry he wasn't woken in time to leave at sunrise. The older man, Rashid, an experienced warrior, who had fought many battles with the sheikh, argued that several camels had gone missing in the night and it took them this long to find them. Muradin said they should have left without them, no matter how much of the wares would have to be carried by the people in the caravan. Rashid, and several other older men and women, more experienced with the caravans, said it was impractical and could possibly be dangerous. They could end up having to buy horses in Muhar to replace the camels. One of the women, Amsha, mentioned that this would not please the sheikh. Which was the only thing that quieted Muradin.

The camels had been found and were being inspected as they spoke. Muradin barked orders to pack up camp and be ready to leave as soon as the camels were ready. Muradin stormed off to his tent.

Ahmed went to ask Amsha what had happened. Since he had been up late and noticed nothing.

"The camels were there when Jamal took over the last shift of the night, but noticed them missing midway through. He woke several others and they went searching for them immediately. They had only just returned. Their restraints were cut."

"Cut? How could that be?"

"Two of the slaves we're transporting to be sold in Muhar are also missing. We have not told Muradin this."

"Knowing him, he will torture the remaining slaves to find out what happened. Then kill them for his trouble," Ahmed said of his cousin.

“Yes,” Amsha replied. “The slaves have already been questioned by Karim. His spells failed to uncover any knowledge of the two that are missing.” She smiled at Ahmed. “It gave us a little more time to rest. And you as well.” She tugged at Ahmed’s jellaba, which he still wore over his aba.

Realizing this he blushed. He noticed just how hot it was. Amsha wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief she carried in the pocket of her aba. Amsha also wore a black aba, like all the desert dwellers, tied by a black sash. She did wear a black keffiyeh, the traditional head cloth worn by most men and women, tied with a brown agal, a cord designed to hold the keffiyeh snugly to the head, although her shoulder-length black hair was loose and could be seen beneath the keffiyeh, and she wore no veil. Her olive-tan skin glistened in the sun. Amsha was about ten years older than Ahmed. She handed the handkerchief to Ahmed.

“Why don’t you hang on to this and go get out of the jellaba before you melt. I’ll get it back tonight. If you’d like?” She smiled seductively at him, brushed his goatee, and walked away. Ahmed could hear the anklet she wore on her left ankle jingling as she left.

He walked back to his tent and removed the jellaba, putting it in his pack. His aba beneath was rumpled. He removed it revealing pants and boots beneath, and then brushed it to try to get some of the wrinkles out. He took a towel out of his pack and wiped the sweat off his muscled, dusky bronze chest. Then he replaced the towel and put the aba back on. He put the handkerchief in his pocket. Then thought about Amsha while he packed his things up and took down his tent. This would not be the first time she visited him. Amsha was a widow, her husband died six years ago. This and her being a skilled warrior gave her a bit more leniency with her affections. She made it very clear she had no intention to remarry. She had done her duty, married and had two children. Although neither of her children lived past five years. And a problem during the birth of her second child made her unable to have any more children. This made her less desirable as a potential wife.

Ahmed being unmarried, made him perfect. He also did not wish to marry. Though he doubted any woman in the tribe would want to marry him, including Amsha. His uncle never talked to him about any arrangements. His cousins, male and female, including Muradin, were all married by the age of 21.

First Ahmed put the bit and bridle into the camel’s mouth. Then he put the leather camel apron in front of the camel’s hump that hung over the mount’s sides, nearly reaching its knees. Then he placed a soft wool saddle blanket behind the apron. After the blanket came the packsaddle, a *terke*, a cage like construction of horizontal bars which he put in front of the hump on the blanket. The *terke* would allow him to guide the camel with his legs and feet. Then he put his large leather saddlebags that hung on either side the camel’s back. He put the camel stick made of hardwood into the *terke* that he would use to motivate the camel should it become uncooperative. He hung a leather bag filled with dates, treats for the camel on the long trek. Leather is the best material for keeping the dates fresh. Before placing his camel grooming kit into its place in the pack, he inspected its contents, a brush with stiff bristles, a metal hoof pick, and a wool massage cloth. Then he placed two *thilaithi*, a camel skin water bag that holds 2 gallons of water, over the saddlebags. Then he placed the rug and pillow he sits on in his tent atop the camel’s hump, and strapped it down with two thick leather straps with a wide

piece of material that went comfortably under the camel's waist. He then placed his tent on one side of the hump and his bedroll on the other side. He checked that the rigging was snug yet unrestricting under the securing straps of the harness, before tightening the securing straps. The desert camel can carry 400 to 520 pounds, rider included, without significant stress. His camel, Naheer, would carry less weight than this.

Shouting brought Ahmed from his tasks and out of his thoughts. And Muradin's voice made him shudder. Muradin wanted to leave, now. No more delays. He was calling for everyone to mount up. Ahmed thought, Muradin's impatience was mounting as well, and laughed to himself as he put the last of his belongings on the camel. Ahmed whistled and an owl emerged from the sand by where his tent had been and flew up and landed in his terke nestling into the small pillow. The burrowing owl had golden-feathers.

It only took a few minutes for everyone to finish packing up and start out. Amsha brought her desert camel, which carried her belongings, over to him to lead, as she rode her war camel, a special breed developed by culling the strongest males from desert camel herds and crossing them with the swiftest females. The war camel is self-assured, courageous, and responsive, and relishes warfare, snapping at an opponent with its teeth, and rearing to pummel with its forelegs. War camels are lean and cannot carry as much weight as desert camels.

It would take most of the afternoon to reach Anhalla, the ruined city, provided there were no setbacks.

But setbacks were what was in store for the caravan. Scorching heat beat down on the caravan despite storm clouds that had grown overhead all morning, which watched menacingly as the sky turned green then dark unleashing a vicious sandstorm that came out of the endless wastes. Most of the dozen scouts, who ride 10 to 20 miles ahead of the caravan, returned to weather the storm near the caravan. The 45 warriors and armed guards, which Amsha was one, which ride ahead, behind, and on either side of the caravan to provide protection from deadly creatures, also came close to the caravan to protect themselves. The caravan travelers covered themselves and waited for the storm to blow over. Amsha and Ahmed huddled beneath the same blanket. Amsha's two camels and Ahmed's one huddled next to them waiting for the storm to pass. And the owl burrowed into the sand.

After the storm passed, they could not find one of the scouts who had not returned to the caravan. His camel was lying near where he should have been covered by a blanket. Not even the caravan's wizards could locate him. Also, two pack camels with rice were missing, as was several more slaves. The wizards and remaining scouts hunted for them for an hour before Muradin ordered the search abandoned. While the scouts and wizards searched, several in the caravan dug up several *ab'i* tubers. These tubers usually lie about 3 feet below the desert surface, they appear as smooth blood red stones. The edible tuber is as big as a camel's hump, and is filled with a half-gallon of cloudy water. The water is squeezed from the tuber over a container. But these were merely bagged and packed onto the camels, for later. While they dug up one of the tubers, they disturbed a nest of seven burrowing owls that slept 4 feet beneath the surface of the sand. These owls looked just like the one Ahmed had hidden in the pillow of his terke. The owls emerged and attacked the group excavating the *ab'i* tuber with their large talons. Ahmed's owl emerged from the pillow and screeched at the seven owls, before burying

it's head back into the pillow. This was enough of a distraction for the group to overcome the owls, killing three before the remaining four flew away.

Before reaching Anhalla, the storm clouds finally burst, covering the desert and the caravan in a torrential rainstorm, nearly washing them away before sinking into the desert. The rain, however, did cool the remainder of the daylight hours.

It took all afternoon to reach the oasis in Anhalla with its chunks of foundation the only reminder of the vast glory the city once was. There wasn't much time before sunset to make camp near the oasis and far from the magnificent walled estate near the outskirts of the city. Although the estate was presently silent, the members of the caravan knew all too well, anyone who investigated this estate and the sounds of merriment that came from over its tall walls never returned. Everyone pitched tents, set guards, gave instructions not to wander from the safety of camp. No one saw anything, or anyone, but they knew the wild children of Anhalla were near. They camped away from the pitiful mud dwellings the wild children lived in. They usually kept to the dark recesses of the ruins. They never made contact. Baboons and monkeys could be heard darting through the ruins, although they were strangely quiet. However, the entire time, everyone felt they were being watched and not by the baboons, monkeys, or the wild children.

Everyone was on orders not to leave camp, or leave their tent if at all possible. There would be four people on watch at all times. Ahmed was on the last watch. When he was awoken for his shift, he emerged from his tent to see a clear virtually starless sky lit by an orange moon. The moon bathed the ruins in an amber glow that made Ahmed feel uneasy. There was little sound to the night. A few bugs chirped and the wind blew. This made Ahmed feel even more uneasy. He had a bad feeling about his night.

"The baboons have made no move toward the camp," the man whispered. "But you can hear them, at least we hope it's them, moving about in the ruins. Rashid is in charge of your shift. He's at the eastern side of the camp by the arch."

"Thank you," Ahmed whispered. "Try to get some sleep." Ahmed put his scimitar and his jambiya in his sash. He whistled twice and waited until his owl came and landed on his shoulder. Then he went to meet Rashid and the other two on guard duty.

"There is movement in the ruins but no move on the camp," Rashid began quietly. "This isn't usual for the baboons and monkeys. We will circle the camp, keeping each other in sight at all times. Anything other than that movement, or if you lose sight of one of one of us, alert the others."

The shift was quiet, too quiet, and nearly over. Dawn was in two hours. One of the men on guard heard a noise in the ruins near the remains of a building. He couldn't make it out. He made a noise to draw the attention of Rashid, who was behind him. He motioned to the ruins. Rashid whistled catching the other guard's attentions. Then Rashid walked to the man and they whispered quietly. The man then walked slowly toward where he heard the noise. Ahmed sent his owl to land on Rashid's shoulder then follow after the other guard. The owl landed on Rashid's shoulder, startling him. He looked at the owl that flew off after the guard. Rashid then looked at Ahmed and nodded his approval. The three waited, quietly, looking all around. The man stepped into the

ruins then was lost in the shadows. The owl followed into the shadows. A moment later they all heard the owl screech loudly.

“Ahmed,” Rashid called waving him to follow. “Wake the others,” Rashid called to the remaining guard.

Rashid and Ahmed ran to the ruins. It was dark in the shadows, but they saw what appeared to be a scantily clad woman leaning over the guard’s prone figure and another dark figure a few feet away. Her long dark hair obscured most of the guard’s body but she wore a long glistening headpiece on her head that reached to her shoulders. With her left hand she was swatting at the owl diving at her. She growled in frustration.

“Stop!” Rashid shouted. “Let him go!”

The woman turned. From what they could see in the dark, her mouth and chin were darker than the rest of her face. And she held something in her right hand, a large, dark, round object twice as large as her hand. It seemed to drip, for there was a dark spot on the ground beneath her hand. She growled at the men. She put the object to her mouth and appeared to eat it, then stood and ran from the ruins away from the men.

“Check him,” Rashid ordered, then followed the woman. Four men carrying swords shouted at her to stop as they ran toward her. She looked at them and three of the men stopped in their tracks. Rashid overtook her and swung his sword at her. He missed and she reached out and touched his chest. He fell to the ground screaming clutching his chest. Two more men ran toward her from the camp, moving in front of her to cut her off. She hesitated looking at them, but they continued moving toward her. The three men closed on her. Instead of trying to avoid the men, she turned toward the single man that pursued her. She closed the distance and made a grab for him when he came within reach. She grabbed the man’s throat and he screamed, dropping his weapon and grabbing her arm to get her to release him. She looked over her shoulder to see where the other two men were. She called into the night. Several men and women emerged from their tents, weapons drawn. But before any could close on the woman, twelve figures shuffled from the shadows in all directions entering camp. One of the men muttered something and a bright light illuminated the area. The twelve figures she called were humanoids covered in bandages from head to toe. At the sight of these bandaged figures, half the men were overcome with fear and collapsed to the ground. Several more armed people emerged from their tents.

“Don’t let the creatures touch you,” shouted one of the women, “they spread disease.”

The people standing turned toward the approaching creatures. With this distraction, the woman dropped the man in her grip and ran into the ruins out of sight. The man lay in a heap on the ground.

The men and women attacked the bandaged figures with their swords. The creatures swung at the people with both hands. But with every blow the men and women delivered, the damage seemed minimal. One of the creatures hit a man in the chest who flew ten feet. The creatures fought with little conviction and began to disperse now that the woman was gone.

One of the women lit a torch and moved toward one of the creatures. She swung at it until she hit it with the fire. It burst into flames.

“Fire,” she screamed. “Use fire on them.” It continued to swing its hands at her, despite the flames consuming it.

The men and women began to pursue the creatures.

“Stop,” screamed Muradin. “Let them leave.” Muradin stormed into the centre of camp. “What happened?” he demanded, red-faced with anger.

Rashid gathered his weapons, strength and courage then walked toward Muradin, clutching his chest where the woman touched him. The men and women frozen began to move again and the ones on the ground had gathered their courage and were on their feet. The only man who didn’t get up was the one in the woman’s grip. When checked, they discovered him dead.

Rashid explained the events leading up to the incursion. Ahmed finally emerged from the ruins. He carried a small bundle in his arms. He stopped and talked to the wizard who lit the area who ran into the ruins with another person. Ahmed walked up to Rashid and Muradin.

“What’s that?” Muradin spat.

“This is what took Jarim into the ruins,” Ahmed explained. “It’s a wild child. It looked like the woman had been attacking the child when Jarim disturbed her. She had discarded the child and went for Jarim.”

“And what of Jarim?” Muradin asked angrily. “I want to hear what he has to say.”

“That might be impossible,” Ahmed said.

“Why?” Muradin spat.

“Jarim is dead. I asked Karim to check him to see how he died and if there is anything he can do. There are no apparent wounds on him. May I tend to the child?”

“I don’t care,” Muradin growled. “But you are responsible for it.”

“Her,” Ahmed corrected.

“What?” Muradin spat.

“It’ is a girl.”

“I don’t care what it is. It cost us two men and who knows what else.” Muradin turned his back on Ahmed and walked away. “Be ready to leave an hour after dawn,” Muradin shouted to the camp.

Ahmed asked one of the women to come to his tent with him and check the child over. She cast a spell and a torch appeared. As Ahmed began to lay the child on his bedroll, the woman stopped him.

“It probably has lice. Do you want that in your bedroll?” she said.

“She,” Ahmed emphasized. “Farah, I will sleep on the ground.” He laid the child down. He took one of his thilaithi water skins and pored some into a wooden bowl. Then took a rag and made it wet. Farah checked the child over.

“It seems alright.” Ahmed gave her an angry look. “She,” Farah corrected.

“Thank you Farah,” he said in a dismissive tone.

She got up and left his tent.

Ahmed closed the flaps of his tent and secured them. He brushed the girl’s mat of black hair back from her face. He took the rag and began to wipe the girl’s filthy face off. She stirred. Ahmed cast a spell. And a cup floated out of his pack and filled with water. Opening her eyes the girl let out a yelp and moved away. Ahmed cast another spell and spoke to her, “I won’t hurt you.” She calmed a little. “My name is Ahmed.”

Ahmed took the cup from the air held it out to her. “It’s water,” Ahmed said.

She hesitated. Thinking she didn’t trust him, he took a drink from the cup and held it out again. She took the cup and sniffed at the contents. When she was satisfied it was

alright, she took a drink. A small pouch floated from his pack. He took it from the air and opened it. He pored the contents onto the bedroll, beans, peas, and figs. He took one of each and ate them.

“What happened in the ruins? With the woman?”

She looked at him curiously. “When I found you, you were unconscious on the ground and the woman was over the man with something in her hand. What happened? Do you know?”

“Monkey,” she chittered.

“‘Monkey’? What monkey? There was no monkey when I got there.”

“Her.”

“I don’t understand.” He shook his head.

“Her, monkey.”

“She had a monkey with her?”

“Her, monkey, watched you.” She fanned her hand.

“She had her monkey watch, us?”

She shook her head. “Saw her. She change. Monkey watch. She change. Woman grab. Man came. Grab man. Throw me.”

“She changed into a monkey?” The girl nodded. “As a monkey she watched us? Then she grabbed you and the man came to help. She grabbed him and threw you?” The girl nodded. “You don’t remember anything after she threw you.”

She shook her head. “Takes thing out.” She patted her chest.

“What?”

“She takes thing out.” She patted her chest again. “Red thing.” She put her hands together to make a round circle. “It moves. Out, in. Big, small.”

“I don’t understand. She takes something out of the chest?”

She nodded. “Eats it.”

He shook his head.

“Ahmed?” a man’s voice said from outside his tent.

“Yes,” he replied.

The flaps of his tent shook. He unsecured the flaps and opened them. Rashid stood there.

“What is it?” Ahmed asked.

Rashid leaned his head into the tent. “What has she said?”

“From what I get, the woman was watching the camp as a monkey. The girl saw her. And the woman attacked her. That’s when Jarim went into the ruins. She grabbed Jarim and threw the girl who went unconscious. But what she says now, I don’t understand.”

“What is she saying?”

“The woman ‘takes thing out.’ She pats her chest,” he imitates the girl. “A ‘red thing’,” he makes the circle with his hand, “that moves out and in? Big and small? And something about ‘eats it’. I don’t understand.”

“I do,” he began. “Jarim’s heart is missing. When I went to attack her, her mouth was red and dripping. Blood. She took his heart out and ate it. Maybe the in and out, big and small means it’s beating when she eats it. I’ll go tell the others.” He began to close the flap, then opened it again. “I forgot,” he handed Ahmed a piece of white cloth.

“For the girl. It’s the smallest I could find. I really wish I knew who you learned magic from.”

Ahmed took it as Karim left. He looked at the cloth. It was a shirt and a black sash. He laid the clothes down and turned to the girl. The bowl of water and the rag floated over to the girl.

“Why don’t you wash up a bit and put these cloths on. If you’d like to make your hair wet, I can get a comb and you can comb your hair.”

She tilted her head and had a curious expression on her face.

A wooden box came floating out of his pack, opened and a mirror floated across to stop in front of her.

“Your hair is a bit messy.”

“That?” she said pointing at the kit.

Ahmed leaned over and put his razor kit in front of her. He showed her everything inside, the straight razor, “this is very sharp. It could cut you. Men shave their beards.” He brushed the smooth parts of his chin around his goatee. “Some men also shave their heads.” Then he showed her the lather bar, “this is to make the shaving easier. When wet it makes lather, or bubbles.” The horsetail brush, “this is to put the lather on the face, or scalp.” The scissors, “these are to clip the hair and make it shorter, or to trim the beard. It’s also rather sharp.” He unwrapped his turban and showed her how short his hair was. He made a cutting motion with his fingers to show how the scissors worked then rewrapped the turban. Then he pulled out a small leather pouch, “in here is a cream to put on after you shave, to help make the face smooth and avoid razor burn. A little bit goes a long way.” While he repacked his razor kit, she leaned over and touched his cheek, by his goatee. He laughed as she quickly moved back away from him. He left the mirror out. “Now, I have to go outside and help pack things up. This will give you a chance to clean up and change. I’ll be back in a little while to pack up the tent. We’ll be moving out after dawn.”

Ahmed got up and left the tent. He went to help pack the camp up. Someone asked what he did with the girl. When he said he left her in his tent, they laughed, saying he probably won’t have any belongings left when he returned. Calling him way too trusting.

When he returned to his tent, he heard noise inside. “Hello?” he said. The noise stopped. When he entered the tent what he saw surprised him. His pack had been moved over to the bedroll, the camel grooming kit was out and the brush was lying in front of her. The razor kit was open and the scissors were next to the brush. There was a pile of lather in the drinking cup and a pile of black hair was next to the cup. And she was sitting, innocently on the bedroll looking up at him with her wide almond-shaped, coffee coloured eyes. Her deep bronze coloured face was clean, her black hair was about two inches long and dripping wet and the sash Karim brought was half wrapped around her head. She wore the shirt untied, which had the sleeves cut to her wrists, the remnants lying on the bedroll next to the uneaten food.

He couldn’t help but smile. But he tried not to laugh. He cast a spell. He sat down on the floor of the tent, next to his pack. He got into his pack and pulled a towel out. He slowly moved toward her, she didn’t move away. He took the sash from her head and

used the towel to pat her hair dry. Or dryer. He took the brush and started to brush her hair. "This is actually a brush for my camel. I'll see if I can get a brush just for you. All your own, if you'd like?" She nodded her head quickly. When he was done, he wrapped the sash around her head, like his turban. "Don't worry about not getting it the first time. It can take a while to get the hang of wrapping turbans." When he was done, he got into his pack and tried to find a cord of some kind. When he couldn't he leaned his head out of the tent and called to someone passing by who wore a keffiyeh.

"Excuse me, do you have a spare agal I could have?"

"Sure," he said and walked off.

Ahmed tried to clean up and readjust his pack when he heard a voice at the tent opening. Amsha stuck her head into the tent.

"You wanted an agal?" Seeing the mess, she snickered.

"Don't," he warned.

"Ahhh, the joys of parenthood. I remember this. But be careful, it has a tendency to occupy the rest of your life. Or at least the rest of your youth."

"Enjoying this?"

"Very much," she said entering his tent. She sat down on her knees by the girl. Her anklet jingled when she sat. "I'm Amsha," she said gently.

"I couldn't find my extra sash. And I thought an agal might fit her waist better."

Amsha wrapped the agal around the girl's waist then tied it. Then Amsha started sniffing. "What is that smell?" She leaned forward and sniffed the girl's cheeks. She smiled and snickered again. "She's wearing your shaving lotion."

"She didn't shave did she?"

Amsha lifted the girl's chin and looked at her face. "No cuts," she said. Then noticed a long scar on the girl's jaw from her left ear to her point of her chin. "At least no new ones." Amsha took off her keffiyeh. "Turn you head, Ahmed." When he did she lifted the shirt the girl was wearing and wrapped the Keffiyeh around her to make shorts. "That should do." She pulled the shirt down and brushed it out. "You better hurry here. Muradin's impatient to leave. The creatures touched several of the men this morning. He wants to get to Muhar quickly, in case we need to have them healed." She brushed her hand across the girl's cheek. "I think she looks a lot like you." Amsha got a sad look on her face. She stood and moved to the tent opening.

The girl reached out and grabbed Amsha's ankle. She swung around to look at the girl, who jingled the bells on the anklet. Then she brushed the sandal with her finger.

Amsha leaned down and took the anklet off and handed it to the girl. "Better hurry and pack up." Then she left.

The girl wrapped the anklet around her ankle. It was too big. Ahmed took the anklet and wrapped it twice around her ankle. It didn't fit, not long enough to wrap twice. He closed the clasp on one of the links, then on the last link. It made a loop at the end. The girl played with the bells.

Ahmed packed up his things and started taking everything out of the tent. "You'll have to come out now. I need to take the tent down."

The girl came out, shaking her foot to make the bells jingle as she walked. Ahmed took down the tent and began packing his camel. Amsha bought her camels over to Ahmed. Ahmed finished packing his camel. Muradin called to move out. Amsha

mounted her war camel and moved off. Muradin tied her pack camel to his camel. He cast a spell.

“We’re leaving now,” he said to the girl. He whistled. After a moment his owl flew up to him and flew into the saddle and nestled into the pillow.

The girl looked around at the people as they mounted their camels. She looked at Ahmed and pointed to his camel.

“I ride this one. We’re leaving. We are on our way to the domain past the Valley of Death. We have goods to sell there.” He pulled his camel down to the ground. “I guess this is good-bye. Try and stay away from the woman. No more following monkeys.”

The girl looked around at the caravan. They were moving out. She looked up at Ahmed. She gave him a big hug and started to walk away, jingling the anklet. He climbed up into the saddle, reared his camel, it stood. He pulled the camel into line behind another man and started off. He heard a high-pitched scream behind him. He turned to see the girl run after him. He stopped the camel. She ran up to him and held her hands up to him.

“Come too,” she said.

“You want to come along?”

“Come too.”

“Alright, but we may not be back here for a while.” He grabbed her arm and lifted her into the saddle behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, digging her hands into the folds of his aba and held on. Then she pulled her hand back and had a piece of paper in her hand. It was a strange paper. There was a picture of people on it. They had painted faces, some danced, some juggled daggers, and one carried a funny box in his hands and was covered with little creatures. She handed it to him.

“Where did you get this?”

“Here,” she said pointing to his pocket.

He checked his pocket. “I wonder how that got there.” He looked at the paper. “Reminds me of a dream I had once. Come to think of it, I think you were in it too.” He smiled at her. “Why don’t you hang on to it.” She rested her head on his back and looked at the paper. He moved the two camels into line behind the others.

In the Ruins of Eternity

Spiritual Beliefs of the Akiri

Beyond the swirling mists lies Har'Akir, an endless sea of sands smouldering beneath the scorching rays of the merciless sun. Beneath the burning dunes lie the ruins of a great civilization, buried beneath centuries of decay. Only a few obelisks and temples remain, slowly eroding to the onslaught of time. Of the builders of those monuments, there remains only a scant few survivors. After centuries of decline, only the tiny city of Muhar remains of the great civilization. Though few in number, the Akiri still cling to their ancient culture. Their memories stretch beyond the centuries and sadly recall the Golden Age of their ancestors; a time where the Gods walked the earth as men and their glory was immortal. Even in their age of misery, the Akiri treasure their amazing beliefs, in the slim hopes that their world is not doomed.

Ma'at

Ma'at is the core concept of Akiri thought; it is the force of harmony, truth, wisdom and law. All of an Akiri's actions are devoted to maintaining Ma'at in his life, to make his own corner of the world peaceful and orderly. Ma'at is a universal force; indeed, it is the force that maintains the very cosmos. Each individual contributes his or her own Ma'at, adding to the harmony of the community, and through that, the order of the universe. Ma'at is not a force of good in the strict sense; it is a necessity for life. Only in an orderly, harmonious world can life flourish, thus all life

depends on the maintained of Ma'at. The Gods were once the guardians of Ma'at; centuries ago they sent kings and priests to maintain harmony in the universe.

At present, the Ma'at of Har'Akir is broken. The cosmic discord is palpable on the wind, crops are sickly and life is miserable. The last pharaoh to rule the Akiri committed such atrocities that the gods forsook the people and doomed the universe to a slow death. Without the presence of the Gods, Ma'at is impossible to maintain. In an attempt to cleanse the universe of Ankhepot's evil, the gods have unleashed the force of entropy so that this universe may perish and another might arise. With the royal blood extinguished, the only link to the Gods remains the priests. Led by the priestess Snefru, these clerics make offerings in the attempt to draw the attention of the Gods. It is the last hope of the Akiri that the Gods will show mercy to the people and return harmony to the world.

Ka

Ka is the animating force of the body; it is the spirit of the person and the essence of their being. The Ka of a person is believed to be the centre of personal power; it is the reservoir of all authority, charisma and strength. In the ancient times it was believed that only a pharaoh possessed a Ka, but as time passed this quality was attributed to all people. An Akiri's ka is often confused with the concept of a soul, though the Akiri make the distinction. The Ka is

not consciousness or personality but merely the force that drives the mind. Each person possesses a ka, unique to that individual, specially chose by the gods. The Akiri believe that the individual, to maintain ma'at, must obey the will of his ka.

Pharaohs were believed to have a divine ka, which would give them the ability and the drive to maintain ma'at in society. The most ancient writings declared that these god kings were animated by the ka of Horus, the divine son of the Gods Osiris and Isis. The pharaoh was assumed to act as the Ka for all of civilization, with his divine power as the source of all society's strength and his laws acting as the conscious of the Akiri. Current Akiri thought holds that the last pharaoh, Ankhtepot, abandoned his ka, which led to the decay of society. Some believe that the ka of Horus still exists somewhere, waiting to be found by the next pharaoh.

Ba

While Ka is the source of personal power, it is Ba that expresses force. Ba is the link between Ka and reality; it is the mechanism by which an Akiri affects the world around him. The Akiri believe that after death, a person's Ba lives on in the body and may even travel across the world. The Ba is often depicted in paintings as a bird with the head of a human, though it is believed that the Ba is naturally invisible. In the past, the Ba was only associated with Kings and Gods. The Ba allowed these beings to exercise physical force in the world, giving them an unending reach over the earth. In his age of decline it is believed that the spirits of the dead have power, not unlike the gods. Thus, all Akiri are believed to have a Ba of their own.

The Ba is an animating force in the body until death, when it becomes free. During the day a Ba is free to roam the earth, acting out the will of the deceased. By the fall of night a person's Ba must retreat to the safety of the tomb, where it slumbers. A person's Ba requires the body to survive in the afterlife. This Ba is a guardian of its tomb and the treasures within. When someone trespasses into a tomb or disgraces a body, the Ba has the power to return to the mortal realm and seek revenge.

Society in Decline

Akiri society is indelibly marked by the decline of their civilization. The atrocities of Ankhtepot occurred centuries ago, and since that age the Akiri civilization has withered like a delicate lotus beneath the merciless rays of the sun. Crop yields plummeted steadily, as did the birthrate. Pestilence and disease periodically struck, and mysterious raiders destroyed the rule of divine law. Most damaging of all was the despair that ran throughout Akiri society, without the guidance of their gods, the Akiri gave in to their destruction with little resistance. As time passed, the cities of Har'Akir became deserted and were buried in the rolling sea of sand until only one settlement remained.

By the year 755, by the Barovian Calendar, the people of Har'Akir face oblivion. For generations the Akiri have known that their world is slowly ending, each generation faces the rising tide of time and feels the numbing sting of the eroding winds of change. Though the Akiri want for little, the ruins of the civilization of their ancestors surround them. Each man, woman and child knows that their people are doomed, they will never rise to those lofty heights

again, and one day will vanish from the earth. Optimism is as precious as water, and many time more rare. The Akiri are a reserved people, speaking sparingly even to their closest friends. They live, labour and love in silence, hoping not to draw attention to themselves and their slow doom. The birth of a child is often a sullen occasion, though the birth of each succeeding child becomes more and more festive as the family grows in size. Few families are blessed by more than two children, though the occasionally large family offsets the losses from stillbirths and accidents.

The Pharazians

In the year 590, by the Barovian Calendar, the domain of Pharazia formed in the mists. The domain held a culture not unlike that of the Akiri, indeed it seemed as though the nomads of Pharazia might have once been part of the Akiri civilization, conquered during the first century of decline. Though these nomads worship the same gods as the Akiri, their culture is very distinct. Despite the oppression these nomads face from the tyrant Diamabel, these nomads are not gripped with the same melancholy that plagues their Akiri cousins. Even still, the nomads share the Akiri view that Har'Akir is the centre of the universe, and is thus the most important place in the entire world. The nomads sell the Akiri slaves and supplies at a low cost and generally try their best to assist the Akiri people. The nomads act as the military for Har'Akir, patrolling their border and watching over vulnerable tombs. The nomads believe that if they can restore Har'Akir to its former glory, Diamabel will lose his grip upon their land.

The nomads have added influences from Pharazia to their religion. Amon

Ra is seen as the chief deity, who serves the role of Osiris, Horus and as the Sun God. The other gods are viewed as celestial servants of Ra, not as Gods in their own right. Borrowing from Diamabel's doctrine, the nomads believe in the theory of a single soul, which exists independent of the body. The remains of a human remain sacred to the nomads, and while they do not mummify their own dead, they fanatically protect the ancient tombs of the Akiri.

The Cosmos

The ancient writings of Har'Akir say that their land is the centre of the universe. The Cosmos, they say, is a vast disk that stretches into infinity. Har'Akir is the most critical point in the universe, and any disturbance that occurs in their land is sure to spread discord throughout the world. The decline of Har'Akir heralds the end of the present universe, slowly the sands will bury everything within the cosmos, ending only after Muhar is buried. The Akiri people still hold their belief, and apply it to all of their foreign relations. The Akiri are often taken agape when a traveler stumbles upon Muhar and knows nothing of their land, describing strange places filled with such ridiculous things as castles or forests or snow. Despite the fictitious tales of travelers, the Akiri know that the entire universe revolves around them.

The Gods

The Akiri revere a large pantheon of Gods, all of whom are interrelated by marriages and reincarnation. The position of chief deity has changed over the many centuries that the Akiri civilization has existed, though since

Har'Akir was drawn into Ravenloft, the pantheon has stabilized.

Anubis: Though he is often confused with the god of Death, Anubis is associated with the preparation of the dead. The jackal-headed god oversees the transition of the living into the afterlife. The priests of Anubis prepare bodies by mummification and weaving intricate spells over them to ensure safe passage into the afterlife. Anubis is worshiped by all Akiri at funerals and given offerings in exchange for the service of mummifying the body of the deceased.

Though a well-respected god, there is a virulent strain of Anubis cultists. These deviants see Anubis as the chief deity and associate him with plagues, murder, age and any other factor related to death. Naturally, the priests who rule Muhar consider this worship heresy. All priests who express these views are slain, so only a few cloistered cells remain of this cult, hidden in the wastes of Har'Akir and Sebua. So devoted are these priests that it is even rumoured that they have been remade in the image of Anubis, "blessed" with the feral head of a jackal.

In Muhar, Anubis enjoys a large temple, disproportionate for his small following. This temple is used to prepare the dead for burial, so it doubles as a morgue. The temple consists of an ornate inner sanctum, surrounded by the "ibu", the place of purification. It is in the ibu that bodies are embalmed and prepared for burial. Offerings to Anubis are made as donations to the temple, in exchange for services. Anubis is true neutral and possesses the domains of death, magic and repose. Those who worship in the depraved, neutral evil cults of Anubis gain the domains of death, evil and repose.

Hathor: Hathor is the cow headed goddess of agriculture. Since her work is critical to the survival of the Akiri, many worship her. A great festival is held in her honour each year at harvest, praising her for sustaining their culture for one more year. There are three shrines to Hathor, and one moderately large ziggurat dedicated to the cow goddess. Offerings to Hathor include fatted calves and bundles of grain. In most cases the offerings are distributed to the priests, though on special occasions the offerings are burnt in a great fire. There are many priests of Hathor, many of whom directly oversee the farming in Muhar. Hathor is neutral good and has the domains animal, good and plant.

Horus: Son of Osiris, Horus avenged his father's death by slaying Set. Horus became the second pharaoh of Har'Akir, beginning the tradition of divine blood and reincarnation. Horus is depicted as a falcon headed man; all birds of prey are considered his heralds. Priests no longer worship Horus, but the priests of Ra honour him in writings. Horus does maintain a following amongst the guards who serve the clerics of Muhar, who see him as their master in the absence of a true pharaoh. There are no priests of Horus, though the temple guards maintain a tiny shrine at the foot of a hill in the centre of Muhar. Horus is lawful good and has the domains air, good, law and protection.

Isis: The wife and the sister of Osiris, Isis is the feline goddess revered by most Akiri women. It was Isis who rebuilt Osiris as a mummy and latter cast the spells to resurrect him. The cat is a symbol of Isis and a sacred creature to the Akiri. Isis and her cats are considered the guardians of the afterlife, responsible for resurrecting the dead so

that they might live on in the afterlife. Isis worship has evolved into a cult of womanhood. The vast majority of her priests are women, who take the role of educators and midwives. The temple of Isis is located near the centre of Muhar. It is a lavish building, filled with statues and other monuments. Offerings to Isis include grain and other goods, with luxury items such as silk or perfume fetching the highest blessings from the clerics. The clerics of Isis breed cats and sell them to their congregation. Isis is neutral good and possessed the domains animal, magic, and luck.

Osiris: Osiris was the first of the chief deities of Har'Akir, also known as the first pharaoh of Har'Akir. Slain and dismembered by his vile brother Set, Osiris was resurrected and returned to the living world as a god. Depicted as a green skinned man, Osiris is the god of the afterlife, the eternal guardian of Ma'at and the source of divinity of pharaohs. Each pharaoh held the "Ka" of Osiris, and with each death his ka was reborn in the succeeding king. Like a real pharaoh, Osiris would latter be succeeded by his son Horus.

Osiris is worshiped by a small following of clerics. As the lord of the afterlife, the clerics of Osiris oversee the final rituals of funerals, where the spells are cast to see the dead to their afterlife. Osiris' clerics are known to watch over the tombs of the ancients, protecting them from those who would desecrate their sacred tombs. These guardians are feared throughout the Amber Wastes for the punishments they meet out to grave robbers. Osiris has one major temple on the edge of the city, and two shrines in the most populated area. Laws passed by the Priestess Snefru dictate that the priests of Osiris receive their offerings only from the clerics of Ra, as a means

of subjugating Osiris to mighty Ra. Osiris is neutral good and his domains are good, protection, repose and water.

Ra: Also known as Amon Ra, he was a newer God, introduced shortly before Ankhtepot's atrocities. Amon Ra is the God of the Sun, an ever-watching guardian of truth, justice and ma'at. Though separate from Horus, Ra is considered to be the father of each king and the source of their divinity. Ra is the chief deity of Har'Akir, and naturally he is the most popular. Each morning Ra is reborn and pilots his solar boat across the sky, issuing justice and fostering Ma'at throughout the day.

Sadly, the priests of Ra feel the constant scorn of their god. Pharaoh Ankhtepot's atrocious assault on the Gods enraged Ra, so much so that the sun god has refused to reincarnate himself and allowed Har'Akir to dissolve. The priests of Ra fervently hope that their pleas will be heard and Ra will return to them. Until that day, Ra grants his servants spells, if only to prolong the suffering of Har'Akir. Worship of Amon Ra is a grand affair, by Akiri standards. Ra possesses a great temple built upon a hill in the centre of Muhar. On holy days the stone statue of Ra is carried in a procession around the city. Offerings to Ra are mostly grains, collected as tithe from the Akiri. All people taken, as slaves for crimes are the property of Ra's clerics, though additional slaves can be given be wealthy Akiri seeking Ra's wisdom. Ra is lawful good and has the domains of air, good, law and sun.

Set: Also known as Seth and the Gnawing Serpent, Set is the dead god of treachery, entropy and serpents. Ever jealous of his brother Osiris, Set attempted to destroy his brother's universe so that he might create one in

his image. Slain by Horus, Set is trapped in eternal torment in the afterlife. The goal of Set is to destroy the universe so that he might escape and build his own realm. The followers of Set are hidden throughout Akiri society. While Ra has forsaken his people, Set seduces the greedy and perverse with promises of power and luxury when Set arises once again. His priests often pose as the priests of other gods, sowing discontent and chaos throughout society.

It is rumoured that followers of Set have created a stronghold somewhere in the Wastes, where they have marshalled forces for nearly a millennia. Rather than wait for Akiri society to vanish from the earth, Set's minions hope to conquer it by force and free their dread master. Assassins, grave robbers, thieves and all forms of human scum worship set. Worship of Set is always a bizarre affair; in most cases it is limited to whispered prayers, though human sacrifice is not unheard of in the isolated corners of the Wastes. Set worshipers are known to keep serpents as pets, including deadly asps and cobras. Set is lawful evil and has the domains of death, evil and trickery.

Sobek: The crocodile headed God; Sobek is lord of the rain, rivers and oasis's that sustain all life in the Amber Wastes. Though he is a bringer of life, Sobek is seen as a malignant creature. It is Sobek who withholds the water from the Amber Wastes, letting the land bake beneath Ra's merciless rays. Rather than let mankind die quickly, Sobek sends the rains once a year, just enough to sustain the Akiri. These deluges flood the land, causing mudslides, collapsing houses and spreading havoc everywhere. In the wake of rain comes the endless plague of ravenous mosquitoes, which make life in the desert unbearable

torture. Just as Ankhtepot tortured the priests of the Gods, so too does Sobek torment the people of Har' Akir.

Despite his evil, Sobek is worshiped by a tiny following. The people recognize that Sobek is a necessary evil, issuing the punishment prescribed by Amon Ra, so he is honoured accordingly. Most farmers give Sobek a token offering, in the hopes that he will be merciful and choose not to punish them. Sobek has one shrine, built into the shore of the oasis. Offerings to Sobek include calves, grain and fish that are given to Sobek's priests. Sobek's priests also sell mummified crocodiles, most of which are faked. These mummies are good luck charms, designed to protect the owner from the crocodile god's wrath. Sobek is chaotic evil and has the domains of destruction, evil and water.

Thoth: Thoth is the God of knowledge and scholars. All professionals, from architects to doctors, worship Thoth. At the time of Ankhtepot Thoth worship was abandoned, but a few remaining scholars pay him tribute. The ibis god has only one shrine dedicated to him, and though it is well cared for, it is rarely visited. Thoth worship is limited to a few daily prayer rituals, practiced by a professional before he begins his daily work. Thoth is neutral good and has the domains of knowledge, magic and protection.

Death and Burial

The life of an Akiri is spent in contemplation of death. Indeed, the scarcity of water and food makes death a common event. The Akiri face the inevitable end with some optimism, believing that the afterlife will unite them with the glorious civilization of

their ancestors. The Akiri are very concerned with their place in the afterlife, an entire life's work might be devoted to collecting the materials needed to ensure a place of honour amongst the dead.

The common Akiri cannot afford extensive rituals for their dead, in the case of slaves the body is lowered into a sandy grave. The peasants of Har'Akir can afford for a priest to anoint the body before placing it in a simple coffin. The wealthier members of Akiri society can afford to partake in the more elaborate rituals of death.

Mummification: The Akiri believe that the spirit of the dead remains in the body. Indeed, life in the afterlife depends upon the survival of the corpse. The dry climate of the Amber Wastes allows for natural mummification. Bodies buried in the sand are desiccated, slowing decomposition dramatically. The Akiri have refined this natural process, creating an elaborate ritual to preserve the bodies of the dead for millennia.

The process begins with embalming, in the ibu of the temple of Anubis. The body is washed in palm wine and rinsed with water. The most important step in mummification is the removal of all of the moist organs, which is accomplished through an incision in the left side of the body. The lungs, liver and intestines are washed, dried and packed into canopic jars. Since the heart is necessary for life in the afterlife, it is left inside the body. The Akiri believe that the brain is useless, so it is removed with tongs through the nose.

The body is buried under a small pile of a salt known as natron and left in the sun for forty days. The dried carcass is washed with oil and water to retain elasticity. The body cavity is then filled

with sawdust, salt and scrolls upon which funeral spells have been written. The body is then wrapped in linen and adorned with protective amulets. The linen is painted with resin, gluing the wrapping to the body. Finally the body is wrapped in a shroud upon which the picture of Osiris has been painted.

The internal organs of the deceased are protected in wooden canisters, known as canopic jars. The liver is inserted into a jar bearing the likeness of the human headed god Imsety, the lungs are held in a jar topped by the baboon god Hapy, a jar shaped as Anubis contains the stomach and the jar shaped into the likeness of Horus protects the intestines.

Sarcophagi: The body is contained in a series of coffins, which help to protect the body. The first coffin is made of wood, carved and painted in the likeness of the deceased. In the case of the wealthier priests and aristocrats of Har'Akir the coffin is made of stone, though in the ancient past the coffin was made of gold. The coffin is lowered into a stone sarcophagus, in which the body will rest for eternity.

Grave Goods: The tomb of the dead is filled with the goods that will be used in the afterlife. Furniture, food, coins and other objects are stored in the grave with the body. Any tomb of significance is literally a trove of treasure, waiting to be plundered by an impious thief. Often the tomb contains a variety of mummified animals, kept as pets for the afterlife. Small statues are found in tombs, representing slaves who will labour in the afterlife.

Tombs: For most Akiri, the desert itself is their tomb. Simple graves are dug into the sand and the bare body, or coffin, is buried. The wealthier Akiri can afford to have their bodies buried in

real tombs, cut from the rock of the mountains in the Eastern corner of their land. The style of tombs has changed over the course of centuries. Tombs dating back before the reign of Ankhtepot were elaborate structures, built in a similar manner to temples or ziggurats. However, in the centuries of decline the style of tomb changed to reflect the ease by which such tombs were spotted and looted by thieves.

Most of the more recent tombs found in Har' Akir and Sebua are built in a standard fashion. A horizontal shaft is dug into the mountainside, and branches off into a "t" shape. The two branches run parallel with the cliff face, and serve as storage places for the grave goods. The shaft continues forward extending into the funerary chamber. Though not the actual resting place of the body, this is the ceremonial room where the final funeral rituals are conducted. The burial chamber is cut into the rear of the funerary chamber and is sealed behind a great stone door. The burial chamber is very ornate as holds the most expensive goods in the grave, including the canopic jars. The sarcophagus itself is held in a

well, cut in the centre of the burial chamber.

The Akiri believe that the tomb is the home of the dead during the afterlife, so it is decorated accordingly. The walls of tombs are painted with all manner of images, depicting scenes from the deceased's life as well as the soul's journey through the afterlife. Interwoven throughout the murals are the hieroglyphic writings of the Akiri language. Those who can decipher the symbols can read of the history of the deceased, as well as the legends of Akiri religion.

Long before the decline of Akiri culture, tomb builders recognized the necessity of security. The entrances to tombs are secured with massive stone doors, locked with an intricately designed seal. For millennia the Akiri have practiced the art of trap building, inserting insidious devices into the crypts of their patrons. While Akiri tombs are infamous for traps, experienced crypt raiders know that the devices are often of poor quality. Since such snares are designed to last for centuries, trading lethality for longevity.

Shoals on the Sea of Sand

Natural Hazards in the Amber Wastes

The Amber Wastes are an endless ocean of sand. During the day the blasted wastes are scorched beneath the merciless rays of the sun. At night, dark hunters haunt the wind swept dunes. The land is parched and arid for months on end, yet without warning the skies can darken and flood the desert with a lethal torrent of rain, transforming the wastes into endless mire. Those who have walked the Wastes are wary of the dangerous, though the burning sands hold dreadful perils even for the most experienced travelers. Reluctant are the nomads and merchants who cross the desert, and foolish are those who travel unawares of the shoals on the sea of sand.

Merciless Heat

The Amber Wastes are parched desert, scorched beneath the sun. Those who leave the safety of shade and shelter can feel the wrath of the sun god Ra as his merciless rays sears their exposed flesh. Just after sunrise the temperature begins to climb to an uncomfortable level. This is the time where the akiri attempt to accomplish most of their work, in the brief five-hour window of time where the sun lights the land but does not burn. In the two hours before noon the sun has heated the land to an unbearable level, with temperatures reaching as high as 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Only the hardest Akiri dare to continue their work in this time. In this time characters must make a fortitude saving throw each hour against a DC of 15 +1 for every previous check.

On a failed check, the character sustains 1D4 points of subdual damage. This subdual damage causes the condition known as heat stroke; any character suffering from this damage is fatigued and suffers a -2 penalty to strength and dexterity. Characters in heavy clothing suffer a penalty of -4 to their check. Those characters rendered unconscious suffer normal damage from the horrible rays, taking 1D4 points every hour of exposure.

At noon, for one half hour, the temperature reaches an abysmal 110 degrees Fahrenheit. At this time the Akiri flee to their homes and hide within the safety of the shade. During this time characters must make a fortitude saving throw every ten minutes against a DC of 15 +1 for every previous check, to avoid taking 1D4 points of subdual damage. After this period of hellish heat, the temperature hovers back at 90 for four hours. The evening comes afterwards; bringing the temperature down to a bearable level for another four hours as the sun slowly sets. After sunset the temperature drops rapidly, becoming noticeably chilly by midnight.

The environment of the Wastes is always hot and arid. Under these inhospitable conditions humans quickly lose precious moisture. Characters wearing armour or carrying heavy equipment require twice as much water as normal to sustain them. Those characters that avoid heavy labour and are wearing appropriate desert apparel require only the normal amount of one gallon of water.

Sandstorm

In the complete absence of trees or any other objects to break the wind, the gentlest breeze can grow into a gale force. The sands of the Wastes are easily picked up and carried by the growing storm, combining into a force to smother the Amber Wastes beneath a hail of stinging dust. Every day there is a 1% probability of a sand storm striking. These sandstorms occur for 1d6 hours, usually in the evening. The storm is preceded by the gradual darkening of the sky as the clear blue heavens turn a greenish hue. The wind gradually picks up as the onrushing clouds blot out the horizon. The sand storm smothers unprotected flames with its choking dust; even protected flames have a 50% chance of being smothered by a sand storm. By the end of the storm 1D6 inches of sand is deposited on the affected area. These sand storms can be huge affairs effecting areas as huge as fifty square miles.

Each sand storm has a 10% chance to grow into a greater sandstorm. In these massive gales the wind speeds reach a staggering speed of 74 miles per hour, making normal missile attacks impossible and imposing a -8 penalty to listen checks. Medium sized characters in a greater sand storm must make a fortitude save against a DC of 18 or be knocked prone, while small characters are knocked down and rolled 1d4 * 10 feet, suffering 1d4 points of subdual damage for every ten feet they roll. Furthermore, any character exposed to the greater storm suffers 1d3 points of subdual damage each round. While the storm rages, all characters without a scarf or some mouth protection begin to choke on the sand, effectively drowning. Those characters with a protective covering can hold their breath for a

number of rounds equal to ten times their constitution score before drowning. These massive storms leave 2d3-1 feet of sand in their wake.

The lands of Pharazia and Sebuia are rarely struck by sandstorms, enjoying the protection of the Western mountains from the wind. In these lands, sand storms occur only once a year at the most, and never suffer from greater sand storms that have struck Har'Akir. The Akiri, however, live in dread of these nightmarish storms. It is whispered that when these storms descend upon the land, it comes in the pharaoh's likeness, a massive wall of swirling sand in the shape of his cruel face. As the greater storm crashed upon Har'Akir, the mouth opens wide and swallows everything in the storm's path. It is said that these storms are sent by the sleeping king, that his divine force, his *ba* as it is known, is punishing the Akiri people out of petty malice. The clerics of Har'Akir discourage these rumours, actively punishing anyone who claims to have seen the face of the storm.

Mirage

Beneath the blinding rays of the sun, the horizon dances in the shimmering air of the Amber Wastes. Light bends and twists in the searing waves of heat, contorting into strange reflections on the edge of sight. As well, the merciless temperature of the desert is harsh upon the mind of any beleaguered traveler, driving the clearest mind to confusion. This dizzying combination gives birth to the mirage, the infamous illusions of the desert.

Mirages are seen as blurred images on the edge of sight, they are warped reflections of the sky and ground, twisted by the intense heat. The extreme temperature plays tricks upon the mind,

shaping these optical illusions into fantastic phantasms. Some travelers have seen huge lakes on the horizon; others have seen mighty mountains spring from the sand. Those foolish enough to investigate these sights find that these illusions remain on the edge of the horizon, always out of reach. The mirage can become a lethal illusion, drawing the heat-addled deeper into the desert, to their doom.

Each hour that a character travels in the desert, during the day, he must make a will save against a DC of 5, plus 1 for every hour that he has been walking in the sun. The character may apply both his constitution and his wisdom modifiers to this save. On a failed save, the character sees a mirage in the distance. This mirage is a blurred image, though in this state of mental stress the character perceives it as real. Common mirages include mountains, lakes, cities or castles.

The nomads of Pharazia are well versed with mirages, often trading tales over the campfire of encounters with the imaginary. There are tales of the wind calling with a human voice, and stories of strangers found in the desert that vanish in the blink of an eye. Legend has it that one band of riders once discovered an unknown village where they traded with the friendly locals and spent the night in an inn. As the story goes, they woke the next morning and prepared to leave, stopping only to drink from a well. To their astonishment the water turned to sand in their mouths, and when next they looked the village had vanished, leaving them alone in the desert.

Quicksand

Even in the desert there is water. Water drains through the large particles

of sand, flowing deep beneath the surface where it is protected from the rays of the sun. This water lies within the protective sands, collecting into a pool as precious little precipitation drains into the growing hollow. The result is a boon to local plants, and a curse to travelers. Found in low areas, quicksand is a layer of sand lying over the mélange of mud into which water has recently drained. These natural traps can be of any size, though in the Amber Wastes they are rarely larger than fifteen feet in diameter, and twenty-five feet deep. A patch of quicksand can be spotted with a spot check with a DC 20, with characters native to the Amber Wastes receiving a +5 insight bonus. The surface layer of sand is only strong enough to support itself over the mud; any character weighing more than ten pounds breaks the surface. Characters may make a reflex save against a DC of 15. If the check succeeds the character escapes the sand, if it fails the unwitting victim falls into the sucking mud.

Characters in the mud begin to sink, just as if they were in water. Characters within the mud must make a swim check against a DC 15, with full penalties for heavy loads. Climbing out of the mud is extremely difficult, for the character must wrestle against the vacuum suction caused by his own motions in the mud. Every round that a character takes any action other than remaining afloat, he takes 1d3 points of subdual damage. Climbing out of the mud requires the character to reach the edge of the quicksand and make a climb check against a DC of 20.

A character that sinks beneath the quicksand begins to drown. The victim may hold his breath for a number of rounds equal to twice his constitution score, and afterwards must make a

constitution check against a DC of 10, plus one for every previous check. If this check fails the character falls to 0 hit points. Following this failure the character drops to -1 hit points on the next round, and drowns on the round after falling to -1.

Flash Floods

The Amber Wastes lack the seasons that so many domains enjoy, the sun beats down each day with the same merciless intensity. Though stable for months at a time, the weather conditions of the Wastes can rapidly deteriorate into freak storms. The Akiri blame this instability on the collapse of harmony throughout their lands, and though outsiders dismiss such an egocentric theory, few can rationalize the rapid and chaotic shifts of the heavens. Each day in the Amber Wastes there is a 1% chance of a flash flood.

Though Sebuia and Pharazia are occasionally blessed with gentle precipitation, the only rain to water the domain Har'Akir come in flash floods. Clouds roll forth from the heavens, as if from nowhere while the sun darkens and the wind rises. In mere minutes the sun is blocked out and dark shadows blot out the desert. The rain comes forth in a merciless torrent, thick droplets pelt down like hail stones, quickly flooding the banks of the Oases, filling pools of muddy water and crashing down the cliffs. Visibility is poor in these rains, halving the range of sight and imposing a -4 penalty to spot and search checks and missile attacks. These floods stretch over whole domains, even drenching the entire cluster in extreme cases.

These rains last only 1d6 hours, though they can cause lasting damage. The dry cliffs of the Amber Wastes are susceptible to great mudslides as the

sand upon them slips down the side in massive tides of deadly sludge. One hour into the deluge the sands upon the cliffs destabilize and flow over the edge. Mudslides affect two areas, the slide zone and the burry zone. The slide zone occupies the sides of the cliffs and the very top plateaus. All characters in the slide zone may make a reflex save against a DC 15 to avoid the slide, suffering 3d6 damage and being pinned on a failed save. Characters climbing a cliff at the moment of the slide are not pinned on a save, but fall, suffering falling damage and damage for the slide zone. The burry zone occupies the area just below the cliffs. All characters in the burry zone are pinned and suffer 8d6 damage, though they may make a reflex saving throw against a DC 15 for half damage. All characters pinned suffer 1d6 points of subdual damage each minute, and if unconscious must make a constitution check against a DC 15 each minute or suffer 1D6 points of normal damage.

Mosquito Swarms

Though life in the Amber Wastes barely survives beneath the merciless sun, there still exists a parasite to plague the desert. Despite its wiry shape, the mosquito is a hardy insect, capable of thriving even in the Wastes. The Akiri breed of mosquito is blessed with a rapid lifespan, growing to maturity at the astonishing pace of only three hour's time. The permanent oases of the Wastes contain enough predators to keep the mosquito population at a bearable level, though when the rains shower the desert, the vampiric fliers explode in numbers.

Often heard before seen, The wining drone of a million wings haunts the dreams of every native of the Amber

Wastes. The black cloud is visible with a spot check against a DC of 12 and audible with a check against a DC of 10. Mosquito swarms exist for only short periods, usually only a day after a rainstorm. Flying above muddy pools, the mosquitoes form a spherical cloud nearly fifteen feet in diameter, filled with breeding couples of mosquitoes. These clouds of insects move as if controlled by one mind, seeking out sources of water and fresh blood. Mosquito swarms have dark vision with a range of 100 feet and a movement rate of forty feet. These swarms wash over any living creature they find and drain their victim of precious blood. The long proboscis of the female insect can reach through the tiniest chink in armour while its agile body squeezes into the smallest nook. Character adequately clothed for the desert may swath themselves in their clothing, avoiding the sting of the swarm with a successful wilderness lore (survival) check against a DC 15.

Living characters caught by the swarm are tormented for 1d6 rounds, during which the character suffers 1d3 points of subdual damage each round. If a character falls unconscious during this assault, he begins to suffer normal damage from the mosquitoes. At the end of the feeding, the mosquitoes flee back to a source of water to lay their eggs. This process requires ten minutes, after which they seek out blood once more. Mosquitoes are feared for the diseases they carry and deliver to their victims. The disease known as Red Ache may affect a character subjected to the hideous feeding of a swarm. This disease has a DC of 15, an incubation time of 1d3 days and deals 1d6 points of strength damage. Symptoms include red welts and severe irritation of the skin.

Oases

Even amidst the desolation of the wastes, there are springs of life. These are the Oases, blessed places where cleans water springs from the earth and nourishes the land. Though these oases are crucial lifelines for the travelers who cross the wastes, they can just as easily become their graves. Oases are gathering places for the denizens of the desert, including predators.

Dug into the land surrounding an oasis are snake pits, the burrows of the viper species that make their home in the desert. Adapted to life in arid climes, these asps and cobras need only to live within travel distance to the water. Those who approach an oasis must be cautious to avoid these temperamental serpents. Most of the poisonous snakes found in the Wastes are tiny creatures, though snakes as long as a full-grown man have been reported. Closer to the Oasis are the weak grasses that mark the barrier between the oasis and the desert. These grasses are home to a thriving insect community, including the traditional arthropod predators. Spiders and mantises are found in these grasses, terrorizing the insect prey, though it is the desert scorpion that strikes fear into the hearts of large animals. The tiny scorpions of the Wastes are notorious for their lethal sting, proving that it is not size that makes a creature dangerous.

Beyond the grass stand the towering palm trees that provide the shade that makes an oasis a sanctuary from the heat. Amidst the leaves of the mighty tress are vultures, hawks, owls and a variety of other arid climate birds. These desert fowl jealously guard their nests, loudly protesting should anything try to climb into their trees. Hidden in the shade lie the predators of the desert, jackals, the hyenas and the plains cats.

These large predators do not willingly share their territory with other species, so a given oasis will be ruled by only a single pack. Though mere animals, these creatures know that their oasis is all that sustains them, so they will fight to the death to protect their watering hole. A few members of this pack might even patrol some distance from the oasis, keeping an eye out for prey.

Rarely, oases are found to be completely devoid of animal life. Though peaceful in appearance, these groves are in truth lethal traps. An aberrant species of lash weeds (Monster Manual, 114, 120-121) is known to exist in the Amber Wastes, appearing to be a miniature form of palm tree, covered from top to bottom in branches of broad green leaves. To protect them from the arid climate the lethal weeds have evolved an insulating covering, which keeps water from escaping or entering. With this advantage the lash weeds are also capable of surviving completely submerged in water.

These abominable plants gather in groups of ten to twelve, always based around a body of water. Though capable of surviving normally on water and sunlight, the lash weeds crave animal carrion with which they fertilize their oasis, create new soil and expanding their tiny territory. The lash weeds have evolved a deadly hunting strategy, entrapping unsuspecting animals that approach the oasis. Desert lash weeds coordinate their attacks with the members of their grove, communicating with a haunting hooting noise. The grove allows its prey to reach the water and bend low for a drink before signalling the attack. Lash weeds emerge from the water in which they have been hiding and spray their

blinding toxin. The remaining lash weeds on the perimeter use their entangle ability, trapping the creatures in a mass of grasping roots. The lash weeds then wade into melee with their spiny leaves, slaying their prey. The bodies are torn apart and distributed over the oasis.

Desert Lash Weed: CR 4; large plant; HD 2d8+12; HP 30; Init +1; Spd 10ft, swim 20ft; AC 13 (-1 size, +1 dex, +4 natural); Atk 4 whips +6 melee (1d4+1); SA entangle, spray poison; SQ Plant; AL N; SV Fort +7, Ref +2, Will +3; Str 18, Dex 12, Con 16, Int 4, Wiz 14, Cha 12.

Skills: Listen +7, Spot +7

Combat: Desert lash weeds enter combat by releasing a spray of blinding poison and then entangling their opponents. Once their enemies are blind and immobile they close to melee and slash at their prey with their spiny leaves. Lash weeds are slow and incapable of surviving outside of their oases, thus they never flee.

Entangle: Three times per day a desert lash weed may use the entangle spell as if cast by a third level druid. This ability can only be cast on an area of vegetation, excluding the desert surrounding the oasis.

Spray Poison: A desert lash weed may spray a 10 ft cone of poison as a full attack action. This poison has a fortitude DC of 15, blinding any effected character for 1D4 days. This spray can be used only once every three hours.

Dark Vision: Unlike their temperate climate counterparts, a desert lash weed lacks tremorsense. To compensate, desert lash weed evolved light sensitive leaves, capable of dark vision with a range of 50 feet.

Wrath of the Ancients

Curses from the Amber Waste

Angry words carry power, especially in the land of the mists. Malignant forces listen for an angry oath, eager to work vengeance upon the mortal world. In the Amber Wastes there are many such entities, for they are the Ba, the souls of the ancient dead. While the bodies of kings lie in sandy tombs, their essences travel the wastes, meting out justice from beyond the grave. Indeed, the Akiri people warn outsiders to obey the ancient laws and follow the old taboos, for the living are not alone when they walk amongst the dunes. Cruelly do the ancients judge the living, and harsher still is their punishments for wrongs.

There are many legends that tell of the power of the ancients, tales of foolish transgressors and mystical revenge. Since the age of Ankhtepot these stories have only grown in number, becoming the only aspect of Akiri culture to develop in the age of decline. Indeed, the loss of harmony in society has awakened wrathful spirits and sharpened their perception. There are many unwritten laws that govern the Amber Wastes, taboos enforced not by men, but by the power of curse. Those who anger the spirits of the waste find that there is no escape from their punishment, for the curses of the desert may follow them wherever they may wander. Woe to those who break those undying edicts and draw upon themselves the wrath of the ancients.

Bane of Sobek

In the endless sea of sand, what greater treasure is there but water? Shining in the sun like a diamond, each drop is the treasure of Sobek, the crocodile god. Ever the miser, Sobek withholds the rains from the parched land, bestowing it upon the land in deadly torrents. The Akiri treasure their water, yet there are those who carelessly waste such a precious commodity. Yet the eye of Sobek is ever watchful, seeking those who squandered the boon he has bestowed upon them. Terrible is the anger of the rain God, and those who earn his spite learn to regret their carelessness.

The act of desecration is subjective, but certain acts almost always draw Sobek's anger. It is an offence to dump rubbish or natural waste into water, as well, throwing the bodies of the dead into water is forbidden. Sobek cares nothing for manmade bodies of water, so tubs of water and other containers are unprotected. Whenever a person desecrates a body of water, there is a small chance that they attract the attention of the God Sobek. The DM rolls a curse check against a DC of 30, with a bonus of +10 to the check. If the check fails, no harm comes to the transgressor. If, however, the check succeeds, the desecrator is afflicted by a dangerous curse, known as the Bane of Sobek.

A character afflicted with the Bane of Sobek is cursed to suffer from thirst or sickness. Whenever a character afflicted with the Bane of Sobek

attempts to drinks from any source of water, a terrible transformation occurs. The water becomes turbid as a cloudy red fluid invades the drink. Swarming amidst the crimson water are foul insects and larvae. If the accursed character is desperate enough to drink the vile liquid, he must make a fortitude save against a DC 12 to avoid being nauseated for 1D8 rounds. A nauseated character may not attack, cast spells, concentrate on spells, or take any other action but a single move at their base speed. Furthermore, each drink of water may infect the accursed character with a vile disease. This disease has an incubation time of one day, a DC of 12 to resist, and deals 1 constitution damage.

Should an accursed character approach a large body of water, such as a river or an oasis, the water becomes red and bloody in a radius of ten feet around the transgressor, becoming clean only when it leaves the radius. A vile illusion falls over the water, all aquatic beings within the fouled water appear dead and decayed. The sight of skeletal fish and rotting amphibians prompts a horror check against a DC of 10. Naturally, characters with this curse are shunned by settlements.

This curse can be removed by making an offering in Sobek's name. Such an offering might include a donation of as much as a tenth of the character's total wealth, or some service to the church of Sobek. Most of the Akiri can recognize the curse, and will describe the cure.

Thoth's Judgment

The eroded ruins of an empire lost to time break the endless dunes of the Amber Wastes. Though worn, toppled and partially buried, these stone monuments have remained a critical link

between the past and the present. Upon these stones are the legends and histories of the Akiri people, the last faded remnants of a once vivid culture. Yet though the statues, walls and obelisks of the Akiri have weathered the centuries, there are more threats to these monuments than the relentless desert. Human hands have chiselled at the stone of the Akiri ruins, shattering them for personal use, destroying the history of Har'Akir forever, one piece at a time.

Though mankind may have no reverence for knowledge in this bleak age, there is one who has never turned his back to the ancient monuments. He is Thoth, the ibis headed god of knowledge. Even after the blasphemy of Ankhtepot Thoth has guarded the knowledge of the Akiri, protecting the writings of the ancients, and avenging their destruction. The Akiri speak in whispered voices of Thoth's Judgment, the curse that befalls those who carelessly attack ancient ruins of the Amber Wastes. Though the Akiri are forced to chisel stone for practical use, no man dares to deface a monument without the permission of the clerics, who studiously record each glyph from the surface for prosperity.

Any character that destroys a monument in the Amber Wastes may befall the curse known as Thoth's Judgment. If a character defaces or topples one of the stone ruins of the Akiri, the DM rolls a curse check with a bonus of +10 against a DC of 30. If this check succeeds, the transgressor may become cursed with Thoth's Judgment.

Thoth's Judgment is a lethal curse, which manifests over the course of several weeks. Beginning immediately after the monument is destroyed, the transgressor begins to feel stiffness in his joints. This stiffness worsens over the

course of a week, while the character's skin begins to take on a cold and pebbly texture. At the end of the week the character suffers 1 point of permanent dexterity damage.

By the second week the accursed character begins to suffer from a reoccurring nightmare, which robs him of sleep and prevents him from rest and relaxation. In this nightmare the character finds himself running through an endless desert, fleeing a growing shadow behind him. As fast as the character runs, he feels himself stiffen and slow as his body begins to turn to stone. Finally the transformation is complete, and the transgressor finds himself immobile as the shadow looms from behind. It is then that the wind picks up and bombards the helpless statues with sand, eroding the petrified vandal into nothingness. Just as the last fragments vanish, the character awakes, feeling even greater pain in his joints.

Each week, the accursed suffers from the growing arthritis, taking another point of dexterity damage. As the character's bones harden, his skin solidifies into stone. For every two points of dexterity damage sustained, the character gains a +1 natural armour bonus to armour class. When the character has been reduced to 0 dexterity he becomes petrified. No mortal magic can remove this transmutation.

Thoth's judgment may be circumvented by numerous means. If the defaced ruin is meticulously studied, and all of its writings and features document, Thoth stays his hand. As well, if a cleric of an Akiri god sanctions the destruction of the monument, Thoth ignores the desecration. A character suffering from the curse has few options. If the transgressor can arrange for the destroyed monument to be

reconstructed, Thoth will reverse the transformation and repair the damage. An atonement spell cast by an Akiri cleric will remove the curse, though it will not repair the petrification. This service always carries a high cost, often related to the preservation of knowledge.

Curse of Ulthar

The cat is a creature of supernatural majesty, rivalling the Gods themselves in nobility. To the Akiri people, the cat is a mystical being, to be revered, respected and in some cases, feared. Beneath the watchful rule of Isis, the felines of Har'Akir are considered a people unto themselves, governed by their own laws, protected by their own power. To harm a cat is taboo to the Akiri, punishable by the law. To kill a feline, however, is a crime that the Akiri leave to the cats to punish.

Whenever a cat is slain by violence, there is the possibility that the murderer becomes cursed. The DM rolls a curse check with a bonus of +10 against a DC 20. If the curse check succeeds, the transgressor becomes afflicted with a frustrating curse. By the stroke of midnight of the next evening, a "Cat of Ulthar" appears near to the cursed character. This feline shadows the transgressor wherever he goes, nipping at his heels, pawing at his food and yowling in the night. This creature always knows the location of its victim, and has the ability to teleport to the cursed character's location once each day. Though the cat does not need to eat, drink, sleep or breath it can often be spotted chasing mice, napping and engaging in other acts associated with such animals. The feline does its best to irritate the character and generally hamper his actions.

Though this curse seems harmless at first, it has the potential to become much more dangerous. If the animal is slain by the cursed character, the curse is elevated to the troublesome rank. At the stroke of midnight the Cat of Ulthar returns to plague its victim. The cat is much more aggressive in this second incarnation. It shadows its quarry from a safe distance until it notices a chance to attack. The cat prefers to jump on its victim's back, scratching fiercely and causing no small amount of terror before fleeing. The vengeful animal takes every opportunity to make its victim miserable, fouling his food, clawing his possessions and yowling all through the night, preventing restful sleep.

The curse can progress even further from this point, for if the accursed character slays this second beast, a third is summoned on the following midnight. The curse is elevated to the dangerous rank and the vengeful cat becomes even more malignant. The Cat of Ulthar continues its reign of terror, though now it actively attempts to harm the accursed character. The cat uses an intellect as developed as a human's to plot its victim's doom. The feline waits for its victim to fall asleep and then tries to smother him with its own body. The murderous beast lies upon the victim's mouth, causing the character to suffocate as if he was drowning. This attack lasts until the character dies or the cat is chased off. The animal uses other tricks, such as luring the victim into unsafe places, or making sneak attacks.

If this third animal is slain, the accursed character draws the full wrath of feline society and the curse progresses to the lethal level. At the stroke of midnight the cat returns with the intent of slaying its victim. The Cat of Ulthar

has the ability to summon 1D6 other house cats each round, conscripting an army of felines that will serve until the sunrise. This army of felines attacks the accursed character en masse, biting and clawing and raking their enemy until he is slain and stripped of all his flesh. The vengeful feline and its minions return each night until the curse is removed, or the accursed character is slain. A cleric of Isis, or some other feline god can remove the Curse of Ulthar with an atonement spell cast. Naturally, this service comes at a high price to the character, who must either make a significant donation or perform some service in return.

Cats of Ulthar are magical creatures, spawned by the force of curse. These creatures always appear to be extraordinarily majestic cats. Their appearance varies; with fur ranging from a misty grey to pure black, and eyes of yellow or green.

Cat of Ulthar

CR 3; tiny animal; HD ½ D8+3D6; HP 12; Init +3; Spd 30ft; AC 15 (+2 size, +3 dex); Atk 2 claws +7 melee (1d2-1), bite +1 (1d3-1); SA Sneak Attack +1D6, Call Cats, Smother, Trip; SQ Evasion, Immunities, Racial Bonuses, The Cat Came Back, Uncanny Dodge; AL N; SV Fort +3, Ref +7, Will +2; Str 3, Dex 16, Con 10, Int 10, Wiz 12, Cha 12.

Skills and Feats: Balance +18, Climb +13, Escape Artist +8, Hide +22*, Listen +11, Move Silently +19, Search +7, Spot +11, Tumble +10; Skill Focus: Hide, Skill Focus: Move Silently, Weapon finesse (claw, bite).

Combat: Cats of Ulthar use their natural stealth to shadow and opponent and strike when he is most vulnerable. These cats use hit and run tactics to

terrorize their victims, constantly nipping at the heels of their target. At the dangerous level of the Curse of Ulthar, these cats attempt to set a lethal trap for their victims, using the *smother* or *trip* attacks. At the lethal rank of the curse, the cat summons an army of cats to slay its victim.

Call Cats: A Cat of Ulthar may summon 1d6 common house cats every 1d4 rounds. These felines obediently follow the orders of the Cat of Ulthar until sunrise. A Cat of Ulthar may only call cats when it is attacking a character that has progressed to the Lethal rank in the Curse of Ulthar.

Evasion: If exposed to an effect that allows a reflex saving throw for half damage, on a successful save, a Cat of Ulthar takes no damage.

Immunities: Cats of Ulthar are given a divine sentence; they are immune to any form of magical mind control and any use of the animal empathy or handle animal skills. Cats of Ulthar do not need to eat, sleep or even breath.

Racial bonuses: Cats of Ulthar receive a racial bonus of +4 to hide and move silently checks, as well as a +8 bonus to balance checks. Cats of Ulthar use their dexterity bonus for climb checks. *In tall grass or heavy undergrowth the hide bonus becomes +8.

Smother: A Cat of Ulthar may make a smother attack on any character that is prone and completely immobile, such as one who is asleep. The Cat lies upon the face of the helpless victim and suffocates the sleeper. The victim suffers the effects as if he were drowning. Each round that the cat lies upon its victim's face, the cat makes an opposed balance check against the character's wisdom check. If the Cat

succeeds, the victim remains asleep, but if the victim's check succeeds he awakes.

Sneak Attack: Whenever the Cat of Ulthar attacks an opponent who is denied his dexterity bonus, or is flanked by the feline; the Cat may deal an extra 1D6 points of damage.

The Cat Came Back: Each Cat of Ulthar follows one character that suffers from the Curse of Ulthar. Each night at midnight the Cat of Ulthar appears near to the location of the accursed character, regardless of the cat's location. This ability allows a Cat of Ulthar to reappear, even if it has been previously killed. A Cat of Ulthar may even cross a closed domain border with this ability.

A character cannot gain experience for slaying a Cat of Ulthar. To gain experience for the encounter the curse must be removed. Once the Curse of Ulthar is removed, the cat vanishes forever.

Traps: A Cat of Ulthar may use the *search* skill to detect traps with a DC higher than 20.

Trip: A Cat of Ulthar may make a trip attack against an opponent up to two sizes larger than itself. The cat uses its dexterity modifier to resolve the opposed trip attempt and suffers no penalty for its small size.

Uncanny Dodge: A Cat of Ulthar can react to danger with a preternatural speed. A Cat of Ulthar always retains its dexterity bonus to armour class if flatfooted or attacked by an invisible character. If immobilized the cat loses his dexterity bonus.

Revenge of the Pharaohs

Death flies on swift wings to those who would disturb my rest. This phrase adorns the entrance of the tombs of the Akiri kings, warning any would-be grave

robber of the danger within. The kings of the Akiri civilization possessed a wealth unimaginable to most monarchs, and used their wealth to build monuments to their own greatness. Most important of all monuments were their tombs, the structures that would serve as their home in the netherworld. Filled with treasures, these tombs drew the attention of thieves, leading to the violation of countless crypts and the disruption of the afterlife. As agents of the Gods themselves, the pharaohs of old possessed a mystical force, known to the Akiri as the Ba. This divine force gave the pharaohs divine powers in life, and grants them mystical force in death. Even in their eternal slumber, the Ba works the will of its king, existing as a guardian spirit, watching over his body. Anyone who desecrates the tomb of a pharaoh instantly draws the full fury of the ancients.

Any character that removes treasure from the tomb of an Akiri king calls down the Revenge of the pharaohs. The DM rolls a curse check with a bonus of 10 against a DC of 25. If this curse check succeeds, the character falls victim to a dangerous curse. Those who do draw this curse are alerted by a dark omen. As soon as they leave the tomb an eagle circles overhead, calling out as it wheels. The Akiri people know that the eagle symbolizes the hand of Horus, guardian of all kings.

The guardian spirit of the pharaoh seeks vengeance upon those who violated his tomb, following them wherever they go. The spirit is an immortal force, depicted in Akiri hieroglyphs as a bird with a human head, though in reality it is insubstantial and invisible to any means of detection. This vengeful entity exists out of time and space, bodiless and mindless, though

during the day it may temporarily enter the living world and reap its master's vengeance. The avenging spirit prefers to terrorize its victim before slaying him, disrupting the transgressor's life just as he disrupted the pharaoh's rest. The spirit systematically destroys the transgressor's most treasured possessions and assassinates the accursed character's friends and family. Once it can do no more harm, it slays its victim.

The avenging spirit will not relent in its hunt until the goods stolen from the tomb are returned, or its victim destroyed. A cleric of Amon Ra, or Osiris may remove the curse with an atonement spell, though they would be loath to assist a grave robber.

Avenging Spirit

CR 8; Medium Size Undead (incorporeal); HD 8D12; HP 52; Init +0; Spd 30ft; AC 12 (+2 deflection); Atk +4 telekinesis; SA telekinesis; SQ incorporeal, invisible, rejuvenation, spell resistance 15, teleportation, turn immunity, undead; AL LN; SV Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +8; Str -, Dex 10, Con -, Int 10, Wiz 15, Cha 15.

Skills and Feats: Hide +11, Listen +13, Sense Motive +13; Spot +14; Alertness.

Combat: An avenging spirit is driven to avenge the desecration of its tomb by torturing the transgressor. The avenging spirit systematically destroys the life of the accursed character, disrupting his life just as he interrupted the pharaoh's afterlife. The avenging spirit attacks the character's friends, family and possessions. The spirit maintains a low profile, preferring to attack indirectly, fouling crucial provisions, destroying important equipment, and arranging accidents.

Amongst the repertoire of the spirit are numerous devious tricks, including emptying canteens on long desert treks, tripping characters that are walking down stairs, and capturing venomous animals and dropping them on sleeping victims. Once the spirit can do no more harm to the transgressor, it slays him.

The avenging spirit is forever bound to the tomb of its pharaoh. When night falls over the tomb, the spirit is compelled to return to rest. Each dawn the spirit rises again and seeks out its victim anew.

Incorporeal: An avenging spirit is incorporeal. Only magical weapons or magical spells can harm the entity. Furthermore, there is a 50% chance that the spirit ignores any corporeal source of damage. An avenging spirit may pass through solid objects and is always moving silently.

Invisible: An avenging spirit is naturally invisible. Magical means of detecting invisible creatures reveals only a vaguely humanoid figure, made of shimmering sunlight.

Mental Link: An avenging spirit forms a mental link with the character that suffers from the Revenge of the Pharaohs. This link gives the spirit access to all of the accursed character's knowledge. As well, the spirit always knows the location of a character afflicted with the curse Revenge of the

Pharaohs, or any other locations significant to the accursed character.

Rejuvenation: Each sunrise the avenging spirit is restored to full hit points. Even if destroyed, the spirit reforms in the tomb of its birth at sunrise. The only manner in which the spirit may be prevented from rejuvenating is for the body of its pharaoh to be wholly destroyed.

Spell Resistance 15: The avenging spirit has a spell resistance of 15.

Telekinesis: The avenging spirit may use telekinesis, as a spell like ability at will. This ability effects as if cast by a tenth level sorcerer.

Teleportation: Avenging spirits have the ability to teleport to either the tomb of its origin, or the location of a character cursed with the Revenge of the Pharaohs. This ability does not allow the spirit to cross closed domain borders, except to return to its tomb. The Spirit may only use this ability while the sun shines above its tomb.

Turn Immunity: Avenging spirits are undead entities, empowered by divine energies of the god Horus. As a result, they are immune to turning or rebuke by clerics.

Undead: Immune to mind influencing effects, poison, paralysis, stunning, sleep and disease. Not subject to critical hits, subdual damage, ability damage, energy drain or death from massive damage.

Aljaugasba

City of Temptation

The Sea of Sorrows is a cold place, bathed in the salt air and enshrouded in gloom. Its coast is lined with lonely villages and seedy taverns, reeking of alcohol and unwashed, impoverished sailors. Yet it is in these dens of filth that the legends began. Beneath the flickering lights of candles the sailors gather around and listen in silence as a withered old salt whispers with a faltering voice. With hoarse words he rasps the tale of the city beyond the sea, far beyond the filth and grime of their little land. The seamen sit entranced as they hear of a place of opulence and decadence, for it is the legend of Aljaugasba, city of temptation.

Sought by many, found by few, Aljaugasba is the legendary city of foreign delights. Rare is the sailor from the Core who has ever set eyes upon Aljaugasba, though those few have brought back fortunes in spice, silks and goods the likes of which have never been seen. The City of Temptation has been the secret goal of many a brave sea captain, eluding the ships of the core for decades. Superstitious sailors claim that the ever-changing Sea of Sorrows hides the mysterious port, though no logical mind accepts such impossibility. Aljaugasba is a closely guarded secret amongst captains, each of who hopes to discover the passage to the city beyond the sea, and the endless wealth it holds.

Aljaugasba

Cultural Level: Renaissance (9). Aljaugasba mixes elements of classical and early medieval philosophy into an

advanced economy and a culture as thriving and as educated as any renaissance city.

Landscape: Aljaugasba is a small coastal region, conjoined to the southernmost tip of Pharazia. The small domain is mostly flat, sloping down in the south where it meets a small saltwater bay. The earth is dry and arid, unable to support much more than sparse patches of grasses. The only source of water comes from the numerous wells dug deep into the earth. The land is broken by a series of roads running in all directions from the city. These roads end at the border, and though they are in terrible disrepair an experienced traveler can easily determine that the cobblestones were once roadwork of the highest quality.

The bay is a smooth curve cut into the sandy earth. The entire beach is buried beneath the extensive network of docks, leaving no barrier between the city and the deep blue green waters of the harbour. These waters are pleasantly warm and calm all year round, except for the occasional storm. The waters are home to a wide variety of fish, molluscs and squid, though the individual populations are so small that commercial fishing must be tightly controlled. The bay of Aljaugasba is the key to its thriving economy. The bay functions as a reliable mistway to the Poison Sea of Rokushima Taiyoo, the Eastern rivers of Sri Raji, the river west of the Theospine Mountains in Nidala and the Eel's Flow river of G'henna. The bay also serves as

a passage to the Sea of Sorrows, though the ever-shifting Sea hides the mistway.

The weather in Aljaugasba varies between dry and arid to humid and balmy. Rain is rare, and usually very gentle. The occasional sand storm descends from Pharazia, though the sea breeze serves as a convenient barrier, breaking up the storm into a manageable cloud of dust. The weather and the soil makes growing crops nearly impossible, though the proximity to the sea and the availability of fresh water makes Aljaugasba an ideal trading settlement.

Settlements: Aljaugasba (pop. 13, 210); Humans 99%, Other 1%. Languages – Pharazian. Religions – none. The official religion of Aljaugasba was abandoned decades ago, though small shrines to the gods of Sri Raji and the Kami of Rokushima Taiyoo may be found scattered throughout the city.

Aljaugasba is roughly oval in shape, with humble residences on the outer ring on the north side, docks on the south side and wealthy estates on the eastern and western edges. Within the city are four major districts, holding the most important industries of the city. Most of the buildings are ancient structures made of simple, white washed brick. Though made of primitive materials, they are capable of supporting multiple floors. The common homes of the north section are single room apartments crammed together in multi-storey buildings. Though small, they are no tinier than typical residences for commoners in the Core, or anywhere else. In contrast, even the poorest of homes is blessed with luxury items such as pottery, textiles, and windows cut into bare walls and filled with a decorative wooden lattice. Windows and doors are often shaped into pointed arches and

covered with drapes to keep out the hot, humid wind.

On the roofs of these buildings are ingenious drains leading to a subterranean drain emptying into the bay. These drains are the emptying point of thousands of chamber pots, ensuring cleanliness and low instances of disease. Beneath the city is a network of pipes and drains, including a plumbing network capable of pumping water into the fountains and saunas scattered throughout the residential areas of the city.

White Collar District: The northeast corner is the white-collar district, known for the garment commonly worn by scholars and bankers. This area is home to the many institutions of learning of the city, including academies of alchemy, architecture, astronomy, engineering, medicine and metallurgy. As well, this quarter houses the offices of moneylenders. These towering structures are the homes and offices of the wealthy banking families who loan gold to the merchants who make trade with other domains possible. These business dynasties are nearly identical to those found in Dementlieu, though outsiders from that land would find the merchants of Aljaugasba far more sophisticated and scheming than their Core counterparts.

Tradesman Quarter: The north-western district is the tradesman quarter, where the skilled experts of the city create works of legendary quality. Black smiths, jewellers, carpenters, and weavers make up the majority of the craftsmen in this corner. This area has many shops where consumers can browse through merchandise and even commission specific works. Outsiders with expertise in crafts would find the

wares of this quarter very sophisticated, exceeding the products of the master craftsmen of any other land. Over the years the weapon smithing industry has expanded to service the needs of the warring domain Rokushima Taiyoo, though this has fostered an emphasis of quantity over quality. Indeed, master craft weapons and armour remain beyond the reach of Aljuagasba's smiths. This quarter is also home to the guildhalls and a small number of housing apartments.

Flesh District: The south-eastern corner is known derisively as the flesh district, for its purpose is servicing base needs. This area is infamous for its brothels, gambling houses, fighting pits and opium dens. Poorly lit at all hours, this district is constantly kept shaded by the crumbling towers of ramshackle bawdy houses. This area evolved into a snare for the wealthy and the naive, offering an endless barrage of base pleasures for those with the coin to pay. Within the gambling houses are games of chance gleaned from every land in the core, challenging the luck of gamblers to no end. Opium dens make up the bottom floors of many buildings, providing their slavishly loyal cliental with comfortable bunks, soothing music, and the addictive drugs that sap their will. Travelers of loose morals describe the brothels of Aljaugasba as a heaven on earth, capable of satisfying the decadent lusts of even a king.

The flesh district is known throughout the demiplane as a place where a sailor could spend pay earned from a month of backbreaking labour in an hour of shameless debauchery. Indeed, the flesh district is a gigantic pitcher plant made of stone, luring the foolish in with promises of pleasure, ultimately fleecing them of their good,

or perhaps even their freedom. The merchants of the flesh district never ask to see payment for their bawdy wares up front, giving their customers a line of credit. Though this appears to be a generous arrangement, it is in fact a ruse to encourage the naive to spend beyond their means. Those who cannot meet their tab by the end of the night are legally taken as the property of their creditor.

Prisoners sold into slavery often find themselves working in the fighting pits of the flesh quarter. These brutal areas provide a vile entertainment for the wealthy and poor alike. Slaves are forced to fight in these pits, pitted against exotic animals, trained fighters, or simply thrown into death traps while the pit patrons lay wagers. Many of the natives of Aljaugasba despise this barbaric institution, but the governing powers of the city refuse to intervene. The masters of the fighting pits pay a hefty toll in bribes to the city government, while the ring serves as a convenient method of disposing of criminals.

Less famous, though no less significant are the coffee houses that line the border between the flesh district and the white-collar quarter. These small bistros provide the stimulating beverage known as coffee, which some natives claim is more addictive than opium. These cafes are hot houses of political, philosophical and scientific debates, fuelled by caffeine.

The Flesh District is the only area of the city that is expanding. Since Aljaugasba's appearance fifteen years ago, the district has grown at a steady pace. Almost every year a new building is added to the district and every decade a new street is absorbed. Like a malignant tumour the District swallows

up more of the city each day, adding block after block to its perverse body. The merchants of the Flesh District grow in power with each customer lured into their dens of degradation. Every noble family has interest in the Flesh District, renting land if not owning the perverse establishments. With their influence, the expansion of the bawdy quarter is unstoppable, much to the dismay of the common city dwellers as they watch their city fall into depravity.

The Grande Bizarre: The southwestern quarter is the most crucial component of the city, for it is the Grand Bizarre, the centre of commerce for all the demiplane. Thousands of shops and stands are crammed into this square mile of urban jungle. The bazaar is made up of levels, like some huge structure. The lower floor holds the heaviest stores of goods, most of which are grains, fruits and livestock. All manner of cereals, building materials and animals can be purchased on this level. This level is extremely crowded by the goods, though traveled by the fewest shoppers. Completely dark even in the day, the stench of animals pervades every corner.

Above the ground level are the massive series of woven walkways, built like rope bridges along the tall buildings. The buildings themselves are open walled, held up by pillars, devoting every inch of surface space to store fronts. The walkways allow shoppers to walk along the storefronts, even though they might be several floors above ground level. The walkways stretch from building to building, supported by beams and ropes. The resulting webs completely cover the levels below, blocking out the light and trapping the humid air. Though made from the native grass, these woven walkways are incredibly resilient to weight, lasting for

decades before being replaced. Naturally this is a crucial trait, since thousands of merchants, weighed down with goods, cross these walkways every day. The buildings act as pillars holding the walkways aloft, many are built to act as stairwells, allowing travel up and down the bizarre complex.

The first and second levels of walkways consist of assorted babbles, including cloths, fruits, finished crafts, weapons, armour and equipment. The third level of walkway is closed off from the public, and heavily guarded. This level is the slave market, where humans are caged and exhibited for potential buyers. These slaves come from a wide variety of places, including the captives of the Pharazian nomads and prisoners of war taken from Rokushima Taiyoo. Most purchases are made between the buyer and the slave master, though in some cases a buyer liquidates his assets by holding an auction. Though the natives of this domain despise the institution of slavery, this trade has become increasingly important to the prosperity of their city.

The Folk: The natives of Aljaugasba are a slim people with angular features. Skin colours range from dusty brown to an olive hue, while eyes are almost always a deep brown. Men keep their hair short, though women prefer to wear their hair long and loose. Men and women wear loose clothing, including trousers, vests, and robes. Tradition dictates that unmarried women wear some manner of face covering, though in recent times these restrictions have been relaxed.

These city folk carry themselves with a pride and nobility lacking in most domains. Even the poorest city dweller is knowledgeable in science, philosophy

and even commerce. While they are a friendly and courteous people, there is condescending undertone to all of their relations with outsiders. These city dwellers see themselves as a bastion of true civilization, surrounded by superstitious semi-barbarians. Immigrants from other domains are eventually accepted as equals, as their backwards habits are dissolved in the societal melting pot. The city dwellers are atheistic, having lost all faith in gods long ago. Confident and optimistic, these city dwellers are blessed with a strong work ethic and a relentless tenacity.

Just as in many other domains, the city dwellers are divided into distinct classes, the upper, middle and lower classes. The lower class is the largest class, made up of simple labourers, including the artisans, weavers, and guild craftsmen. Though low in station, these men are exceptionally skilled in their trade and knowledgeable in commerce. These proud men labour endlessly in the hopes of one day saving enough to start his own business, or to send his son to an academy.

The middle class is a smaller group, comprised of the many shop keeps, business owners, guildsmen, and scholars of Aljaugasba. The vibrant economy of their city offers these professionals a level prosperity unknown to most in the demiplane. These merchants and scholars expend their small fortunes to fill their homes with luxuries and all manner of baubles. The guildsmen of Aljaugasba are the local administrators of their people, disseminating the laws amongst the guild members and enforcing regulations. Though the lower and middle classes are mobile, the upper class is a rigid caste, made up of a few

noble families. These wealthy nobles are the bankers and the lawmakers of the city, given high legal status and freed from taxation by law. Led by the Sultan, this caste rules over the City of Temptation with a laiser faire strategy.

Though not quite a class of its own, there is a sizable population of slaves living and working in the city. Most slaves in Aljaugasba are brought for sale, eventually sold to a buyer and taken to a foreign land. A few slaves are permanent residences, sold to the fighting pits or the brothels of the Flesh District. These slaves have no rights under the law, and will remain property until they can save enough to buy themselves from their owners.

Though they are loath to speak of the matter, all of the denizens of Aljaugasba carry a secret shame. Since the death of Sultan Amuraba the city, has fallen into a slow moral decline. Aljaugasban society has never recovered from the loss of the Sultan, for while Amuraba had defended a rigid code of moral laws, his successor, Iben Amar, has allowed society to decay into decadence and depravity. While corrupted nobles feed the sick desires of foreign merchants, the moral structure of the city crumbles. Once a gleaming beacon of purity, the city of Aljaugasba has become a crumbling ruin, tainted with wanton depravity. The Flesh District is an open sore upon the face of their once clean city, and with each passing year that sore infects more. The city dwellers have grown to despise their own city, fearing to raise their families in a land so corrupted by base desire. Yet with hostile Pharazia to the North, and uncivilized lands to every side, the city dwellers find themselves entrapped in the pitcher plant that is their home.

Unable to escape the snare, they fall ever further.

The Law: Oligarchy. Prince Iben Amar rules the city of Aljaugasba, with the assistance of the oligarchy of noble families. The prince is the owner of all land in the city, and taxes the populous for its use. Though the prince officially holds absolute authority, he rarely exercises his power. Not since the death of Sultan Amuraba has the monarch of Aljaugasba wielded true power. Obsessed with hedonism, the prince has never concerned himself with the governing of the city. In his absence, the noble dynasties of the city rule Aljaugasba. These nobles are concerned only with maintaining their own status, which depends upon the vibrant economy of their city. Though this oligarchy allows the city dwellers great freedom, though it is completely devoid of compassion for the downtrodden. Slavery, prostitution, narcotics, and gladiatorial combat are but a few of the institutions fostered by the nobility as a means of keeping the economy of their city alive and growing.

The laws of Aljaugasba are derived from a codified series of laws written on a gigantic stone tablet, written more than fifteen of years ago. Known as Amuraba's Code, this towering monument stands in a square in the centre of the White Collar District where it is constantly studied by legal scholars. Both criminal and civil disputes are brought before judges appointed by the noble oligarchs. Punishments for crimes are swift and brutal, with common rulings for criminals including amputation, mutilation, death and torture. Civil offences are often resolved with hefty fines or even the enslavement of the guilty party.

The laws of Aljaugasba are enforced by the city guard, a small but highly trained army under the Prince. Small numbers of these soldiers patrol the city during the day and the night, keeping a watchful eye over the populous. When faced with a dispute, these guards seize both the accused and the accuser and take both parties before a judge. The noble families of Aljaugasba maintain their own private guards. These warriors are known as the janissary, and are feared by thieves and assassins for their rigid discipline and finely honed fighting abilities. The janissaries are foreign slaves, raised from youth to be loyal warriors. To prevent the possible harm caused by a slip in discipline, these guards are eunuch. Most such janissaries originate from Rokushima Taiyoo. To earn larger fees from the slave merchants, the warring factions of that domain have taken to castrating all of the male youths they capture.

Trade and Diplomacy: Resources – beef, camels, carpets, ceramics, cloths, coffee, dates, figs, fish, gold, grains, iron, jewels, pottery, precious metals, salt, scientific knowledge, silk, slaves, spices, steel goods, tea, textiles, usury. Coinage – none. No coins are minted in Aljaugasba; blank coins of precious metal are used as currency. Trade is conducted by barter, though foreign coins of precious metals are frequently used.

Aljaugasba is a city of endless trade, awash in a flood of resources from foreign lands. Aljaugasba's grand bazaar is host to every resource in the demiplane, drawing an endless storm of merchants to the City of Temptation. Aljaugasba has gained unfathomable wealth through its trade, taking the raw

resources of other lands, manufacturing exquisite goods and then selling the finished wares. Money lending is a massive institution in the City of Temptation, fuelling the thriving economy.

While the Core may be alien to the City of Temptation, other lands in the mist have no difficulty in finding Aljaugasba. The war torn land of Rokushima Taiyoo has traded with Aljaugasba since its appearance in the year 740, bargaining silks and grains for the magnificent steel weapons, made from the ore purchased from G'henna. Spices and exquisite craft works flow down the river from Sri Raji, drawing smugglers from Nidala and Pharazia to engage in the forbidden spice trade.

As a centre of trade Aljaugasba attempts to maintain the most cordial relations with other lands, though it's emissaries are met with fear and suspicion. Its neighbour Pharazia has banned all trade with the city, for fear of the corrupting influence of the city. Likewise, the militant ruler of Nidala forbids any travel to the City of Temptation. The theocracy of G'Henna trades ore and other materials for grains, though they use foreign intermediaries and forbid any citizens to contact the godless city.

The warring factions of Rokushima Taiyoo trade extensively with Aljaugasba, with the city acting as neutral ground. An aura of tension follows the travelers from Rokushima, for the caravans that leave city are often attacked and looted. The city is a hot bed of intrigue and assassination, as each of the factions attempts to foil the trade ambitions of the others. Though the law forbids it, these merchants attempt to recruit mercenaries from Aljaugasba to secure their ships against attack. Certain

corners of Aljaugasba are havens for spies, assassins and assorted thugs, who sell their service as warriors to any faction willing to pay them.

The lands of the Core are all but unknown to the city dwellers, so visitors from those realms are fleeced of every scrap of information they can give. Being unfamiliar with the decadent pleasures of the city, the naive sailors of the Core are taken in by the snares in the Flesh District, giving Aljaugasba the title "City of Temptation".

Characters: Classes – aristocrats, experts, fighters, monks, rogues, wizards. Skills – bluff, craft (jeweller, tailor, weaver), diplomacy, knowledge (history, economy, politics), Profession (banker, merchant, sailor). Feats – Machiavellian, Skill Focus (bluff, craft skills, profession skills)

Characters originating from Aljaugasba need not be natives, for the domain possesses a large immigrant population. Foreigners from Pharazia, Rokushima Taiyoo, and Sri Raji are commonplace, as are refugees fleeing from G'henna and Nidala. These immigrants bring a wide range of skills and professions into the city. Nearly every class, culture and religion in all of the demiplane is represented by at least one individual.

Abdul the Damned,

Male human, undead, incorporeal, psion (telepath) 8: CR 10; SZ Medium; HD 8D12; HP 52; Inn +1; Spd 60 ft. fly (perfect); AC 19 (+4 armour (inertial armour) +1 Dex, +4 deflection); Atk +4 melee (touch); SA Psionics; SQ Incorporeal, Invisible, Phylactery, Possession, Turn Resistance +4, Undead; SW Curse; AI LE; SV Fort +2,

Quoth the Raven: Issue 5

Reflex +3, Will +9; Str -, Dex 12, Con -, Int 16, Wiz 16, Cha 17.

Skills and Feat: bluff + 11 (16), concentration + 11, diplomacy +11 (20), gather information + 11 (16), hypnotism + 11 (16), innuendo + 5 (12), intimidate + 6 (13), knowledge (local) +11 (14), sense motive +11 (16); Inertial Armour¹, Machiavellian², Mesmerizing², Psychoanalyst¹.

¹ Psionics Handbook

² Champions of Darkness

Psion Powers (Base save DC = 1D20 + power level +3); Power Points: 45; 0 – daze, distract, missive, telepathic projection, detect psionics 1st – attraction, charm, empathy, lesser mind link, sense link 2nd – aversion, detect thoughts, suggestion 3rd – false sensory input, fate link, mind link 4th – domination, mind wipe. Combat Modes – Ego Whip, Empty Mind, Id Insulation, Intellect Fortress, Mental Barrier, Mind Blast, Mind Thrust, Psychic Crush, Thought Shield.

Background

Long ago, in a world far away, Abdul Iben Azed was the son of poor peasants in the great city-state known as Aljaugasba. When he was but a child it was discovered that he possessed fantastic abilities, that he was capable of controlling the minds of those around him. Though rare, his kind was not unknown to the royalty of Aljaugasba. Seeking a powerful servant, the great Sultan Amuraba so he was bought from his parents and made into a eunuch advisor. Abdul was trained to be a master diplomat, and an advisor to the king, swearing the royal oath, to serve the Sultan to his death and to never use his fantastic powers on any citizen of Aljaugasba.

He was schooled in the most prestigious academies, and taught to focus his abilities. For many years he worked as a diplomat under Amuraba, using his amazing talents to increase the prestige and influence of his Sultan. The city-state prospered, growing from a relatively minor port to a sprawling metropolis. Yet despite all appearances, a great danger brewed beneath the surface. Incapable of base pleasures, Abdul became addicted to power. The flirtation began at adolescence, as he experimented with the giddy thrills of controlling the weak minds around him. While other men dallied with women, acquired property, or dosed themselves with opiates, Abdul honed his powers. As he took on the role of a diplomat his addiction to power grew. He manipulated the minds of kings, wove intricate plots of intrigue, and pushed simple minds to depravity for his own vicarious enjoyment.

Abdul had tasted the dark wine of pure, unadulterated power, and found himself hooked. The sweet taste of control haunted his every moment, driving his obsessed mind to megalomania. He looked upon the people of his city with horrible envy, despising their decadent tastes. Abdul yearned to stamp out the base joys that were forever denied to him, to bind the people to his superior mind and control their fate just as the Sultan had ruled over his. The vizier broke his sacred oaths and used his power to manipulate the Sultan. Thus was birthed Amuraba's Code, the strict laws of morality enforced by brutal justice. For years Abdul ruled through his pawn the Sultan, attacking the rich and the decadent. So confident was he in his power that Abdul had overlooked the danger.

Prince Iben Amar, the debauched, depraved son of the Sultan schemed with the corrupt nobles of Aljaugasba. The Sultan's brutal laws choked the neck of commerce in the city, strangling the flow of merchants and starving the noble dynasties of the gold they desperately craved. Fearful of the Sultan's control, they plotted to remove the aging monarch and replace his stoic rule with a regime that would leave the conspirators free to pursue their own desires for power and pleasure. Under the pretence of observing a sandstorm growing on the edge of the city, the Prince lured his father and Abdul to a tower overlooking the city, where the assassin's struck.

The conflict was short, for the thugs overwhelmed the Sultan and Abdul in seconds. Exhausted from a day's work of controlling the Sultan, Abdul was deprived of his powers and helpless against the Prince's assassins. With knives pointed to their throats, Prince Amar gave Abdul one opportunity to escape death. If he slew the Sultan, his life would be spared. Knowing that he could easily dominate the Prince later, Abdul plunged his dagger into the Sultan's body.

Even as Abdul threw the bloodied body of the Sultan from the tower, the Prince laughed. For all Abdul's intellect, he had not realized the trap until it was too late. The denizens of Aljaugasba watched in horror as the body of their ruler fell, and as they raised their gaze they saw his murderer, the vizier Abdul Azed. The master of manipulation had become the pawn of the perverse Prince, slaying the Sultan and clearing the way for the conspirators to take power. With a single swipe Abdul was decapitated, as he stood aghast at his own stupidity. As his head

tumbled to the earth a sand storm rose about the city.

The story of Abdul the Damned is still told in Aljaugasba; the tale of the evil eunuch, who manipulated the great sultan and then murdered him, only to be executed for breaking his sacred oath. The plot of the conspirators succeeded marvellously, for the people hailed Prince Amar for slaying the man who had destroyed their beloved ruler. Rather than allow another vile eunuch to seize power, the Prince created the oligarchy, to ensure that no single advisor could ever harm Aljaugasba again. In the aftermath of the sandstorm Aljaugasba has been discovered by countless new lands, which fill its bay with merchant vessels bearing gold and exotic goods. Since then, the laws of Amuraba have been mostly overlooked, as the city opened its doors to merchants once more, entrapping them in a snare of exotic pleasures. In celebration, Abdul's head was bronzed and placed upon a great pike in the centre of the city, where it still stands as an example of anyone who breaks his oath.

Current Sketch

At the moment of his death, Abdul sent his consciousness outward, seeking a receptacle in which he could escape death. As the sandstorm swept over the city his mind reached the ruby set into the Sultan's sceptre. There Abdul found a suitable phylactery for his mind. After a year of marshalling his strength, he found the ability to move beyond the gem in an incorporeal state. Though his abilities remained, he discovered to his horror that he was unable to use his powers on any native of Aljaugasba.

In death, he is cursed to obey the vows he broke in life. He can never again use his powers on a true resident

of the city, and since his phylactery resides in Amar's hands, he must protect the corrupt prince to ensure his own survival. Surrounded by the corruption and debauchery he once tried to stamp out, Abdul truly is damned. Now his existence is a miserable torture; for all his power, for all his invulnerability, he is impotent. The city he yearns to rule slips further and further into decay with each year, while the decadent merchants he despises partake of the base pleasures he abhors.

To ease the pain he feels, Abdul resorts to cheap trickery. Using his formidable powers he possesses the bodies of foreigners and uses them as pawns in his intricate plots to subvert the Prince. This goal is nearly impossible, with each failed attempt quashing another fragment of his spirit. After forty years Abdul nears desperation, as he seeks foreign warriors with whom he can conquer the city and rule it with an iron fist.

Combat

Abdul the Damned avoids combat directly, though the power of his preternatural charms makes him a lethal opponent. The dread vizier uses his invisibility and his incorporeal body to their fullest effect, hiding in walls and floors and attacking from strange angles. Abdul uses his psionic abilities to assault his enemies, using mind blast to stun groups, and then following up with *domination* on the strongest opponent.

To circumvent his curse, Abdul prefers to use his pawns to work his bidding. Abdul possesses the bodies of foreign merchants and makes arrangements with thugs and mercenaries to accomplish his plans. Once he is ready to leave the body, he uses mind wipe to force the merchant to

forget the past events. Through this tactic Abdul can arrange the murder of those who meddle in his schemes. When forced to ensnare a native of Aljaugasba in his plots, Abdul uses the hypnotism skill to implant suggestions into his pawn.

Curse: Though the accursed vizier broke his oaths in life, in death he is held to his promise never to harm the citizens of Aljaugasba. Abdul may never use his psionic powers to influence a character that was born in Aljaugasba. He may never possess their bodies, dominate their wills, or even probe their minds. Abdul the Damned may only use his abilities on characters of foreign birth. Through these puppets, Abdul may use his formidable skills to influence the natives of Aljaugasba.

Incorporeal: Abdul the Damned is an incorporeal spirit. Only Magical weapons or magical spells can harm the ethereal vizier. Furthermore, there is a 50% chance that the spirit ignores any corporeal source of damage. Abdul the Damned may pass through solid objects and is always moving silently.

Invisible: Abdul the Damned is naturally invisible at all times. Magical means of detecting invisible creatures reveals a humanoid being, comprised of shining red light. The crimson nimbus sparkles and casts spots of red light in all directions. The being appears to be without a head. In the centre of the creature, where the heart should have been, is a blood red ruby cut into a heart shape.

Phylactery: Though the damned vizier may move about the domain freely, the source of all of his power is his phylactery, a heart shaped ruby. This ruby is weak for a gem, having only a hardness of 10 and a maximum of 45 hit points before it is chipped and ruined.

Each point of damage dealt to the gem reduces Abdul's psionic power point total by one. If slain in combat, Abdul will be reduced to 0 power points while his essence retreats to the gem. While in the ruby, Abdul recovers power points as if at rest. When he is at full power points once more, his incorporeal form reappears.

Abdul's phylactery is the ruby set into the sceptre of Prince Iben Amar, the ruler of Aljaugasba. This sceptre is the symbol of Iben's status, so the rod never leaves the Prince's sight. The royal guard, all of who are at least 6th level fighters, constantly surrounds the prince. When the Prince rests, he cradles the sceptre in his hands.

Possession: Abdul the Damned may possess living beings. The accursed vizier may inhabit the body of any humanoid he controls with the power domination. While inhabiting that body, Abdul may use his skills as if the possessed character had his ability scores, skills and feats. Abdul may leave this body as a standard action, but can be forced out if the possessed character escapes his domination, or if the body is slain.

Undead: Immune to mind influencing effects, poison, paralysis, stunning, sleep and disease. Not subject to critical hits, subdual damage, ability damage, energy drain or death from massive damage.

Closing the Border

When Abdul the Damned wishes it, no one may enter or leave the Domain of Aljaugasba. A massive sandstorm rises on the northern edge of the domain, insulating the city from Pharazia. Anyone entering the storm becomes hopelessly lost, and inevitably exits

where they entered. The Bay of the domain is wracked by a storm, which makes sea travel impossible.

Adventure Hooks

The City of Temptation is an excellent starting point for an adventure into the Amber Wastes. There are many scholars in Aljaugasba dedicated to investigating Akiri culture. Anyone mounting an expedition into Har'Akir or Sebua would be wise to investigate the massive stores of information on that area in the universities of the city. As well, the City's Grand Bizarre offers adventurers an amazing assortment of equipment, ranging from maps, to masterwork weapons to critical camels.

The city itself is a massive pitcher plant, drawing naive travelers in with the sweet scent of pleasure, entrapping them in the depths of depravity, and inevitably digesting them. The party might be called upon to rescue an acquaintance that was ensnared in the flesh district and sold into slavery. The party will have to search the dark underbelly of Aljaugasba, probing the fighting pits, brothels and slave auctions to find their friend.

The Darklord of Aljaugasba is constantly seeking new pawns with which he might overthrow his depraved enemy. An acquaintance of the party might become entangled in the machinations of Abdul the Damned. Abdul's plans to overthrow the oligarchy are all but doomed to fail, with his pawns slain in the process. To rescue their friends the party might have to destroy the spirit of Abdul the Damned, inadvertently challenging the Prince, and accomplishing, on their own, the task Abdul's pawns could not.

Character Development

The Archaeologist

The tides of time hurtle ever forward, an unstoppable juggernaut burying everything it overtakes. People, cities, even whole civilizations are buried in the unstoppable storm, lost for all eternity. Indeed, the cultures of the present are built upon corpse of the ancient past, mingling the creations of the new with the ruins of the old. Whether the ruins of an old temple, or a desiccated scroll in a musty library, pieces of lost societies float amidst the jetsam of contemporary culture. The dark land of Ravenloft is a place of slow decay, decline and decadence. There are many who turn away from the self-indulgent society of their birth to amerce themselves in the glorious of the past. Equal parts scholar and rogue, these men and women travel the demiplane seeking out relics, studying the past for the pure joy of learning. Equally at home surrounded by shelves of dusty books or by the walls of a darkened tomb, these adventurers make their living by retrieving forgotten histories from the ruins of lost worlds and sharing them with civilization. They are the archaeologists, the fearless explorers of the ancient past.

Background

Archaeologists often share a similar background, for they are collectively dissociated with the present and preoccupied with the past. Most archaeologists are born to the upper class, for the young people of the higher classes are often neglected for long periods by their family, and have access

to historical documents. Forgotten by absent parents, these young people escape the boredom and loneliness in a world contained in the history books of their family libraries. A few lower class individuals may become archaeologists, if some wealthy benefactor sponsors their initial education.

As they grow, these young archaeologists become natural explorers and scholars. Completely disinterested in contemporary life, they shun most social contact, spending their hours in the musty nooks of libraries and the forsaken corners of their homes. Eventually the young archaeologist ventures out into the world, abandoning the mundane humdrum for the world of adventure beyond. Armed with the knowledge gleaned from countless books, the archaeologist seeks out the fantastic worlds of which they read. Though these civilizations may be long dead, the archaeologist pursues the privilege of venturing amongst the remains of those amazing empires, of finally touching the world of their dreams.

Personality

Though dismissed by the world as simple grave robbers, archaeologists are much more than irreverent thieves. They make their living by selling the artefacts they loot from tombs, yet archaeologists are more akin to academics than burglars. These scholars are driven, not by greed, but by curiosity. Archaeologists spend their hours researching in musty libraries,

delving into ancient legends and dreaming of the glories long past. In their studious minds they see the past, losing themselves in a world as much fantasy as reality.

Archaeologists have two distinct personalities that manifest at different times. The first persona is the scholar, which appears when they are in deep study of ancient tombs and historical information. In this stage they are quiet, withdrawn and even irritable. While at work they are concerned only with their research and have little patience for socialization. When the archaeologist leaves his musty library and begins the hunt, he takes on his second persona, the adventurer. The adventurer is a stark contrast to the scholar. Lively and jocular, the archaeologist is filled with an enthusiasm that is almost childish. While in this phase of work, the archaeologist is much more relaxed and outgoing, a major asset since the archaeologist often needs assistance from others when in the field.

Though archaeologists are rarely distinguished from grave robbers, they are quick to point out the differences. Archaeologists treasure the artefacts found in the sepulchres they explore, from the most brilliant gem to the dustiest tablet. The trophies they take from the grave are not items to be fenced but artworks to be distributed. Even the greediest archaeologist desires nothing more than to place an ancient artefact in the hands of a discerning collector of antiquities. Indeed, a cracked clay bowl is often treasured more than a pile of gold coins. Though, no archaeologist would fail to point out that if that bowl happens to be filled with coins, so much the better.

Psychology

To the archaeologist, the sepulchre is not merely the resting place of the dead, it is a portal into a time long past. Within the embrace of the grave, ancient knowledge is hoarded, great kings are preserved, and forgotten gods are revered. As they venture into the blackened catacombs, the archaeologist crosses the barrier between fantasy and reality, finally touching the world that they have dreamt of for so long.

Archaeologists often lose themselves in the past, neglecting friends and family as they delve into antiquity. This is a behaviour learned from their own absent parents, who neglected them. Archaeologists have great difficulty relating to those who don't share their deep interest in the past, drifting apart from friends and family as their wanderlust takes them away.

Archaeologists are obsessed with preserving the tombs they explore and the treasures they remove. Archaeologists often document the sepulchres they explore, recording the tomb to its minute details. As well, artefacts are carefully retrieved and placed in the care of scholars and collectors. This meticulously scholarly approach is important to the archaeologist, for it allows him to give back to the academic world from which he derives his purpose.

Patterns

Archaeologists live life in two stages, research and field study. During the research phase they spend countless hours delving into historical documents, learning all that they can from written materials around them. They often travel long distances to locate texts and artefacts related to their studies. This

phase is focused on one goal, to locate the resting place of a tomb, a ruin or some other location of historical significance.

The next phase occurs when the archaeologist has located the object of his study and has exhausted all other materials. This is the field study, the actual exploration of the site. Archaeologists travel great distances to reach their goals, often spending years finding the exact location. Once there they meticulously explore and document the site, retrieving as many artefacts as they can carry. Others around them find this behaviour irritating, since it is both time consuming and yields little profit.

Once finished a field study, an archaeologist take a brief rest period. In this period the seeker formalizes his hasty scribblings, compiling his work into long volumes and publishing them, often by the new printing press technology. Finally, the artefacts retrieved are issued out to local scholars and collectors, fetching funds that will be devoted to the next search. In this period, archaeologists may find time to join their comrades on adventures unrelated to their studies, in which case this period may last many years.

Role-playing

Archaeologists are scholars, first and foremost. They are quiet and reserved on most topics, though they enjoy discussing ancient history and must restrain themselves from enthusiastically babbling when asked a question. Archaeologists are a worldly people, more at home in ancient cultures than in their own native society. Archaeologists have a knack for blending in to other cultures, even if their companions cannot. Their fellow party members often embarrass them as

they stumble over social faux pas and taboos.

There are two creatures by which an archaeologist cannot abide; grave robbers and ancient dead. The arch nemeses of an archaeologist, these two monsters defile the crypts that archaeologist treasures. Grave robbers selfishly despoil the tomb, tearing through ancient walls and dissecting artefacts in the boorish pursuit of avarice. Archaeologists take every opportunity to punish grave robbers and retrieve the treasures they have stolen.

Archaeologists despise the ancient dead, seeing them as a malignant growth within the sacred tomb. These abominations mock both life and death, existing as a disgusting parody of both states simultaneously. Archaeologists are content to let the sleeping dead slumber in their tombs, even actively discouraging others from waking the ancient dead. However, when such a creature does wake, the archaeologist uses every resource available to assist in its destruction.

Class and Prestige Classes

Most archaeologists are experts or rogues, gaining the skills to combine academic study and adventuring. These two classes allow archaeologists the flexibility they need to mix scholarly pursuits with basic adventuring skills. Bards are known to become archaeologists latter in their careers, often after being exposed to the grandeur of ancient civilizations. Wizards are also drawn to this class, since the search for ancient magic often takes them into darkened crypts. Levels in the fighter or ranger classes may prove useful to archaeologists who tend to run afoul of danger, though few archaeologists begin their careers as such base warriors.

Clerics, paladins and druids are inappropriate classes for an archaeologist. Druids are unconcerned with the crude, manmade structures of the past while clerics and paladins are not inclined to scholarly pursuits and dislike disturbing the rest of the dead. Sorcerers are often too self absorbed to pay attention to the past, more concerned with their own power than the past.

Archaeologists take the Crypt Raider prestige class as soon as possible, since its abilities are focused on the needs of the archaeologist. Prestige classes like Royal Explorer, Thief-Acrobat or Dungeon Delver are also useful. The scholar prestige class is also a useful asset to archaeologists who devote the majority of their time to research.

Suggested Feats

Archaeologists will find no shortage of uses for the skill focus feat, applied to search, or disarm traps, or the decipher script skills. Feats such as Back to the Wall, Dead Man Walking, Indomitable and Jaded will prove useful as well. The feats, Sworn Enemy and Warding Gesture could be applied to undead to give archaeologists an extra weapon against the hated ancient dead.

Professor J.R. Livingston

Professor Livingston is a man in his late thirties, standing six feet tall with a medium build. The famed explorer is very tanned, a stark contrast to most people in the Core. Livingston speaks with a discernable Mordentish accent, though he is known to curse aloud in the strange foreign tongues. Professor Livingston is known for his thick spectacles and the beaten bush hat that he wears, even to formal occasions.

Livingston is often spotted wearing a long leather jacket, even in the hottest weather.

Male human, expert 2, rogue 6, crypt raider 3: CR 10; medium sized humanoid; HD 11D6+11; HP 52; Init +2; Spd 30ft.; AC 15 (+3 leather armour, +2 dex); Atk +10/+5 melee (1D6+1, adamantine rapier), ranged +10/+5 (1d2 subdual, whip), +10/+5 (1D8, pistol); SA sneak attack +3D6; SQ evasion, sepulchre savvy +2, snatch, uncanny dodge, witness to horror +1; AL NG; SV Fort +4, Reflex +10, Will +8; Str 12, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 16, Wis 14, Cha 14.

Skills and Feats: appraise +14 (+17), climb +14 (+15), decipher script +14 (+17), disable device +14 (+17), hide +9 (+11), knowledge (history) +14 (+17), knowledge (religion) +9 (+12), move silently +9 (+11), open lock +14 (+16), search +14 (+16), survival +5 (+7), use magical item +14 (+16); Back to the Wall, Exotic Weapon Proficiency: Firearms, Jaded, Lightening Reflexes, Warding gesture (undead).

Languages Known: Mordentish, Akiri, Pharazian, Rajian.

Signature Possessions: Worn bush hat, leather jacket (acts as leather armour +1), adamantine rapier, whip, Amulet of Thoth (acts as Periap of Health), Atlaua's Bowl (decanter of endless water), pistol, powder, 35 bullets (5 gold, 5 silver, 5 adamantine, 20 normal).

Background

Jonathon Rutherford Livingston was born in 720, the only son of Henry and Mary Livingston, two scholars in the service of the Church of Ezra in Mordenshire. In 729 Mary Livingston died of consumption, causing Henry Livingston to retreat into his religious research. All but abandoned by his father, Jonathon was left to wander in

the family library, collected by his late grandfather. In shadows of the musty family library, Jonathon Livingston discovered a fantastic world, filled with astounding peoples and places. As he would learn over the years, these strange and fantastic lands were no mere creation of fantasy. They were real places, hidden in the mists.

For many years Livingston planned to explore the lands he had studied in his childhood. In 737, at the impetuous age of 17, he defied his father and smuggled himself aboard an expedition to discover a lost tomb in the wastes of Har'Akir. Though inexperienced, Jonathon's knowledge of the Akiri history proved a critical asset to locating the crypt and retrieving countless, priceless, artefacts.

By 755, Livingston's extensive studies of the ancient ruins of Sri Raji culture earned him a professorship at Missaconic University in Mordenshire. Though Livingston lectures infrequently, he is the most experienced explorer tapped by any institution of learning in the Core. The schism between him and his father has made Professor Livingston very unpopular amongst the anchorites, who see him as a corruptive influence on his students, spreading heathen culture and flaunting social responsibility.

As of late, Professor Livingston has focused his efforts back to Har'Akir. Word has it that he nears completion on research that will help him locate the legendary canyon known as Pharaoh's Rest. Seasoned explorers are already being interviewed to form an expedition.

Combat

Despite being adept with a pistol and rapier, Professor Livingston avoids

combat as much as possible. Livingston uses his whip to disarm opponents and end hostilities, though if necessary he uses his pistol and rapier to deadly effect. Livingston has only survived for so long because he knows that discretion is the better part of valour. If he finds himself in a hopeless situation, he runs, taking as many people with him.

Evasion: If exposed to an effect that normally allows a reflex saving throw for half damage, Livingston takes no damage on a successful reflex throw.

Sepulchre Savvy: A true tomb seeker, the esteemed Professor is at his best in the crypts and catacombs. While in a setting where the dead have been interred, Livingston gains a +2 competence bonus to saving throws against mechanical traps and magical traps, to jump checks to avoid falling damage and to reflex saves against cave-ins and collapses.

Slippery Soul: Any curse attempt on Professor Livingston suffers a -2 penalty. The Professor also gains a +2 bonus to will saving throws against bestow curse and lesser geas.

Snatch: As a free action Livingston may pick up an action. He may combine this action with a move, picking up an item before, after or during his move.

Sneak Attack: Whenever an opponent is denied his dexterity bonus to armour class, or when the opponent is flanked, Livingston may make a sneak attack that deals an extra +3D6 points of damage.

Uncanny Dodge: Professor Livingston retains his dexterity bonus even when flatfooted or flanked.

Sephren's Pyramid

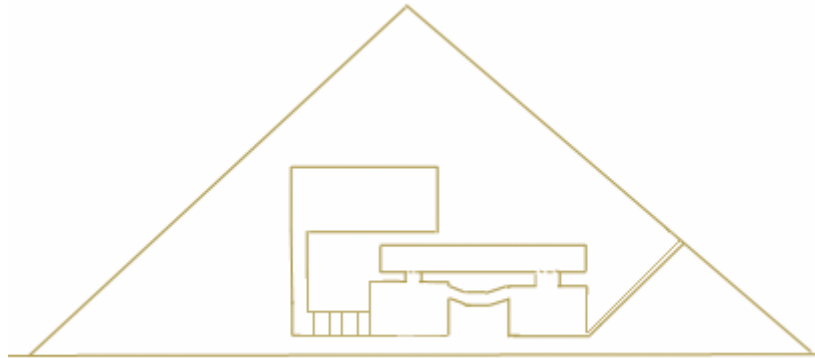
Grave of the Pharaoh

By Dmitri Zorin

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Built millennia ago in a desert kingdom now remembered only as Black Land, this pyramid's purpose was to be a tomb of one of the line of unremarkable pharaohs, Sephren. The sepulchral complex included, as was the custom of the land, an outside temple for regular rites to be conducted by clerics after

pharaoh's death, a lesser pyramid, dedicated to pharaoh's wife, as well as the pyramid itself. The main passage used by workers to get materials and tools inside the pyramid was sealed so as to prevent easy access to Sephren's chambers.



Numerous sandstorms ravaged across the kingdom's lands when part of the Black Land was drawn into the Demiplane of Dread in the aftermath of Tyet's crime (the land later known as Sebuia). The sands, said to be sent by Set, completely hid several of the pyramids in the region, effectively disguising them as sand dunes.

A decade after Sebuia's appearance, a group of tomb robbers, armed with tools of their trade and some suppositions about these dunes' true nature, started digging the first dune in a series, the one under which Sephren's Pyramid stood. When they stumbled upon worked stone sloping upwards, these tomb raiders immediately started

burrowing their way inside the pyramid. The only tunnel on the map leading from the chambers to the outside is the result of this work.

However, in the very first chamber, rogues managed to start off a trap that loosed hordes of grave scarabs specifically hidden in the chambers above for such an occasion. None of the robbers left the pyramid and thus the affair was lost to time. Of the guardian scarabs, only a handful survived the cannibalistic aftermath. Those who remain lie in wait for their next meal.

In late 740 BC several members of the Green Hand, the order of clerics of Osiris dedicated to protecting the sanctity of the grave, stumbled upon this

shaft made by the would-be raiders. The thought of investigating the insides of the tomb didn't occur to them, as the group was in a haste chasing tomb robbers all the way from Har'Akir. They hastily sealed the entrance to the shaft and disguised the entrance as best they could. In the depths of the pyramid, awoken by the corrupting touch of the Land of Mists itself, pharaoh Sephren now awaits the fools who would set him free.

How to incorporate this location into an ongoing campaign remains for the DM to decide, but here are several possibilities:

- 1) The party is searching for some magical item said to be buried somewhere underneath the sand dunes of western Sebua and stumble upon the sealed entrance to this pyramid.
- 2) Or they may be asked by a group of men looking like members of the Green Hand to investigate the pyramid on the matter of the restless dead. These people could be Set's cultists or even simple crypt robbers posing as Green Hand clerics and might later attempt to slay the party when it returns from the pyramid's chambers.
- 3) A party cleric may receive strange visions depicting the funeral chambers, sarcophagi and dark forms shambling in the background. Further investigation points to the sand dunes of Sebua.
- 4) PCs may find an ancient book written by a seemingly mad man where he describes his travels through the desert and strange and bizarre discoveries of ancient, prehistoric ruins he made. One of the earlier entries, obviously made when

the man was at least partially sane, describes the pyramid buried beneath the sands of Sebua.

The party is advised to have a rogue and a priest among its members, as well as at least several axes, shovels and hammers. 150-200' of rope will also do nicely, as well as grappling hooks.

The trip to the pyramid may be as eventful or as uneventful as you like, probably with some encounters with jackals/scorpions/desert zombies. The area around the pyramid itself is lifeless. An occasional bird may be seen now and then flying big circles high in the sky and several of the scorpions live in the rocks nearby.

When the PCs reach the dune, read the following:

You stand at the bottom of a huge sand dune, probably 100 yards high with the wind spiralling around the dune blowing loudly into your ears, feeding your mouth and eyes sand and threatening to tear off your clothes. In the skies above a large bird of prey flies lazy circles, seemingly unconcerned with the petty problems of the land-bound creatures. Several dozen yards up the slope you notice what looks like an unremarkable sandstone plate that seems like lying on the slope. The plate exhibits neither handles, nor any artwork.

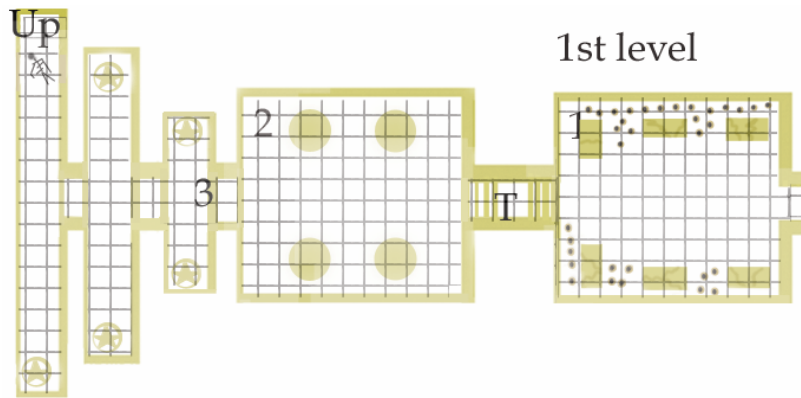
Climbing up the steep and treacherous slope of shifting sand requires a successful Climb check against a DC of 10. The sandstone plate marks the sealed entrance into the pyramid. A combined strength of 45 is required to shift the plate, as well as some levels and crowbars. Alternatively, the seal could be broken by inflicting 432 points of damage (the plate has a

hardness of 6 and 12hp/inch of thickness, being 36" thick).

The plate covers long and dark passage that descends fifty feet down at an approximately 45 degrees angle. The passage is rectangular with sides as long as four feet. Claustrophobic characters might experience severe problems climbing down the passage. Fear checks DC 10 might be in order for characters suffering from claustrophobia. Any armour or bulky equipment has to be dragged along, as the passage is barely wide enough to allow room for a person in scant clothes at best. The walls of this shaft are crude and were obviously made in haste and with little artistic skill, so succeeding at a Climb check against a

DC of 10 is sufficient for anybody willing to descend (that is, if rope isn't used, in which case no check is necessary). Those who fail their Climb check by 5 or more skid all the way down to room 1, suffering 2d6 points of damage from sharp rocks and the impact itself.

Unless noted otherwise, there are no light sources in the pyramid except those that the PCs carry themselves. Thus, DM should pay close attention to what the party may see and what remains behind the veil of darkness in each and every room.



1. Those PCs who this way or another arrive in the room find themselves in splendidly decorated antechamber with ceiling lost in the darkness above (30 feet high) and walls covered in all manner of intricate Akiri bas-relief artwork. Six tables covered with items deemed worth for the deceased in the afterlife stand near the walls to the left and right of the entrance. They are mostly covered with utensils and minor art objects. Miniature wooden boats, small clay statuettes of men and women, chariots and different animals, copper bracelets as well as jars with wine and

beer – this is the list of items found on the tables. A couple dozens of large clay jars, some filled with dried food, some open and empty or broken, stand between the tables. For some reason the food and drinks here are still salvageable.

The artwork itself depicts the long river journey one's soul takes in some strange boat through the underworld to the realm of dead. First, the soul persuades an old boatman to take it across the River of Dead. Then the soul passes through 12 gates guarded by huge snakes and other, otherworldly,

guardians. After the gates the soul crosses the Lake of Flame and stands before 42 judges. Then it comes into some kind of a hall, where its heart is being weighed against a feather and strange creatures with animal heads judge the soul.

From the context it is obvious that the soul has to nourish itself with what was given to it during the funerals. Those PCs who make successful Knowledge (Religion) checks made against a DC of 20 (15 for PCs native to Har'Akir) recognize the humanoid with animal heads as gods of Akiri pantheon – Set, Toth, Sebek, Osiris and Isis.

The only other exit from this chamber except the shaft is the 10 feet wide tunnel under the ceiling in the western wall (25 feet up the wall). No visible handholds lead to it, so a party will have to climb to it somehow. The Climb check DC is 25 for those willing to scale the bare wall, DC 5 for those with rope and DC 0 for those with a knotted rope. In order to secure a grappling hook one must throw it exactly in the opening, i.e. hit an AC 10 with a ranged touch attack (assuming the party wants to secure a rope this way).

Creatures. 4 Medium-size Skeletons (*MM* 165), 1 Ceramic figurine (*DoDark* 57).

Skeletal remains of tomb raiders (everything that's left of them after the scarabs had eaten away their flesh) have orders to slay any intruders. The ceramic figurine of an alligator was created with orders to deal with intruders, but since the creature is bulky and slow on the land, it will take the figurine 4 rounds to join the combat.

Treasure. Those rummaging through the items in the chamber find

eleven copper bracelets worth 3 sp each, 7 copper earrings worth 7 cp each, two bronze diadems inlaid with coloured glass worth 5 gp each, five various clay statuettes worth 7 cp each, 2 obsidian statuettes worth 1 and 2 sp each, 3 bronze statuettes inlaid with jade worth 10 gp each, 10 various gems worth 120 gp total, masterwork bronze kopesh, masterwork short bow and ten masterwork arrows. The food and drink here is enough to sustain 1 person for two weeks.

2. The tunnel leading into this chamber is wide (10 feet), but low (the ceiling is 5 feet high). Small descending stairs form a small landing in the centre of the tunnel. Second, yet intact, trap goes off when somebody puts some weight on the pressure plate that is the landing. Search check DC 20 is required to notice the trap, but there is no way to disarm it. When the plate is pressed in, certain plates in the ceiling in both chambers 1 and 2 fall down to the floor, making rather big holes in the ceiling itself and very big noise in the process. Since the corridor is 25 feet above the floor, PCs should somehow descend first in order to explore the chamber. Read the following text out loud when the PCs first peek out from the corridor into the room, assuming the party has some light sources lit with them.

From your vantage point you can discern another chamber, as big as the previous one. Four papyrus-style columns descend into the cold and gloomy darkness beyond. There are numerous pedestals along the walls with something on them, but you just can't determine the shape of these items.

Each PC spots the hole in the ceiling (if they've triggered the trap) on a successful Spot check DC 16.

The secret door in the western wall leading to area 3 can be noticed with a successful Search check DC 15 (it isn't concealed particularly good, in fact being a door to the temple depicted on the mural). Another Search check (DC 10) is required to notice a pressure plate in the arm of one of the priests in the mural procession. Otherwise, the door could be broken by inflicting 30 points of damage (the door is 2 inches thick and has a hardness of 8).

When the PCs descend and have a good chance of exploring the room, read the following.

It is now certain that this shrine is dedicated to cats – almost three dozen of them stand mummified on pedestals all over the room, some of them in better state than the others. The walls are covered in murals depicting various celebrations involving ceremonial funeral of cats, presided over by humanoids with feline heads. Every procession is illuminated by a golden-yellow disc of sun.

A big pile of broken stones lies in the centre of the chamber. They seem to have fallen down not long ago, judging by the small wisps of dust rising from several of the topmost stones...

At this point, skeletons from area 5 climb down through the hole in the ceiling into the second chamber.

At first, you hear no sound except the sound of your breath and that of your companions. Then a faint clicking sound comes from above... Peering up and trying to discern something in the perpetual gloom that surrounds the columns of this ancient chamber you notice some shapes moving on the ceiling. Then the truth strikes your mind – these are humanoids! Their shrivelled remains dressed in rags of loin clothes and rotten-away caps, these

skeletal guardians crawl their way down the walls and columns towards your party like monstrous spiders, limbs creaking with every movement, long vicious claws clicking on ancient stone, empty eye sockets filled with ever-burning crimson light of hatred and malice...

Creatures. 10 Crypt Cats (*DoDark* 33), 5 Skeletal Guards. See below.

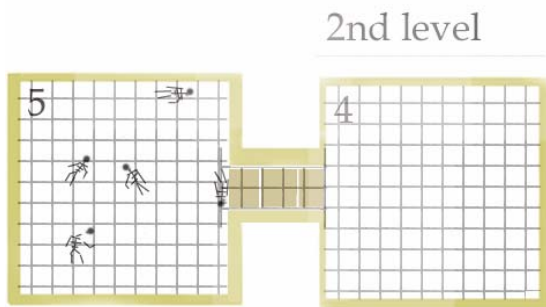
The room itself is dedicated to Bast, Akiri goddess of cats and sun. The shrine was supposed to protect the rest of the dead from those who'd like to disturb it. To that end, 10 crypt cats were hidden among a dozen of common mummified cats that stand on small pedestals throughout the room. They won't attack unless someone passes through the secret door to the west or living dead enter the room.

In two rounds after the dead descend through the ceiling, crypt cats attack them. They won't strike at the PCs unless the party attacks them first or finds the secret door in the western wall. The sight of dead men climbing their way down from the ceiling may warrant a Fear check DC 9.

Treasure. All of the pedestals (24) that hold common (not animated) mummified cats have a secret cavity that was used as storage of a portion of pharaoh's treasure. Search check DC 20 is required to notice the faint outline of a small removable block, filled with a millennia dust. Inside each niche, one can find 1d4 gems worth 50 gp total, 4d6 cp, 2d6 sp, 1d 1d10 ep and 1d4 gp.

3. This 50 foot long corridor has four niches (2 on the left side and 2 on the right) along its length that hold statues of Ra, Osiris, Isis and Sephren. Priests of Nephtys, wife of Set and Akiri

goddess dedicated to protecting the restful sleep of the dead, overseeing the construction, ordered five secret doors to be installed in the corridor so as to discourage possible grave robbers (assuming they were still alive) from any further progression. As per the previous secret door, these doors are not particularly well hidden, in fact being stone doors carved into the walls with no apparent way to open them. They could be identified as the secret doors with a successful Search check made against a DC of 15 (if indeed the PCs didn't figure it out for themselves) and a small pressure plate can be found somewhere nearby on a successful DC 10 Search check. Above the last door a hieroglyphic writing was cut in stone that reads ("Open the doors to Heaven for the deceased pharaoh"). Anyone who makes a successful Decipher Script DC 30, or who possess the knowledge of an Akiri hieroglyphic writing language can read the sentence. The corridor ends in a T-intersection with southern branch being a dead-end with a statue of Anubis, god of dead, and the northern



end sporting a vertical shaft that leads somewhere in the chambers above (area 6). Skeletal remains of a mage (the only spell caster in that tomb robbers group that was slain centuries before), who managed to get this far into the pyramid only to fall from the shaft to his death, lie on the floor at the northern wall.

The shaft itself is 60 feet high and is 10 feet wide so it's impossible to brace oneself against an opposite wall. Climbing up the shaft requires a successful Climb check DC 15 (the shaft sports handholds at even intervals so it's relatively easy to climb).

Creatures. 1 Crypt Statue. As large animated object (*MM* 17) made of clay (hardness 6).

The statue of Set to the south is actually an animated object that has orders to slay anyone entering the room. It managed to scare the mage so much that he hastily started ascending the shaft, slipped and fell to his death.

Treasure. Those searching the statues in the corridor can notice that the staff and flail of Osiris are actually made of gold decorated with jade (200 gp each), his eyes made of twin onyxes (50 gp each); the staff in the hands of Isis is masterwork, made from the red wood (350 gp); ankh in the right hand of Ra is made of white marble and is actually an *amulet of undeath turning*; the necklace on the statue of Sefhren is made of gold inlaid with jade (150 gp), while his staff and flail are made of bronze and inlaid with coloured glass (100 gp each). Those looting the dead mage find *wand of sleep* (13 charges remaining, 1st level caster), *ring of protection +1*, *bracers of armour +2*, his spell book (all cantrips, 10 1st level spells, 5 2nd level spells, 2 3rd level spells), *scroll of mirror image* and marked *potion of cure moderate wounds*, as well as pouch with 50 gp. Of course the list is subject to DM's approval and can be severely truncated if it suits one campaign's needs.

4. The only purpose of this chamber was to hold a swarm of scarab beetles that would descend on any desecrators

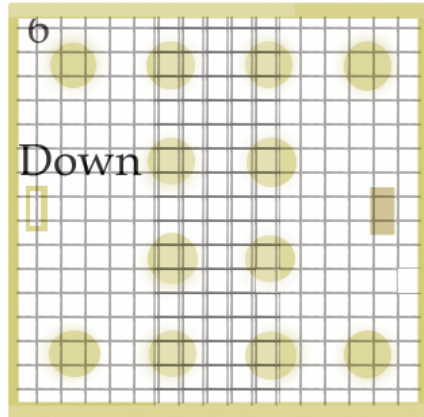
who would trigger the trap in the corridor below. The ceiling is only five feet high here and there's nothing of interest inside the chamber, except plain walls and a sealed corridor leading to chamber 5.

Creatures. 3 Grave Scarabs (*DoDark 25*). The swarm used to be tens of times more but beetles turned on one another as time passed and they became hungry. Their last meal being the slaves entombed in chamber 5, the beetles now stay in inactive form and certainly won't pour down through the whole as was intended by the tomb designers.

5. This chamber was planned to be holding another swarm of beetles, but in the last years of Sephren's rule a group of assassins was caught during an unsuccessful attempt on his life. They were sealed in the upper chambers of the pyramid along with scarab beetles, which devoured them alive. Now animated through the dark will of an awoken ancient dead, these assassins seek to hold onto what they did in life – killing people. If the plate in the ceiling was not moved as a result to PCs triggering the trap, then the undead assassins would be found here, otherwise they are probably disposed by the time PCs get up to this chamber (see area 2 for details).

Creatures. 2 Grave Scarabs (*DoDark 25*). 5 Skeletal Guardians.

3rd level



6. After the party ascends the stairs, they find themselves in a chamber of cyclopean proportions, which holds Sephren's sarcophagus. The latter stands at the eastern wall of the chamber and is in reality two sarcophagi placed one into another. The outer one is made of hardened wood painted golden and blue and decorated with gold and jade inlaid, while the inner one is painted green and blue and sports few jade inlaid only. The eyeholes on both sarcophagi are hollow, allowing Sephren to see into the room. Note that his line of sight is limited by his dark vision. That won't hold true if PCs have light, of course. If, for one reason or another, a PC approaches the sarcophagus and studies it, allow him to make a Spot check DC 15. If the PC succeeds, he/she notices two pin-points of red light shining from the darkness where the eyes of the sarcophagus should be. The sight is unnerving and could call for a Fear check DC 14.

The very dimensions of the chamber dwarf you. The ceiling seems to be lost in the gloom above. A dozen of large columns, their tops lost in shadows, rise from the floor, depicting various scenes of pharaoh's accomplishments during life. You can actually feel light breeze touching your skin as you gather yourselves and

Quoth the Raven: Issue 5

prepare to explore this room. You can even hear the wind whisper in your ears – no, wait – it's not a wind, it's snake hissing!

Creatures. 5 Shadow Asps (*DoDark* 136). Sephren, Ari 4, rank 3 ancient dead.

One has to succeed at a Spot check DC 34 (asps take 10 on their hide roll) to notice the black silhouette moving in the shadows.

Standing still in his sarcophagus, Sephren won't make any move unless the party gets past the guardians of his rest, preferring to study the party's tactics and identify the most powerful spell caster/fighter. After the battle with his minions is over, he bides his time, even going as far as allowing PCs to rummage through the items in the room. When the moment is right (preferably when someone starts examining sarcophagus), Sephren bursts out (the sight, if described appropriately and if it indeed surprised the party, might call for a combination of fear and Horror Checks (DC 14 and 10 respectively), subject to DM's discretion). He then tries to fight his way past others towards the character he perceives as the most dangerous.

Treasure. Among numerous priceless (devoid of value) figurines and statuettes of warriors, animals, boats, etc. made of clay scattered throughout the room, PCs may find (on pedestals as well as on floor, depending on size): *boat of folding* (transforms into a papyrus boat), *+1 flaming burst kopesh*, *+1 leather armour*, *3 potions of cure moderate wounds*, *scroll of remove disease*, *scroll of protection from evil*.

Non-magical treasure in the room numbers 5000 gp in assorted gems, 3000 ep and 4000 cp. This list is subject to DM's approval, of course.

Skeletal Guardian CR 2;
Medium-size undead; HD 2d12; hp 13;
Init +6 (+2 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative);
Spd 30 ft.; AC 14 (+2 Dex, +2 natural);
Atk 2 claws +2 melee (1d4+1);
Face/Reach: 5 ft. by 5ft./5ft. AL N; SQ:
undead, immune to cold, half damage
from piercing or slashing weapons; SV
Fort +0, Ref +4, Will +3; Str 13; Dex 15;
Con –; Int –; Wis 10; Cha 11

Skills and Feats: Listen +5; Spot +4; Improved Initiative; Lightning Reflexes

Salient Powers: Spider Climb; Verminous Host

Sephren

Ari4/Rank 3 Ancient Dead; CR 6;
Medium-size undead; HD 4d12; hp 20;
Init (+4 Improved Initiative); Spd 30 ft.;
AC 20 (+10 natural); Atk slam +10
melee (1d6+7); Face/Reach: 5 ft. by
5ft./5ft. AL LE; SA: disease (mummy
rot, DC 23), fear (DC 16), rejuvenation
(Rate 12/hour, Rest 1day/1hour) SQ: DR
15/+1, undead, cold immunity, fire
vulnerability, sonic resistance 20, turn
resistance +4; SV Fort +1, Ref +1, Will
+6; Str 25; Dex 11; Con –; Int 8; Wis 17;
Cha 19

Skills and Feats: Diplomacy +6;
Handle Animal +4, Intimidate + 8,
Knowledge (religion) +3, Listen +4,
Sense Motive +6, Spot +6; Improved
Initiative; Iron Will

Salient Powers: Command Undead;
Delay Disease

Fifful Slumber

The Secret Life of the Ancient Dead

Hidden in the dark corners of the earth are secret tombs, dark catacombs protected from the passage of time. In the safety of the grave, the stories of old are recorded, forgotten gods are venerated, and ancient kings rest. Beneath death masks and sarcophagi lie desiccated bodies; dead to all appearances, yet retaining the spark of life. They sleep in the eternal embrace of the crypt, enshrouded in glory everlasting, infused with the power of the Gods themselves. Unchanging, undying, invincible, they are the ancient dead.

While the demiplane is dotted with creatures that defy the boundary between life and death, the ancient dead are unique. These desiccated corpses are not merely bodies animated by the foul emanations from negative energy plane. The ancient dead are infused with divine energies, granting them amazing powers. Neither alive nor dead, they cross the threshold of death as easily as mortals wake from slumber. Surrounded by mystery and conjecture, there are few creatures as misunderstood as the ancient dead. Nonetheless, the ancient dead are defined by certain traits, which are common to almost every individual.

Slumber

Most species of undead straddle the boundary between life and death, existing in neither state. Ancient dead, however, exist in both states at different times, alive while awake, and dead while at rest. This state of rest is a period where the ancient dead retrieves the

vibrant positive energy, which is the very essence of life and the force that preserves its body. While the body is bombarded with the essence of life, the spirit departs for a time, entering the afterlife. Slumber is precious to the ancient dead, for it is a period of communion with the afterlife and the gods therein. Life within the confines of its corpse is exhausting to dead spirit, while slumber is restful and rejuvenating. Naturally, slumber is the preferred state for the ancient dead.

This state of slumber is precious to the ancient dead, though within the confines of the Demiplane of Dread, it is a pale mockery of a true afterlife. The spirit of an ancient dead cannot escape the confines of the cold ethereal mists, it is forced back into the husk of its body. Alone within its mummified body, the ancient dead is deprived of a true afterlife. Members of the ancient dead have likened the sensation to being trapped behind a barred gate; they can sense the afterworld through the bars, even reach through the bars, yet they can never truly enter it, forever outside looking in. Trapped within the mortal shell, the spirit sleeps fitfully, rested but never satisfied.

The ancient dead desire nothing more than the peaceful harmony slumber. Rather than engage in tawdry power schemes like vampires, or irrelevant research like lichs, the ancient dead isolate themselves from the outside world, to better rest within their tombs. Petty plotting and scheming would require more attention than a mummy

would be willing to pay. There are precious few causes dear enough to an ancient dead to force it to wake and work.

Needs

Much like their living counterparts, the ancient dead have special needs that must be met to maintain a healthy existence. These three primary needs are security, reverence and immortality. Though physically resilient, the ancient dead are subject to mental instability. When deprived of these three needs, ancient dead become insecure, unnecessarily violent and completely unpredictable.

Security: The ancient dead cannot rest while their tombs are insecure. The threat of thieves or assassins plagues the ancient dead, breeding fear and paranoia. Ancient dead require their tombs to be isolated from the living world, protecting them from outside attack. Their tombs are often surrounded by natural barriers, such as mountain ranges, vast deserts, or located far beneath the earth. These tombs are hidden as well, built into the natural surroundings and camouflaged to avoid unwanted attention. The hidden tombs are sealed off by sealed stone doors and other barriers, while the tomb itself is trapped to prevent invaders.

Reverence: The ancient dead require that the glory that they possessed in life be echoed through eternity in death. The ancient dead require grand tombs, filled with treasures befitting creatures of their status. Their massive crypts are filled with the artifacts that the ancient dead used in life, while great murals celebrate their accomplishments. Towering statues are carved into the pillars and huge scripts of hieroglyphs are carved into the walls. The body of the ancient dead is bedecked in jewellery

and precious metals, laid in a massive sarcophagus carved into its own image.

There are cases where materials alone are not enough to sate an ancient dead's need for reverence. In such a case, the ancient dead require living beings to constantly offer respect and worship. Mortal followers groom the body, pray to it and even make offerings to it.

Immortality: In order to maintain its existence, the body of an ancient dead must be preserved for all time. Shortly after death, the body must be embalmed and treated so that the decomposition process is permanently halted. Many ancient dead exist in deserts where the natural dryness stops decay, while others base themselves in freeze dried mountain peaks. A scant few ancient dead are created in natural peat bogs, though few of these so-called bog mummies are anything more than walking corpses. In the Core, there have been some cases where embalming fluids or mercury were used to preserve bodies.

In some cases, the ancient dead were prepared by the removal of vital organs. These organs are precious to the ancient dead, for while they are separated bodily, they are treasured items. Often kept in ornate canopic jars, these organs remain the most prized possessions of the ancient dead.

The ancient dead are often concerned with the preservation of their bodies. Though slumber allows these dead to regenerate physical damage, the ravages of decay remain a threat. To survive the centuries, an ancient dead must take precautions to avoid damaging its body. Lairs are often insulated against moisture, while the body may be embalmed periodically over the years.

Culture

In many cases, the ancient dead outlive the civilization that spawned them, their tombs the last bastions of societies lost to time. Though the ancient dead care little for the chaotic living world, they feel a compulsion to protect their native culture and to preserve it throughout the centuries. In the timeless crypts of the ancient dead, forgotten gods are worshiped and lost legends echo through the darkened halls. The ancient dead resent the appearance of younger civilizations, seeing them as short lived and inferior.

In some rare cases, the ancient dead are the protectors of a living culture. The last vestiges of a civilization in decline rally around the graves of their ancient kings, hoping to rekindle the glory of a time long past. In this capacity, the ancient dead are reluctant leaders. Rather than take an active role, these ancient dead delegate their power to loyal followers.

The ancient dead still pay homage to the Gods they worshiped in life, though the state of undeath has changed their perspective. As creatures who frequently cross the border between life and death, the ancient dead have been elevated above mortal men, to a level closer to the gods themselves. While mortal clerics beg their gods in humility, the ancient dead casually borrow power from their fellow immortals. Ancient dead who were priests in life often conflict with the living members of their former church, as they assert their authority as god-like creatures.

Minions

The ancient dead often secure their tombs with undead servitors and golem creations. These mindless

minions are ideal servants for the ancient dead, since they require no attention and are slavishly loyal. Members of the ancient dead give little thought to the safety of their lifeless soldiers, often ordering them to fight to the end regardless of the circumstances. This strategy protects the deathless master of the crypt against parties equipped to fight but one mummy, though against more enduring opponents the gambit leaves the ancient dead vulnerable.

The ancient dead rarely attract living servants, since they despise any contact with the living. Compared to the immortal tranquility of death, mortals are little more than babbling children, far too impatient and needy to make useful servitors. In the rare case that an ancient dead leads a group of followers, the closest servants of the ancient dead are given great autonomy in leading the cult. These mortal leaders take up the burden of governing the irrational human cattle, allowing their undying master to slumber in peace.

The ancient dead rarely pursue any activity that requires minions to work in the world beyond their tombs. Nonetheless, there have been instances where the ancient dead gather servitors to work as their hands in the lands of the living. The formation of cults, the retrieval of artifacts, and the destruction of dangerous enemies are the most common goals. These minions are required to be self-sufficient, since the ancient dead have no intention of supporting them. Assassins are commonly included in the ranks of the cult, since they require no supervision.

These organizations rarely include more than one ancient dead, though there are exceptions. The Seekers of the Seven Scarabs are the most infamous example, though it is believed that the

legendary Pharaoh Ankhtepot leads a small community of ancient dead. The highest-ranking ancient dead bully their lower ranked servants, often forcing them to wake from slumber to accomplish minor goals.

Awaking

Preternaturally wise, the ancient dead are capable of waiting centuries before acting. If an exceptionally powerful enemy steals an artefact, the owner will patiently wait for the mortal foe to grow decrepit, or even die, before sending a servitor to retrieve it. If a mummy desires an artefact, he is content to delay the quest for generations, until his cult servants are experienced enough to wield it. Yet there are times, even for the ancient dead, where time has grown short. In these extremely rare moments of desperation, a mummy rises from its tomb, stretches its desiccated limbs, and sets off into the chaotic world of the living.

The awakening of an ancient dead is comparable to a natural disaster. The land itself quakes with the footsteps of

these undying monsters. With the passing of these titans, mountains crumble, whole villages are levelled and entire generations are brought to ruin and despair. The unstoppable power of the ancient dead wreaks unholy havoc upon the living, bringing suffering to the entire world in retribution for denying the mummy its precious slumber.

Mummies forced to wake are naturally cruel and petulant. Though they retain their superhuman wisdom, their patience has become razor thin. They yearn to end their quest and punish the insignificant insects that brought about their awakening. Anyone who stands between them and their goal is slain, inflicted with a dreadful disease or ground into a bloody paste in their desiccated claws. If forced by necessity, a mummy can put aside his hatred of the living world and take on a disguise, or some sort of false persona in the living world, to better achieve his goals. These roles are maintained only for so long as they are necessary, shed like so many funeral wrappings as soon as their goal is accomplished.

Corners of the Core

Deir el Medina

Centuries ago, a mighty empire stretched across the land known as Har'Akir. Mighty and magnificent, this kingdom stood as a beacon of law, harmony and fealty to the Gods. Yet the crimes of the Pharaoh Ankhtepot drew the scorn of the Gods, and ended the harmony that sustained the Akiri. Plagues, famines, barbarians and blasphemy ravaged the Akiri culture, until the tiny city of Muhar stood alone to face the slow death of their civilization. In the aftermath of the apocalyptic decline, the Akiri of Muhar believed that they alone had survived. They were wrong.

Only a scant few travelers have ever laid eyes upon Deir el Medina, for it lies far in the Northern desert, at the very edge of the land itself, where the mountains touch the endless sandstorm of the border. The city stretches across the sand, a grand monument to the lost Akiri civilization. The silent statues and towering obelisks of the city stand alone and untouched by man. Yet though mankind forsakes the city, it is not abandoned. Beneath the sandy streets, in the depths of the endless crypts, enshrouded in the shadows, the last inhabitants of Deir el Medina live, and wait.

History

Deep within the bowels of the temple of Amon Ra, the clerics of Muhar have stored a papyrus scroll. The scroll is an unassuming document, similar to the hundreds upon hundreds of documents that hold the knowledge of

the ancients. Yet this text is fairly new, scribed less than a century ago. This scroll is precious to the priests, for upon its surface was penned the last testament of a dying nomad. Only decades ago the scroll was brought to the death bed of a Pharazian trader, who, as his body was wracked by the agonies of disease, told of how he became lost in a sandstorm and took shelter in the ruins of a vast city. The scroll describes the nomad's exploration of the city, as well as his study of the hieroglyph writings he found there. There upon the walls of the city he found the lost history of Deir el Medina, and deep within the city crypts, he found its lost inhabitants.

It is known that when the pharaoh Ankhtepot walked the earth, as a living mortal, he committed foul deeds in the search for eternal life. To end his cruelty and turn him from the path of evil, the Gods decided to punish him. Though small, Deir el Medina was amongst the most precious settlements of the Akiri culture, for it was home to the tomb builders who laboured in the canyon known as Pharaohs Rest. The Gods sent Ankhtepot a vision, commanding him to abandon Deir el Medina as punishment for his dark deeds. When Ankhtepot awoke he consulted his most trusted advisor, Inanamen, the priest who would one day betray him. Inanamen deduced the intentions of the Gods and hoped to foil their efforts. The treacherous cleric advised Ankhtepot to ignore the warning, in the hopes of bullying the Gods into granting him immortality.

Though the Akiri records lose track of the accursed city, the hieroglyphs found by the Pharazian describe the rest of the dreadful tale. As punishment to the pharaoh, the city was besieged by endless sandstorms. As the people suffered, the agents of Inanamen worked their evil upon the city. The secret priests of Set used their magic to sustain the people in their time of need, turning the city dwellers against the true gods of the Akiri, bringing them closer to the clutches of evil. As Ankhtepot continued his mad quest for godhood, the city began to fall ever steadily into depravity.

Unable to leave their city, even to bury their dead, the master tomb builders of Deir el Medina turned their talents upon the earth beneath them. The deceased were interred in the catacombs dug beneath their homes, joining a growing population of cadavers. For years the people cut into the stone, creating a maze of halls and galleries descending into the blackness. Even as they dug, the secret clerics of Set turned the people to the worship of their disgusting god.

In the outside world, Inanamen goaded his immortal king to greater acts of evil. Yet Ankhtepot would be betrayed, slain and mummified by the priests of Amon Ra. Exposed as a vile agent of evil, Inanamen fled into the desert, even as the Akiri culture crashed down around his head. Inanamen fled to the city of Deir el Medina, where he assumed lordship over the city of Set. Those few city dwellers remained had retreated into the darkness of the caves beneath their city, fearful of Ra's retribution for their blasphemy. As they descended into the crypt, they recorded their dreadful tale on the stonewalls,

leaving the secret history that would one day cost a Pharazian his life.

In the years since Har'Akir's appearance, the denizens of Deir el Medina have been "blessed" by their god, transformed into serpentine abominations. In the cool, damp depths beneath their city, they worship Set and the entropy he brings. Completely converted to his cause, these perverse cultists dream of the ever-approaching day when the gods shall forsake Har'Akir forever. On that day Set will claim the land, an unending night shall fall, and the faithful of Set shall slither out of their caverns and dominate the cosmos.

The City

The cityscape of Deir el Medina is a sprawling mass of mud brick buildings and stone monuments. The stone has eroded in the constant barrage of sand, becoming uniformly smooth. The crumbling remains of the city walls border the edges of the city. Though they once stood as tall as thirty feet in some sections, the walls have decayed, now never higher than twenty feet. The four great gates of the city remain, marked by a pairs of massive statues that flank either side of the portals. Several of these statues have collapsed over the years; most are too eroded to determine the god they once depicted.

Four wide roads quarter the city, each beginning at the gates. Known to historians as "The Procession of the Gods", these roads were once traversed by carts bearing the statues of gods, who were paraded through the city on special occasions. The four roads are lined by the greatest examples of Akiri architecture. Statues of gods and sphinxes stand silent guard over the abandoned roads, while towering

obelisks slowly sink and the town houses of aristocrats crumble. The procession roads break into the tributary roads that lead to the forgotten merchant districts, or the courtyards. Deir el Medina is filled with simple mud brick houses still cluttered with a handful of artefacts of daily life. Intermixed amongst the houses are the wells that once linked the city to the vital waters that collect beneath their city. Cut into the streets of the city are small shafts, leading down into the catacombs below.

The four roads of the "Procession of the Gods" converge upon the hill that stands in the centre of Deir el Medina. Upon this hill stands the mighty ziggurat that held the temple of Amon Ra. Each road ends in a causeway that leads up the hill and to the four entrances of the temple. These causeways are bordered by walls and decorated with statues of stone gods and beasts that tower over those who dare to approach the temple mount. The ziggurat itself is massive, standing more than 50 feet above the top of the hill. Thick wooden doors once sealed all four of the entrances, but in this age of decline the doors lie broken in the portal. The temple remains a glorious example of Akiri spirituality; every room is adorned with colourful murals and wooden furniture. At the very centre of the temple is the inner sanctum, a massive chamber dominated by a gigantic statue of Amon Ra, which has been mysteriously decapitated. The lower chambers of the ziggurat lead to the stairway that connects the surface to the sepulchre below.

Though the city is forsaken by all life, the restless spirits of the dead haunts its empty streets. Before the creation of the catacombs, many city dwellers died and were cremated, rather than being properly buried. Though a necessary

evil at the time, this irreverent sacrilege deprived the deceased of their place in the afterlife, dooming them to an eternity of sorrow. These spirits are the butu, disembodied souls driven to madness and violence. In many ways they resemble wraiths, though they are wickedly clever. The butu travel in packs of five to fifteen, always traveling through solid objects, only occasionally poking their heads out to see their prey. One or two butu lure their prey into a dead end, making noises not unlike sobbing to attract attention. When their prey bumbles into the trap, the rest of the group attacks from all sides, including above and below. The dread lord who rules beneath the city rules the butu, demanding that they alert him whenever an intruder is discovered.

The Catacombs

Beneath the city streets lies a darkened labyrinth of crypts. In the aftermath of the punishment of the gods, these catacombs were cut into the rock to store the dead of Deir el Medina. The sepulchre is made up of halls and galleries, cut out of the rock and reinforced with mud brick in some spaces. The scent of the crypt is a nauseating stench, originating from the translucent green vapours produced by rotting bodies, collecting on the floor. The condition is made bearable due to the airshafts cut into the ceilings, which help to ventilate the area. During the day, sunlight glints through the shafts, providing illumination similar to dusk conditions, by night the crypts are as dark as any other cavern.

The crypts are hallowed ground, so the butu are forbidden to enter. Anyone fleeing from the wraiths will find the crypts a safe haven, though the stinking depths hide equal dangers. The residents

of the tombs are restless in their sleep. Wights and mummies sleep fitfully in their graves, while shadow asps slither in the darkness. As well, the tomb builders of Deir el Medina were infamous for their expertise in devious tomb traps.

The catacombs descend three floors into the earth like an inverted pyramid. The stairs descending from the ziggurat open into the centre of the first level, which houses the bodies of commoners. Hallways are crammed with slots cut horizontally into the wall, which hold the ancient corpses of the dead, many of which are nothing more than skeletons bound in tattered funeral shrouds. Hallways meet each other at the galleries, small rooms with high ceilings. Galleries are more sophisticated than the halls; they are reinforced with masonry and are painted with vivid murals of daily life and carved with hieroglyphs. These glyphs record the grim history of Deir el Medina, telling the nostalgic tale of the city before the age of decline. Built into the corner of each gallery is a small shrine an Akiri god, though several shrines have been defaced and tagged with obscene graffiti markings.

In the southern corner of the first level stands the stairwell to the second level, resting place of the master tomb builders. Those few travelers who have seen the sepulchres of Pharaoh's Rest may notice the similarities to the crypt of Deir el Medina. The crypt itself is reinforced with masonry and buttressed to support the crypt above. Nearly every wall is painted with murals of the Akiri gods and engraved with hieroglyphs depicting the descent of Deir el Medina and its slow fall into godless cult worship. In the northern most corner of the second level is the staircase leading the third floor.

The tomb hallways open into individual mausoleums, wherein whole families have been interred. Though master tomb builders lovingly crafted these family crypts, over the centuries these sepulchres were defaced as generation after generation squeezed their deceased into overcrowded tombs. These small crypts may hold as many as a hundred bodies, with coffins stacked atop on another, or bodies folded over and jammed into tiny slots in the walls. Valuable trinkets and family heirlooms are found on the bodies or piled in the corners of the tomb. As each family crypt was sealed, cunning devices were installed to prevent the reopening of the tomb, as a means of preventing future relatives from jamming any more bodies into the grave. Many traps are built into the rock, placed in the sealed doors of the crypt.

The third level was reserved for the bodies of the aristocrats and priests of Deir el Medina. As the city's cult worship evolved into open Set worship, work on this level was abandoned for the construction below. Only a few mausoleums still stand on the third level, most having been opened and desecrated or left uncompleted. The walls of this level are made of the most finely crafted masonry, broken by patches of bare stone where the mud brick has collapsed, or was never installed. Hieroglyphs cut into the finished portions of wall describe the last years of decline in Deir el Medina, as the worship of Gods was abandoned. Graffiti markings carved over the glyphs at a latter date explain the rest of Deir el Medina's grim history, starting from the appearance of Inanamen to the abandonment of the surface. This area lacks the airshafts and the rotting bodies of the first and second levels, so the reeking green mist is

replaced with a musty atmosphere of dust.

This third level is built on either side of the long main tunnel leading from the stairs from above, southward to the tunnels below. Individual hallways break from the main hall, forking off and leading to the individual crypts of the ancient upper class of Deir el Medina. Nearly fifty tombs were built into this floor, built at different elevations and connected by sloping halls. Those few tombs that have not been defiled have survived only because of the presence of powerful magical traps. Lethal and enduring, these arcane devices offered too much trouble for so little award to grave robbers.

Temple of Set

At the end of the main hallway of the third level is the sloping ramp leading deeper into the darkness of the earth. These tunnels are noticeably cool and moist, slick with the moisture draining in from the desert for miles. This is the Temple of Set, a long series of serpentine tunnels cut into a spiral descent further into the rock. The tunnels stand nearly eight feet high, circular in shape. The walls have a smooth moist texture, not unlike the scales of a serpent though there are places where the smooth wall is broken by a section of masonry, on which have been built sconces for torches. Initial glances suggest that these spots are stone and mortar, though close examination reveals that these squares are made of hundreds of human bones, glued tightly together with ancient clay. These grisly torch holders illuminate the tunnels as well as warming them significantly. Between the moisture and the heat, the atmosphere in the Temple of Set is not unlike that of a jungle, or the belly of a gigantic snake.

The Temple of Set winds far down into the earth, spiralling like the coils of a colossal viper. At infrequent intervals the tunnel opens into a tributary hall, leading into different areas of the temple. The highest break leads to the living quarters of the Temple, containing bunks, training rooms and workshops for nearly fifty individuals. Living quarters are little more than circular rooms, covered in a soft carpet and surrounded by the chests and lockers that hold the few personal belongings of the mutated denizens of Deir el Medina. Beyond the living quarters are the spawning pits, the ghastly birthing chambers of vile creatures. These pits are cavernous rooms where the fiendish spawn of Set breed in a disgusting, reptilian orgy, producing corrupted egg after corrupted egg. These unborn soldiers of evil are taken to the hatching room, which is in actuality a storage chamber for thousands of eggs. The Temple of Set can hold but a few followers of Set, so the majority of eggs are left in hibernation.

Below the spawning pits are the farms that feed the depraved serpent people of Set. These farms are massive pits, filled with shrieking rats and mice, drawn to the tunnels by the vile call of Set. These rodents constantly claw at the towering walls of their prison, attempting to escape through the top, even as more of their kind pours through the tiny honeycomb of tunnels at the bottom of the pit. At any hour there are a dozen or so serpent folk, gleaning mice from the pit for latter consumption.

Further down the tunnel is the reptile pool. While the surface is arid and dry, the dark earth collects moisture and drains into natural chambers, such as the one used as a reptile pool by the mutated monsters of Deir el Medina. All

manner of crocodiles, serpents and lizards swim through these natural pools of water, fed by the mice collected in the farms above. As the chosen of Set, these reptiles are culled from the surface world, so that they will be spared extinction when the Gods destroy the world.

Beyond the reptile pool is the end of the tunnel and the entrance to the inner sanctum of the Temple of Set. This portal is a gigantic stone door, more than fifteen feet tall. Four massive statues guard this door, shaped as mighty men with the heads of asps, cobras, lizards and crocodiles. These doors open rarely, only once a century, when a suitable candidate for the priesthood petitions for the right of mummification and eternal life. Any being who approaches the door way is asked four questions by the statues, who test his historical, philosophical and spiritual knowledge. If the loyal serpent can answer the questions correctly, the doors open and may enter the chamber beyond. If the petitioner will not, or cannot answer correctly, the four statues animate as mighty golems and crush him or her into a pulp. The golems themselves open the doors, so in the event of their destruction, the six-inch-thick stone doors would have to be forced open with some sort of lever.

The Well of Souls

Beyond the doorways of the end of the Temple of Set, lies the well of souls. This cavernous chamber is older than Deir el Medina, more ancient than even the Akiri civilization. Crafted after the resurrection of Osiris, the Well of Souls is the secret entrance to the afterlife, the final escape rout of the vile god Set. Deep within the blackest bowels of the earth, the undying priests of Set slumber,

preparing for the day that they gods will finally forsake the world and their vile master will return. Its very presence in the world of the living spreads dissonance and entropy into the world, corrupting the ma'at of Har'Akir and bringing the earth ever closer to destruction.

Unlike the Temple of Set, this chamber is as dry as the desert above. The portal at the end of the Temple opens to a wide walkway that circles the well, overlooking the great floor nearly twenty feet below. A staircase of stone directly opposite the entrance leads down to the floor, which is made of thousands of stones, fit together into a massive mosaic. The startlingly advanced artwork stretches across the entire bottom floor of the well, creating a surreal picture viewable from the walkway above. In the picture writing of the Akiri, the mosaic depicts the story of Set, beginning where the staircase reaches the floor, and continuing along the floor in a massive circle, ending where the story begins.

The Well of Souls is made from ancient stone bricks, the finest ever seen in Akiri architecture. From the bottom floor, it can be seen that the walkway is supported by dozens upon dozens of columns carved into statues with fierce serpentine heads. Sconces holding ever-burning torches are placed every ten feet around the well, on the walkway and on the statues of the lower level.

The ceiling is a colossal dome, a feature never seen elsewhere in Akiri architecture. In the flickering firelight of the Well, a mural is visible on the ceiling. The massive picture is painted in vivid colours, drawn in a realistic style more similar to Dementlieuse artists than Akiri artisans. The mural depicts an army of serpent-creatures

rampaging through human cities, as a massive snake slithers across the sky and swallows the sun.

Beneath the walkway, along the wall of the lower floor, stand the stone sarcophagi of the priests of Set. Evenly spaced along the wall are a dozen coffins, with all but four occupied. The stone coffins are ornately carved to resemble their inhabitant, a scaly humanoid with a disgusting serpentine head. In the centre of the Well is a sloping funnel made of slick rocks, thirty feet in diameter and leading down into a thirty-foot pit. At the bottom of the pit writhes a mass of swarming serpents. Deadly boa constrictors, venomous vipers and thousands of other slithering reptiles fill the bottom of the well, waiting for a victim upon which to feed. Careless invaders who walk within the funnel must make a balance check against a DC of 10 or fall into the pit.

Between the stairs and the pit lies a simple stone slab. The rock is stained with ancient blood and scratch marks from knife blades. Leather restraints are bolted to both ends of the slab. The sides of the slab hold hooks holding carving knives and other brutal bronze tools. Despite its appearance, this slab is not a sacrificial altar. This slab is the workbench for the ancient priests of Set, for the initiation of a worthy follower into their ranks. The initiate is mummified alive, his organs removed and his body filled with salt. The sacred organs of the initiate are stored within the bellies of Set's chosen serpents, which wait hungrily in the pit.

Opposite to the staircase, at the other end of the Well towers the statue of Set. This figure is more than thirty feet high and made of solid gold. The sculpture is polished to a mirror like finish, reflecting the dancing firelight,

creating the illusion that the statues is moving, even breathing. Two huge ruby eyes stare out into the chamber, sparkling with chilling malevolence.

The statue of Set depicts the serpent god as a humanoid with the head of an asp. In his clawed hands he holds the sword he used to dismember Osiris, wielding it above his head, as if to bring it down upon some helpless being at his feet. Rubies adorn the cutting edge of the sword, freezing the image of dripping blood for eternity. Ivory fangs are fixed into the serpent mouth, with sapphires and emeralds set into the edge, depicting the treacherous venom of the snake.

Adventure Hooks

Deir el Medina is an isolated ruin, though there are tales of lost travelers sighting the crumbling settlement. Anyone traversing the border of Sebu and Har'Akir could lose their way in the mountains and stumble upon the ruin. It is feasible that the exploration of the city might lead the wayward party into the crypts, and perhaps even into the depraved depths of the Temple of Set.

The Pharaoh Ankhtepot rests fitfully in his tomb, the crimes of his past weighing down upon his withered shoulders like lead. Amongst his greatest regrets is Inanamen, the secret cultist of Set who manipulated him into so much depravity. For many years Ankhtepot has suspected that Inanamen fled to accursed city of Deir el Medina, though he has had no way to investigate the dead city. Should he find a group of mortal adventurers in his debt, the search for Inanamen would prove an ideal task by which the foolish humans can redress their obligation.

The cultists of Deir el Medina have spent centuries waiting for the day when

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ma'at decays into entropy and the gods finally abandon Har'Akir. On this day they will awaken the thousands of eggs they have stored in their hatching chambers and birth an army of hideous evil. The chosen priests of Set will shed their mummified scales and emerge as living beings, leading the legions of mutants as Set returns from the afterlife and devours the Sun. This day draws

steadily near, to the everlasting dread of the priests in Muhar. For centuries Snefru and the other clerics have known of accursed Deir el Medina, though they have never possessed the power to assault the vile settlement. If a few foreign adventurers can impress the priests with their prowess, they might be called upon to destroy Set's temple and restore ma'at to the tortured land.

Children of the Night

Inanamen

All the denizens of the desert fear the fangs of the asp. From the tiniest mouse to the mightiest man, no creature risks the sting of venom. Yet poison is not the only weapon at the disposal of a serpent. How more deadly is a honeyed word that drives men to evil, and to their own destruction.

For as long as the Akiri Empire has stood, there have been serpents slithering in the shadows. The Cult of Set has always plagued the Akiri, spreading chaos and corruption in society and destroying the divine ma'at that sustains the universe. Followers of Set are found in all ranks of society, from the lowliest beggar to the richest noble. The seductive hiss of Set worms its way into the minds of the greedy and ambitious, promising power and wealth. Once inside, Set wraps his vile coils around his prey, crushing the last sparks of goodness and warping his victim into a twisted mockery. So was it when Set entered the lives of a noble family in the Akiri Empire.

Centuries ago, a wealthy family in the Akiri civilization joined the cult of Set in exchange for great power and influence. In payment to their dread God, they were asked to adopt a foundling and raise him as their legitimate son. Named Inanamen, this child was brought up in the household of the nobles and placed within the highest circles of society. In the language of the Akiri, his name translates as "Glory to the Gods", however, in the secret tongue of the cult of Set, his name translates as "Chosen of Set". From the beginning, Inanamen possessed a preternatural

charm and intellect, which allow him to worm his way into the priesthood of Amon Ra and seize control of his own cult of Set. Inanamen used his cult followers to assist in his rise to high priest, assassinating or discrediting anyone who stood in his way, eventually becoming the advisor to the pharaoh, Ankhetepot.

With the patience of a reptile, Inanamen waited many years of his opportunity. As the pharaoh felt the sting of age, he feared his own death. Just as the sun falls each dusk, so too was the pharaoh destined to die. Yet like the sun, he too would rise again, resurrected as Osiris, Horus and Ra, living forever more as the immortal line of kings. Yet Ankhetop feared death and began his research into immortality, to avoid his inevitable death and reign forever. It was then that Inanamen struck, taking the opportunity to lead the pharaoh into depravity and destroy civilization.

Inanamen encouraged Ankhetepot to perform grisly experiments upon his slaves, though to the Set worshiper's delight, the pharaoh needed no urgings to be brutal. Inanamen happily watched as Ankhetepot slew countless innocents in the quest for immortality, acting only rarely to keep the pharaoh on the path of self-destruction. After years of bloodshed and torment, Ankhetop was rewarded for his evil and given the immortality he craved, as well as his touch of death. While Ankhetepot basked in his own glory, Inanamen plotted. Receiving a vision from Set, the hidden serpent realized that the end drew

near. Even as the priests of Ra prepared to overthrow Ankheteptot, Inanamén worked his corruptive wiles. The cult of Set spread plagues, poisoned wells and enticed barbarian invasions, helping to bring about the age of decline. When the rebellious priests of Ra mummified Ankheteptot, Inanamén had already fled to a safe haven, the accursed city of Deir el Medina.

As the Akiri civilization collapsed, Inanamén shared with his people the vision of their destiny. After millennia of waiting, the Cult of Set was to prepare for the destruction of the world. Since the beginning of time, Set had plotted to seize the earth from his brother Osiris. With the blasphemy of Ankheteptot, Set had brought corruption and entropy into the world, destroying the harmony of the cosmos. As chaos reigned the Gods withdrew, slowly losing hope, inevitably abandoning the earth to its fate.

On that dread day, it was prophesied that Set would escape from his prison in the afterlife. With no gods to defeat him, Set would reign unopposed over the earth, enslaving its inhabitants to his vile will. Those who served Set loyally would be made the rulers of that doomed world, ensuring that Set would be revered for all eternity. This would be the fate of the denizens of Deir el Medina, masters of the cosmos under the rule of Set. Inanamén would lead them deep into the earth where they would construct the Temple of Set, a ghastly fortress where the abominable worshippers of Set would live and prepare for the end of the world.

Once the temple was constructed, Inanamén led the diggers to a place revealed to him in a dream, the Well of Souls. Eventually the serpentine diggers broke into a chamber guarded by four statues, all of who bent their knees to

Inanamén. Inanamén would pass to the chamber beyond, but not before giving his people the laws by which to live their vile lives. The mutated serpent folk were to devote their lives to the study of Set, his history, philosophy and religious doctrine. These serpents were to breed a great army, which would be hatched on the day of the apocalypse. The greatest honour for these people was to be included in the Chosen of Set, the ancient dead.

In the Well of Souls, Inanamén waits. He lives his life in communion with his dread God, basking in the power that emanates from the Well of Souls. Every so often a new Chosen of Set proves himself worthy and enters the Well, where he is mummified by Inanamén and joins the ranks of the ancient dead. There in the Well they silently pray to their God, preparing for the day that the Well will open and Set will emerge. On that day, the Chosen of Set will be reborn. Inanamén and his followers will shed their mummified skins and emerge in new, shining scales, rising as immortal servants of Set and ruling over the earth for all time. This is the destiny that drives Inanamén, the inevitable reward for his fell deeds.

Inanamén, The Chosen of Set

Inanamén is a frightening image, for his body is horribly warped by the vile magic of his dark God. The cleric of Set appears to be a horribly desiccated mummy, reduced to little more than skeletal limbs held together by a tin layer of leathery meat and sinew. Cracked wrappings adorn his body, glued firmly to his desiccated flesh. The eyes of the ancient dead are empty sockets, filled by a darkness rivalling the

night sky. While his torso resembles that of a mummified human, he has been mutated by the touch of Set. Where once were legs is only a massive viper tail, made of dull leathery scales. Wherever Inanamen slithers he is shadowed by the scarping sound of dried serpent flesh wearing against the stone floor.

Male Ancient Dead, Fourth Rank, Cleric 11: CR 15; medium-size undead; HD 11D12; hp 74; Init +2; Spd 30ft.; AC 24 (+2 dex, +12 natural armour); Atk +14/+9 melee (1d6+6, disease, slam); SA Constrict, Disease, Fear, Improved Grab, Rebuke Undead, Spells; SQ Damage reduction 15/magic, Energy Vulnerability (Fire), Immunity (Cold), Rejuvenation, Resistant to Blows, Spells, Turn Resistance +6, Undead; AI LE; SV Fort +7, Ref +5, Will +12; Str 22, Dex 14, Con -, Int 19, Wiz 20, Cha 20.

Skills and Feats: Bluff +14 (+19), Climb +0 (+14), Concentration +14, Diplomacy +14 (+19), Hide +14 (+24), Knowledge (arcane) +14 (+18), Knowledge (religion) +14 (+18), Listen +0 (+15), Move Silently +0 (+10), Spellcraft +14 (+19), Spot +0 (+15); Alertness, Combat Casting, Darkness Within, Deadly Presence, Extra Turning, Energy Drain, Toughness.

Spells Prepared (6/ 5+1/ 4+1/ 4+1/ 3+1/ 2+1/ 1+1); base save DC = 15 + spell level): Spells Prepared 0 – Create Water, Detect Magic, Guidance, Light, Resistance 1st – Divine Favour, Doom, Protection from Good, Shield of Faith, Summon Monster I *2, 2nd – Bulls Strength, Desecrate, Hold Person, Invisibility, Silence 3rd – Bestow Curse, Blindness, Magic Circle against Good, Magic Vestment, Prayer 4th – Divine Power, Poison, Summon Monster IV, Unholy Blight 5th – Dispel Good,

Righteous Might, Summon V 6th – Animate Objects, Mislead.

Combat

Inanamen is a devious opponent, using every resource available to him to slay all who intrude upon the Well of Souls. When Inanamen hears the doors to the Well open, he casts invisibility on himself and observes. While the Chosen of Set engage the enemy, Inanamen observes for five rounds, waiting for the intruders to reveal their strengths. If Inanamen detects a powerful spell caster, he climbs up onto the upper walkway, slithers to the entrance and attacks the party from behind. If no priest or mage reveals himself, Inanamen uses *Bull's Strength*, *Divine Favour*, *Magic Vestment*, *Prayer*, his *Summon Monster I, IV, V* spells to bolster the defences, while remaining invisible.

In the event that the Chosen of Set begin the fall, Inanamen focuses his magic upon himself. He casts *Dispel Good*, *Righteous Might* and *Divine Power* upon himself while invisible, then casts *Animate Object* on a stone statue to create a large animated object. While his opponents contend with the animated minion, Inanamen uses stealth to sneak behind the enemy formation. The vile priest opens combat by using his Energy Drain feat to sap the strength of his enemies, following his initial attack with a *Poison* spell on a particularly weak looking target. He then casts *Mislead* and tries to fool his enemies into wasting their spells. When his charade nears the end, he positions himself near the doorway and casts *Unholy Blight* on the strongest opponent, and then *Blindness*, *Silence* on spell casters, or *Hold Person* to disable his enemies. He then wades into melee, using energy drain and his slam attack until he is driven back.

Though dedicated to Set, Inanamen is not foolish. In his mind, Set's escape from the underworld is inevitable, whether he is there to greet him or not. If Inanamen cannot repel the invaders, he flees to the city above. Inanamen hides in the city, commanding the wraiths to protect him. Inanamen rebukes a number of wraiths and forces them to escort him into the desert, where he will hide for a number of days. Afterwards he returns to the city, awakens a number of eggs from the hatching chamber, and begins his work anew.

Constrict: Inanamen may wrap his scaly tail around any opponent he grapples, and deals 1D8+6 points of bludgeoning damage.

Disease: If Inanamen strikes an opponent with his slam attack, that character must make a fortitude save against a DC 20 or contract the disease mummy rot. This disease has an incubation time of 1 day, and afterwards the victim must make a save against a DC 20 or suffer 1D6 constitution damage as their flesh desiccated and flakes away. This ability damage may only be healed by magical means.

Fear: Inanamen is a horrifying abomination to behold; his very image is infused with the essence of the vile god Set. Anyone who views Inanamen must make a will save against a DC of 20 or be paralysed with fear for 4*1D4 rounds.

Improved Grab: When Inanamen succeeds with a slam attack, he may automatically make a check to start a grapple.

Rebuke Undead: Inanamen may rebuke undead as an evil cleric of 11th level. He may make a total of 11 rebukes each day.

Lair

The Well of Souls is permeated by the dread aura of the vile God Set. An unhallow spell is centred upon the massive golden statue of Set, giving all followers of Set the effects of a bless spell (+1 to attack and save vs. fear) as well as the benefits of protection from good, granting them a +2 deflection bonus to AC and +2 resistance bonus to saves against good creatures. Furthermore, the Chosen of Set maintain a desecrate spell on the Well of Souls. Since the entire Well is dedicated to Set, each spell functions as if cast upon an altar of the serpent God. Within the Well of Souls, turning attempts suffer a -6 profane penalty, rebuke attempts gain a +6 profane bonus, and the undead within this area gain a +1 profane bonus to attacks, damage and saving throws. In addition, Inanamen and the Chosen of Set gain +1 hit points for each hit dice.

Followers

Inanamen commands the Chosen of Set, a group of eight mummies who slumber in the Well of Souls. As soon as an individual steps onto the lower floor of the Well of Souls, the Chosen of Set emerge from their coffins and attack the intruders.

The Chosen of Set slumber in their coffins until the opening of the doors to the Well awakes them. Two of the Chosen rush out to engage the intruders on the stairs, first using *Bestow Curse* and afterwards relying on their touch of death. Two ancient dead follow behind them, strengthening them by casting *Bull's Strength* and *Divine Favour*. The remaining five cast *Hold person*, *Summon Monster I*, and *Doom* to weaken their enemies. If a cleric character is visible amongst the intruders, two of the Chosen devote their

time to bolstering the other undead and dispel turning attempts.

Chosen of Set

Ancient Dead, First Rank, Cleric 5: CR 6; medium-size undead; HD 5D12; hp 35; Init +4; Spd 20ft.; AC 16 (+6 natural armour); Atk +6 melee (1d6+3, disease, slam); SA Disease (mummy rot), Fear, Rebuke Undead, Spells; SQ Damage reduction 5/magic, Energy Vulnerability (fire), Immunity (cold), Rejuvenation, Resistant to Blows, Spells, Undead; Al LE; SV Fort +4, Ref +1, Will +6; Str 17, Dex 10, Con -, Int 9, Wiz 14, Cha 12. Climb +0 (+9),

Concentration +8, Hide +0 (+8), Knowledge (religion) +8 (+10), Listen +0 (+12), Move Silently +0 (+8), Spot +0 (+12); Alertness, Combat Casting, Darkness Within, Improved Initiative, Toughness.

Spells Prepared (5/ 3+1/ 2+1/ 1+1); Base save DC = 12 + spell level):
Spells Prepared 0 – create water, detect magic, guidance, light, resistance 1st – Divine favour, Doom, Protection from Good, Summon Monster I 2nd – Bulls Strength, Desecrate, Hold Person 3rd – Bestow Curse, Magic Circle against Good

Growls in the Night

The Serpent Folk of Deir el Medina

In an age long past, the city of Deir el Medina was a grand settlement, home to the master tomb builders of the Akiri civilization. The artisans of Deir el Medina were famous throughout the Akiri civilization for their skills; no tomb in the canyon pharaoh's rest was built without the expertise of Deir el Medina. As the creators of the sacred tombs of Kings, the people of the city were blessed with privileges far above typical peasants. The people of Deir el Medina were precious to the pharaohs, a valued treasure. Sadly, it would be this status that would inevitably be their doom.

As the Pharaoh Ankhetepot conducted brutal experiments and turned away from the Gods, the gods contemplated the best means of punishing the wayward king. It was decided that the city of Deir el Medina would be made an example, to remind Ankhetepot of his powerlessness before the wrath of the Gods. One day, as the sun rose, the green-grey cloud of a gathering storm blotted it out. Lightning rent the sky as a massive sand storm blanketed the hapless town. The storm encircled the city, trapping Deir el Medina in the eye of the storm. Thus began the Siege of Sand, the imprisonment of the city dwellers that would last until the death of the pharaoh.

Trapped in their city, the people of Deir el Medina faced starvation and death. Initially the city dwellers threw themselves on the mercy of the Gods, frantically praying and sacrificing. Yet as the years wore on, their humble pleas became bitter curses. In their time of

peril, they turned away from the gods who tormented them. No voice spoke louder in favour of abandoning the gods than a mysterious sect of the clergy of Ra. These priests used their magic to gather sustenance for the people and to divine new sources of vital water. Slowly, those who opposed these priests died or disappeared, even as the folk of Deir el Medina flocked to their temple. These shadowy clerics gave the people renewed hope and purpose, directing them to create a massive network of crypts beneath their city.

As the people dug, they never suspected the dread truth. Their benefactors were in fact the cult of Set, the pretender priests of a god banished to the underworld. The cult preyed upon the anger of the people, driving them further and further from the true gods of the Akiri and deeper into depravity. As the world around them crumbled into decline, Deir el Medina withdrew further and further into itself. After a generation past, the people fell finally into the clutches of the cult, openly worshipping the vile god Set.

After untold decades, the Siege of Sand was lifted. A few city dwellers tentatively explored the desert around them, finding the Akiri civilization in ruins. For their piety, the people of Deir el Medina had been spared destruction. Shortly afterwards, they would be blessed again and granted their messiah, Inanamen, the Chosen One. Under the guidance of their dread leader, the people of Deir el Medina abandoned their city and created the Temple of Set, the serpentine tunnels that would be their

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new home. In the centuries of their subterranean isolation, the humans of Deir el Medina mutated into the disgusting abominations known as serpent folk.

For centuries they have lived in the darkness of their caves, slithering in the dark corners of the earth like demonic worms. The serpent folk of Deir el Medina are entirely devoted to Set and the destiny he has promised them. The serpent folk wait the day that harmony and justice will die in the world and the Gods will depart the earth. Set will rise from the grave and destroy whatever Gods remain, devouring the sun and wrapping his deadly coils around the world. On that day, it has been promised, the serpent folk will rise from their caves and conquer what remains of the forsaken cosmos, ruling as kings over all humanity.

Until that day, they wait. The serpent folk devote their time to eating, breeding and studying the teachings of Set. The serpent folk of Deir el Medina spawn all year round, laying egg after egg to store in the hatching chambers. These eggs hold the army of Set, keeping them in stasis until the day of destiny. Between their disgusting spawning rituals, the serpent folk study the scrolls and stone tablets written by the Cult of Set, preparing themselves for life beneath their god.

Serpent Folk

Medium sized Humanoid (Reptile)

Hit Dice	3d8+6 (20)
Initiative	+7
Speed	30 ft.
AC	15 (+2 natural, +3 dex)
Attacks	Bite +5, Falchion +4
Damage	1D8+1 bite, 2D4+1 Falchion
Face/Reach	5 ft. by 10ft./5ft.
Special Attacks	Poison, Smite Good, Sneak Attack 1D6

Special Quality	Chameleon, Dark Vision 20 feet
Saves	Fort +3, Ref +6, Will +3
Abilities	Str 12, Dex 17, Con 14, Int 12, Wiz 14, Cha 12
Skills	Animal Empathy +6, Bluff +6, Hide +18, Knowledge (religion) +6, Move Silently +8, Swim +8
Feats	Alertness, Improved Initiative, Weapon Finesse (Bite), Martial Weapon Proficiency (Falchion), Weapon Focus (Falchion)
Climate/Terrain	Temple of Set
Organization	Squad (3-8)
Challenge	3
Rating	
Treasure	None
Alignment	Any Evil
Advancement	By Class

The serpent folk are disgusting hybrids between humans and snakes, warped anthropomorphic reptiles trapped between two worlds. Serpent folk are bipeds covered in glistening scales. Their faces are more human than snake, with a tiny slanted snout for a mouth and two bare nostrils where a human's nose might have been. The bright yellow eyes of serpent folk are completely reptilian, staring out with inhuman intellect.

Inhumanly slender, serpent folk bob and weave as they walk, mimicking the graceful swaying of a coiled snake. A long, thin tail pokes out at the end of their spine, adding balance and stability to their gait. Serpent folk prefer loose robes, made from ancient cloth culled from the clothes of their ancestors. The highest-ranking priests of the serpent folk wear leather, skinned from the bodies of those serpent folk who tried to pass into the Well of Souls and failed.

Combat

Serpent folk are clever combatants, using their familiarity with

their environment to their advantage. Individual serpent folk flee from battle, only to gather a bigger force and launch an ambush. A common tactic amongst the serpent folk is to hide in some concealed nook, wait for intruders to pass and then launch a sneak attack. Serpent folk prefer to bite and run, hoping their toxin will weaken their opponents before the next attack. All serpent folk are proficient with the falchion, a weapon of war well known in Akiri culture. As well, serpent folk often train reptiles as attack animals and can be found with crocodiles, vipers or poisonous lizards.

Chameleon: Until the day of destiny, Set desires his minions to hide their presence from the mammalian slaves of the Akiri gods. To assist his servants to conceal their presence, Set granted the serpent folk the ability to blend in with their surroundings. While in natural surroundings a serpent's scales change colour to match his background. This ability gives serpent folk a +10 bonus to hide checks.

Dark vision 20 ft: In addition to normal sight, serpent folk have the ability to detect heat sources in the darkness, just like pit vipers. Combined with their own highly evolved vision, serpent folk have dark vision with a 20-foot range. This ability does not allow them to distinguish colours.

Poison: Serpent folk deliver nasty venom with their bite. Characters bitten

by a serpent must make a fortitude save against a DC of 12 or suffer 1D3 points of strength damage. One minute after the initial save, the victim must make a successful save against the original DC or suffer another 1D3 points of strength damage. This poison is often used by serpent folk to coat their blades, though air quickly renders it inert. When used on a blade, the poison only deals initial ability damage, and the DC to resist is 10.

Smite Good: Serpent folk are devoted to the cause of evil, and are rewarded by Set for their devotion. Once a day, a serpent may use the smite good ability to charge one attack with unholy power. This attack gains a bonus to hit good aligned creatures equal to the serpent's charisma modifier, and a damage bonus to that attack equal to his hit dice. In most cases, this results in a single attack with a profane bonus of +1 to hit and +3 to damage. If this attack is accidentally directed against a non-good creature then the smite is wasted.

Sneak Attack: Serpent folk are natural born killers, instinctively skilled in ambush. When attacking a creature that is denied his dexterity bonus to armour class, a serpent may make a sneak attack, dealing an extra 1D6 points of damage. Creatures immune to critical hits, or without visible anatomy are immune to this attack.

Tome of the Guardians

The Spear of Ahmoth

By Joseph Zeffelmaier aka Bela
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The Spear of Ahmoth is a powerful magical weapon lost in the sands of Sebuia. The ancient weapon is a bronze short spear forged in the style typical to weapons found in the tombs of Sebuia. Though old, the spear shows no sign of wear or tarnish. It bears no ornate carvings or magical insignias, nor is it encrusted with jewels or gilded in anyway. It simply appears to be a well-crafted but simple weapon of a lost time.

History

Ahmoth was a noble guard to Khamose, fourth son of the Pharaoh, long ago. His father was a poor worker of bronze who was elated when his only son was chosen to serve and protect their beloved sovereign. Ahmoth left his home shortly before his father's death, but as the aging smith lay in his sickbed, he presented his son with the last weapon he'd ever make, a surprisingly strong bronze spear. He said he hoped it would protect both his son and his liege in this life and beyond.

Ahmoth spent several years in the palace of Khamose. The pharaoh's son was fond of the young man for he was strong of arm, swift of limb and possessed a keen mind and unswerving loyalty. Ahmoth began to view Khamose as a new father in his new life. When Khamose found his First Wife in the arms of another man, Ahmoth felt his master's pain. When the crowd called for the woman's death, Ahmoth's voice was among the loudest. Latter, as

Khamose made the beguiling Tiyet his new First Wife, Ahmoth smiled at the thought that his beloved lord may find happiness again.

When Khamose first claimed Tiyet as his First wife, the two were almost inseparable. Khamose was clearly pleased with the girl, and she seemed to bring joy back into the sorrowful ruler's heart. However, as time passed, it became clear that there was a rift between the Pharaoh's Son and his Wife. Sullenness settled on Ahmoth's lord, and more and more Tiyet was away from the palace. She was often delivering offerings to the temple, and gone for much of the day. Ahmoth suspected treachery but said nothing, for his duty was to guard, not to speculate on the affairs of state.

Ahmoth had just gotten off duty when he returned to his chambers and found Khamose waiting for him. The man who would one day be Pharaoh was filled with pain and rage. He told Ahmoth that he suspected Tiyet of infidelity. He wanted Ahmoth to follow Tiyet on her next trek to the temple, and report whatever he saw there. Ahmoth's heart filled with sorrow for the man who had showed him nothing but kindness, he swore to do anything that Khamose asked of him.

That next day, as Tiyet strode through the city, she didn't notice a stealthy shadow dogging her steps. Wrapped in peasant's garb, Ahmoth traveled light, carrying only a water skin

and his spear. He saw Tiyet enter the temple as she said she would, and for a brief moment hoped that his master's fear was for nothing. However, as Ahmoth followed her, he saw her embrace the temple's High Priest, a man named Zordenahkt. He watched from behind dark curtains as the two betrayers fell into each other's arms and made a mockery of his beloved lord.

With speed born of loyalty, Ahmoth returned to Khamose's side. He told the Pharaoh's Son everything, and the man's rage was overwhelming. He railed at the sky and called to have his traitorous wife brought to him. The guards couldn't find her, but in truth she had already returned to the palace and witnessed Ahmoth's testimony. She blanched with fear as the guardsman told Khamose everything, and burned with hate for both the Fourth Son and common servant who had betrayed her.

Throughout the next day, the Royal Guard hunted for Tiyet, but she would not be found. What Ahmoth and the other guards didn't know is that she had already crept back to the temple. There her lover had killed and mummified her, at her own request. Locked in a secret chamber, the priest then killed himself and lay beside his paramour. Khamose's servants and soldiers scoured the city, but the betrayers were never found.

That night, the thing that was once Tiyet returned to the Palace. She stalked through the halls, her funeral gown billowing and her chest scarred from where her living heart had been removed. She came to Khamose's chamber, where Ahmoth stood as sentry. The loyal guard was more than willing to strike down the unfaithful wife. He raised his spear to run the woman through, but then he locked eyes with her. His muscles tightened, his strength

vanished and was helpless before the unholy creature. Removing a ceremonial dagger from her waist, Tiyet slit Ahmoth's throat with one swift motion. As the guardsman lay dying, he watched as Tiyet strode into his master's chambers and pulled Khamose's heart from his chest. She swallowed the beating organ whole and left her former lord. Ahmoth's last sight was of the damned Tiyet gliding out of the hall. His blood pooled beneath him, swirling beneath his hand and onto his beloved spear. His last thoughts were of vengeance against Tiyet. Then all went dark.

Powers

Since the fateful night of his death, blood and wrath have transformed the Spear of Ahmoth into a +3 Undead-Bane short spear. Though made of bronze, it has the strength of steel and is surprisingly light and well balanced. The weapon can never be removed from Sebu, for anyone wielding it will feel a strange pull if traveling away from the blasted desert. Should the wielder proceed, he will find that the spear simply disappears. Only the final death of Tiyet will allow the spear to cross beyond Sebu's borders.

If wielded against Tiyet or her minions, the spear gains the following abilities, as if cast by a 10th level Cleric;

Three times a day-Bless, Bull's Strength (on spear-bearer only), Protection from Evil, Remove Fear

Once a day-Consecrate, Cure Moderate Wounds, Remove Paralysis

These spells will speed Tiyet's downfall by giving the spear-bearer a decided edge when facing her.

Furthermore, the spear is drawn to the jar containing Tiyet's heart. Like a divining rod, it creates a subconscious

pull to the heart, which is the key to destroying Tiyet permanently.

Curse

The Spear of Ahmoth carries a curse. For each night a character possesses the Spear, he is beset with cruel dreams. The visions depict any memory of Ahmoth's, particularly his

most violent experiences. The character slumbers fitfully, resting as if he only slept half the day.

Also, once engaged with Tiyet's minions, the wielder must make a Will Save (DC 20) or fight to the death against these creatures, spurred on by the spiritual remains of Ahmoth. When facing Tiyet herself the DC rises to 30.

The Cult of Khepri

An Akiri Cult in the Core

By Joseph Zeffelmaier aka Bela

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Down past the main roads of Matria Bay, tucked away at the end of a small alley, stands Molon's Curiosities. The sign over the door is rotten and almost illegible, while the door itself is in no way remarkable. No magic sigils bar entrance nor do armed sentries await intruders. And why should they? For after all, Molon's Curiosities is almost unknown to the inhabitants of Martira Bay. And those who are aware of it regard it as a charlatan's junk shop. But there are few, very few, who know what truly lies within its walls, and the proprietor's true business.

Molon's Curiosities was established in 735 (Barovian Calendar) by Jasper Molon. In his youth, Jasper had been a traveler and adventurer. However, unless one can get him quite drunk, he speaks sparingly of his past. What is known is that he's long been a student of History, spurred on by the ancient past to explore. He's seen the lost jungles of the Wildlands, the ice-capped mountains of Sanguinia, and the barren deserts of the Amber Wastes. Perhaps most amazing is that he's lived to tell the tale. True, he has several scars and must now walk with a cane, but his body and mind are still sound enough. Deciding not to push his fortunes, he retired to a simpler life and opened his shop with what treasure he'd obtained. Every day, he sits in his chair, hoping that one of his old enemies won't decide to pay him a visit.

The store itself sells a wide variety of bizarre and foreign objects. Shrunk heads, ancient stone tablets, exotic powders and potions are just a sampling of his wares. One might wonder why he chose such a wretched location for his shop, and why it fails to draw shoppers. The answer is two-fold. First, many of the objects in Molon's collection are frauds. True, some do contain mystical powers or antique history, but many are simply window-dressing. Second, Jasper Molon has a dark secret, and Molon's Curiosities serves as a legitimate front for a sinister cabal.

History

The true history of Jasper Molon's obsession began in 730, the year of his last exploration. He had set his sights on the sandy wastes of Sebua, and whatever hidden mysteries lay beneath its dunes. He'd spent a great deal of time in Har'Akir, and developed a love for its culture. On this trip, he'd even taken a Akiri wife, Bahri. She was very young, only sixteen at the time, and very beautiful. She'd been his interpreter on his latest excursion, and proved to be quite skilled at deciphering the ancient writings Jasper found on old tablets and ruined temples. She was drawn to the older man's confidence and knowledge of the lands beyond her own. Soon, he would only explore the desert with her and a few pack animals.

The two decided to search Sebua next, mostly through the gentle prodding

of Bahri. They'd set out at dusk, to get as much traveling in as possible without the blazing sun. However, disaster struck them not long after crossing the border into Sebua. They'd fought several battles together, but were not prepared for what they faced next. As the night set on their second day, they found them beset by a group of child-sized, shrivelled zombies. They attacked from beneath the sand, but proved little threat to the experienced duo. However, the creature that commanded them was far mightier. Over a hill came a thin, sickly man wrapped in rags. He moved with inhuman speed, and launched himself at Jasper. The beast sank long fangs into the Darkonian, and began to drain the very water from his body. Jasper felt his life begin to fade, when Bahri came to his aid.

First, she brandished a holy symbol that Molon had never seen. She spoke words of prayer, and the scarab-and-sunrise pendant began to glow. The undead creature released Jasper, but seemed unaffected by the holy symbol. The ragged thing began to close in on the woman, when she raised her hands to the sky and intoned the name of her god, Khepri. A swarm of locusts descended from the sky, and carried the screaming creature away. She immediately went to her fallen lover, and healed his wounds. After Jasper's many questions, she revealed to be a priestess-perhaps the last one-of a lost god named Khepri. He was the god of Scarabs and on some level, a creation god. She explained her god's philosophy, or at least her version of it. Khepri believed that from the most foul and vile of waste, power and life can emerge.

Jasper was as enraptured with this lost religion as he was with its priestess. However, before she could finish her

tale, the ground beneath them collapsed. It had been weakened by the tunnelling zombies, and the two lovers toppled into an underground cavern. There, they found an ancient tomb that somehow still smelled of rot. They unearthed a sarcophagus, and inside was the corpse of a long-dead priest. Though clearly thousands of years old, the skin was still wet and writhing with burrowing insects.

Bahri felt the power of her god in that dark place, and with a sudden move, plunged her hand into the dead thing. When she removed her hand from the gore, she clutched an ancient scroll that had been sewed into the body. Jasper and Bahri recognized it as a spell of immense power, and began to make plans for their future.

Jasper and his bride sailed to Darkon, and began to search the streets of Martira Bay for the perfect place to set their schemes in motion. It was a few weeks later that they found a long-abandoned shop lost in Martira bay's winding alleys. However, it contained exactly what they needed. They found a hidden passage that led to a huge underground cave deep beneath the city. The two Khepi-worshippers bought the property that day, and Molon's Curiosities was born.

Activities

The Cult of Khepri is very small, consisting of Molon, Bahri and a few trusted friends who aid them in their works and research. They labour day after day to unearth the meaning of the scroll from Sebua. They've learned that it is but one of three scrolls, all of which are needed to complete the Ritual of Wretched Birth. Each scroll would seem to have its own dark power, but when read with the others, the Ritual will be complete. From what they've learned,

the great spell must be completed over a massive mound of decay. When the three scrolls are read simultaneously at sunrise, a monstrous Servitor of Khepri will emerge from the filth. The beast is said to be able to rid the world of the non-believers the faithful of Khepri will rule the earth.

To this end, the Cult of Khepri has achieved two major successes. First, they have assembled a massive pile of filth for the birthing of the Servitor. It consists mostly of dead bodies, murder victims of the cult. The chill of the caves and Bahri's spells have slowed their decay, but not actually halted it. The pile is already twelve feet in height, and the cultists intend to make it over three times that size, so that the Servitor will have that much more to feed upon.

The second major feat they've accomplished is the deciphering of one ritual on their scroll. Called the "Ritual of the Devourer", they have used it to create a powerful servant to their cause. Cast on a half-Akiri man, Koth, he was transformed into a strange monster with great power and unswerving loyalty to Bahri. Koth commits most of the Cult's murders, the targets of which come to Bahri in visions. Other than that, he guards their sacred mound and kills any who may interfere with their plans.

Currently, the Cult of Khepri continues their search for the other two scrolls. Using their finances from Jasper's past and stolen from victims, they are more than willing to hire adventurers to aid them in their search. However, most of the actual hunting is done by the remaining Cultists. Molon and Bahri remain in Matira Bay, leading their minions from a distance.

Members of Note

Jasper Molon (Cult Leader)-A handsome, commanding man in his fifties, Molon carries a constant air of mystery. His hair is black and silver, and kept in a ponytail. He is tall and strong, without appearing overly large. He leads the small cult with charisma and fanaticism, and promises of power sound assured when coming from him. While a devoted Khepri-worshiper, he still maintains a love of all Akiri culture.

His cane is an actual relic, a red walking stick bearing the head of a Scarab. He has become a priest of Khepri, though not of the same power as Bahri. He still wields skill in stealth and combat, as well as the mind of a well-traveled scholar. He speaks a dozen languages, and seems comfortable in almost any situation and with any group of people. However, he values his secrecy like gold. Molon intentionally avoids talking about his shop, and the very few visitors it gets are either gently hinted away, or end up adding to the Holy Mound. He will sell the odd object to someone, but only his fakes. Luckily, almost everything in his store is a fake. Still, Jasper Molon is a man well versed in staying several steps ahead of his enemies, and has absolute faith in his wife and his god.

Bahri (High Priestess of Khepri)-Though now in her early forties, Bahri is still quite beautiful. She is as tall as her husband, with long black hair worked into intricate braids. Her skin is dusky, and her body still strong and limber. She dresses in simple traveling garb when outside of her shrine, which isn't often. When on her holy ground, she wears loose robes and gold jewellery, all genuine antiques sacred to her faith. She is a powerful priestess, relying on spells when forced into combat. However, she

also wields an enchanted blade, a bronze curved sword.

While Khepri himself is a Neutral god, Bahri and her sect are clearly evil. Her domains are Death and Knowledge, with Sun as a bonus domain. Many of the cult's foes have tried to turn Bahri against her husband, but unlike most wicked folk, the two are truly and deeply in love. They are completely committed to each other, and each would die for the other if it came to it.

Koth (Khepri's Holy Warrior)- Koth is a small but powerfully built young man in his late teens. His arms are knotted muscle and he can move with blinding speed. He is very quiet, only speaking when spoken to by his masters. He was once a street urchin in Martira Bay, born of a sailor and an Akiri merchant's daughter. Abandoned to the streets, he grew strong quickly, but desperately longed to be accepted by

someone. Jasper Molon caught the young man trying to pick his pocket, and instantly recognized his mixed heritage. Taking Koth in, Molon introduced the boy to the faith of Khepri and to his lovely wife.

Koth instantly felt that he'd found his place. Bahri and Molon are quite fond of him, and he adores them blindly. When asked to submit himself to the Ritual of the Devourer, he gladly accepted. The spell, which could only be cast once, transformed the boy into a monster of great strength. Gaining inhuman strength, speed and healing powers, he relishes his new might. He isn't upset by the rest of the transformation. His head is now that of a man-sized Scarab Beetle, and his skin has taken on a chitinous form. He can also walk on walls, track by scent and eat virtually any substance.

Character Development

Grave Robber

Character Archetype

Most people see a dead body and cringe in disgust. The grave robber, however, rubs his hands in glee. A natural born scavenger, the grave robber is the ultimate pragmatist. Since the dead have no use for wealth, it makes no sense to allow treasures to remain in the cold hands of a carcass. Much better, reasons the grave robber, to strip corpses of all objects of value. It's this philosophy that lets a grave robber trim the fat from civilization and survive on the baubles that society threw away.

Grave robbers make excellent livings by scavenging the valuables buried with the dead. Many robbers are tomb-breakers; they are traveling rogues who break into crypts and strip the tomb-network for months before discretely fencing the goods. Other grave robbers are body snatchers, ghoulish creatures who unearth cadavers to sell the parts. Even undertakers are known to loot the bodies of the deceased just before burial. Indeed, the grave robber occupies a valuable, if reviled, role in the ecosystem.

The grave robber often appears to be a normal member of society, though they dress in shabby clothing often covered in dirt. Many grave robbers dress in black cloths, reminiscent of funeral garb. This allows them to come and go in graveyards, maintaining the illusion of being innocent mourners off to visit a grave. Grave robbers are infused with the sickly sweet sent of decay, marking them as pariahs. The grave robber is rarely seen without a

shovel, his most prized tool, or without a charm of some kind. The grave robber is a career criminal of the lowest order and can be found in the seediest sections of settlements. Though reviled by all, their lowly peers respect grave robbers for their steady prosperity and generosity at the tavern.

Background

Grave robbers come from a wide variety of backgrounds, though they all share certain traits. Grave robbers are possessed of pragmatism foreign to those born free of want. These bandits come from impoverished backgrounds, they were raised beneath the spectre of starvation and learned that sentimentality was a poor substitute for food. More often than not, the scavenging behaviour began at an early age. Country boys would poke dead animals, while urban waifs played on the bodies of plague victims. In a cruel world filled with disease and violence, dead bodies are a fact of life, no different than rocks or trees. The grave robber is desensitized to both death and scorn from the living.

Professional grave robbers learn their trade early in life. Those who are either unable or unwilling to take up an honest trade take this profession. The grave robber lives life on the edge, splitting his time between hair-raising raids on the grave and min numbing idleness. Grave robbers often take up petty vices to occupy their free time, so alcoholism and gambling addictions are common in these scavengers.

Personality

Grave robbers are a naturally selfish people; they are willing to do almost anything to support them without resorting to honest work. Indeed, grave robbers may wallow in filth but they remain prideful. They see honest work as below them, fit only for fools who are too sentimental to take the treasures buried in the earth. Indeed, grave robbers look down on anyone who doesn't share their practicality.

Naturally, the act of robbing graves has a warping effect on the personality. Grave robbers are completely insensitive to the sight, smell or touch of cadavers. They enjoy bragging about their ghoulish accomplishments and revel in the disgust of their audience. Grave robbers are macabre in the highest sense of the world; their contact with the dead has left them unable to comprehend the fear discomfort society has for the dead. Most grave robbers take this in stride, since they find this trepidation humorous they try to share that humour with others by making grizzly jests at every opportunity.

Psychology

Grave robbers are driven by more than just greed, for though they forsake honest work they still rely on their profession to validate themselves. Grave robbers think of themselves as special people, their insensitivity to death marks them as people chosen by fate to take advantage of the treasures in the grave. Like kings or priests, they are chosen for their role, and therefore are set apart from the rest of humanity.

Even still, a secret fear haunts every grave robber. So long as they rob bodies, they know that there is a chance that their corpse will one day be

ransacked. Grave robbers are paranoid about their own wealth, since they know that it will attract scavengers like themselves. They have a deep-seated compulsion to spend every coin and valuable they possess, to ensure that when they die they will be penniless. Very rare is the grave robber who isn't known for his excessiveness. Grave robbers spend every copper they earn on alcohol, gambling, drugs, or any other vice.

Though they brag of fearlessness, every grave robber is in terror of one dreaded thing; the undead. There is no greater fear in the heart of a grave robber than opening a grave, only to find the owner awake. Grave robbers carry a wide assortment of charms and wards and make themselves experts in undead lore.

Patterns

All grave robbers are criminals, naturally they hate exposure. Grave robbers flock to cities and other areas where they may live near a large stock of bodies. Grave robbers live amongst the dregs of society, associating with the lowliest of peoples in the dark corners of civilization. Grave robbers spend frequently, willing away their ill-gotten gains on vices of all kinds. They are well-recognized members of the criminal community and make excellent contacts with the underworld.

Grave robbers are best known for their most basic work, digging up individual graves and looting the bodies. However, grave robbers often form into groups to break into large tombs and quickly loot the complex before anyone discovers the incursion. Grave robbers know that their crimes carry the worst penalties society can threaten, so they rarely surrender to the law.

Role-playing

Grave robbers are marked by two major personality traits, selfishness and morbidity. Grave robbers look out for themselves first, and others never. Since they make their living by preying on others, they are not inclined to offer assistance to anyone. Grave robbers join groups only for the promise of riches, a motivation that should be emphasized. Next, grave robbers are morbid. After years of looting bodies they have become thoroughly desensitized to death. They find the societal discomfort with death very humorous, and they share that humour with those around them. Grave robbers are known to make ghoulish jokes, lewd comments, even playing with skulls and bones. Grave robbers love to see the look of disgust upon the faces of their friends.

As career criminals, grave robbers have a healthy distrust of authority figures. Grave robbers prefer to avoid “decent folk”, shunning the company of people with lawful leanings. These scavengers are also prideful, never missing an opportunity to mock superstitious or sentimental people. Priests and paladins are favoured targets for a grave robbers sharp tongue.

These rogues shun physical combat. They prefer to either let others do the work for them, or to use some form of trickery to achieve their goals. No self-respecting grave robber would ever engage in a fair fight. Like any good scavenger, this breed of rogue learns that if the enemy can put up a fight, its best to simply run away.

Grave robbers rarely make powers checks for desecrating a grave or tomb, since their twisted morals accommodate this ghoulish crime. After years of searching caskets and pulling rings off of bony fingers, Grave robbers become resilient to images of death. A grave robber should receive a +2 insight bonus into horror checks related to dead bodies. While grave robbers are resistant to horror, they are terrified of the dead themselves. Grave robbers should receive a –2 penalty to all fear checks related to creatures that are obviously undead. This penalty does not apply to undead who do not resemble humanoids, or dead creatures that still appear to be alive.

Class and Prestige Classes

The best class for a grave robber is rogue, since this class gives the robber the skills he needs to enter tombs and avoid the law. Grave robbers may also be of the expert class, becoming amateur scholars in the lore of the dead. Most other classes are inappropriate for grave robbers. The prestige class Crypt Raider is ideal for grave robbers since it gives them many abilities specialized to their needs.

Suggested Feats

The feat *Jaded* is very useful to grave robbers. Many grave robbers pick up the feat *Scent of the Grave* or *Unwholesome Ichors* from their exposure to rotting flesh. Many grave robbers learn *Warding Gesture* to protect them from the undead they fear.

Secrets and Sorcery

Order of the Cobra

For centuries the peoples of the West have looked upon the crumbling monuments of Egypt with amazement. Untold masses have basked in awe of the towering obelisks, colossal statues and the manmade mountains, the pyramids. The glory and grandeur of ancient Egypt hypnotises the world and entrances even the most advanced culture.

Yet the immortal fame of one civilization draws the envy of younger. Like a contemporary Alexander, the Emperor Napoleon brought an army of scholars and historians with him on campaign in Egypt, eventually uncovering the Rosetta stone and ultimately unlocking the mystery of hieroglyphs. With the Egyptian code broken, the outer world was finally able to understand Egyptian history, sparking interest around the globe. The demand for ancient artefacts exploded and continued to grow as the elite of infantile civilizations yearned to claim their own piece of Egypt.

As Egypt changed hands between the French, the British and the Ottomans, the trade in Egyptian antiques grew and grew. Like ravenous ghouls, searchers tore at the corpse of Egyptian culture, snatching artefacts to sell. Tomb doors were dynamited, statues decapitated and grave after grave was defiled. In the absence of gold and treasure, these new robbers stole whole bodies, selling the mummies if kings to foreign buyers.

Few cultures have ever placed a greater emphasis on the security of the dead as did Egypt. Yet in hideous irony, no culture's dead would suffer greater indignity. By 1890, little remains of

Ancient Egypt. There are few ruins unscarred by the greedy hand of thieves. Silently the spirits of the dead moan in agony, even as treasure hunters intensify the rape of their ancient culture. Even in this late age, there are those who hear the calls of pain. Like the great monuments of ancient Egypt, its culture is immortal. From the shadows these survivors have watched in horror as the civilization of their birth has been raped and robbed. Now they slowly emerge, to right the wrongs and avenge the desecrated. They are the Order of the Cobra, the last guardians of Egypt.

History

The Order of the Cobra is a new Qabal, with an ancient history. The whole story of the Order begins before the appearance of the Red Death itself. As the wizard Imhotep conducted a doomed experiment to sunder the barrier between life and death, his pupil Sadett gathered a band of mystics and adepts and fled into the deepest jungles of Africa. This band would latter become known as the Lost Kingdom, a nation hidden away from the world.

The Hidden Kingdom lived in obscurity, protected by powerful magics that isolated it from the world. For millennia the Lost Kingdom peered out from behind their magical barrier, watching in sorrow as the Red Death corrupted the world. While many of the people of the Hidden Kingdom abandoned the world of the forefathers, a small sect remained loyal to the nation of their ancestry. With heavy hearts this

sect watched as Egypt was conquered again and again, as its culture was crushed and assimilated by foreigners and as its people lost all connection with the ways as old. Forbidden by royal decree to interfere, the sect remained impotent to protect the land they knew as home.

By the beginning of the ninetieth century, the rulers of the Forbidden Kingdom decided to send out emissaries to form connections to the outside world. Amongst these emissaries were members of the Egyptian sect, who were curious to see their ancestral lands with their own eyes. To their horror, they discovered the rape of their native civilization and the desecration of holiest of holies. Confronted by the unadulterated impiety of Western Civilization, the members of the Egyptian sect dedicated themselves to repairing the damage.

Though sympathetic, the ruling class of the Hidden Kingdom forbade the Egyptian sect to interfere. Fearing discovery by the Red Death, the Hidden Kingdom turned its back on the plight of Egypt. For many decades the sect begged and pleaded, until finally, a compromise was arranged. Fifteen members of the Egyptian sect were by their peers and sent into the outside world. These candidates would be magically altered, with their memories partially erased. The fifteen would sacrifice all knowledge of the Hidden Kingdom, so that they might never be forced to divulge the existence of the untainted land. Furthermore, their magical powers were inhibited so that even the most thorough inspection would be unable to distinguish them from the tainted spell casters of Gothic Earth.

Free of all obligations to their people, the fifteen ventured out into the

cruel world. In the land of Egypt they gathered their followers, those natives who shared disgust in the abuse of their nation. From Egypt they spread, gaining followers from the disgruntled and disenfranchised peoples of Africa and beyond. Taking the name of the ancient symbol of Kings, this secret society became known to its members as the Order of the Cobra.

Activities

Activities of the Order are split between two goals, the liberation of Egypt and the recovery of Egyptian artefacts. The Order of the Cobra has infiltrated Egyptian culture on the highest and lowest levels. Amongst the intellectual elite, the Cobras have slipped their own agents. These men and women advocate Egypt's independence from the Ottomans and the Europeans, collecting circles of followers dedicated to restoring Egypt's grandeur. Though idealistic, these circles realise the necessity of discretion and confine their plotting to the secluded corners of Egyptian society.

Supporting these revolutionary societies is the growing cult of Egyptian mystics. These mystics are little more than fortune-tellers and philosophers, yet their true mission is to rekindle the worship of the Egyptian Gods. The cult of Isis is growing anew amongst the wives of wealthy businessmen, the flagship of the Order's cultic movement. Funds gleaned from these cults are channelled into underworld ventures, supporting narcotic sales, smuggling enterprises and racketeering. This criminal network is to be the seed that births the Order's army, which will one day be led against the foreign invaders.

Beyond Egypt's borders, the Order's second mission is undertaken.

The Order of the Cobra supports four major cells working in Europe, trying to collect the artefacts stolen from their homeland and return them. Unwitting agent of these cells track the appearance of Egyptian antiquities, meticulously cataloguing the location and condition of priceless artefacts. All the while, the leaders of the cells plot the theft of these treasures. Recovery teams are gathered and trained to commit burglary to retake artefacts and return them to Egypt.

Working alongside these cells are the more legitimate collectors employed to the Order of the Cobra. Known collectively as the Circle of Thoth, these collectors maintain antique businesses, using their profits to acquire items of Egyptian and return them to their homeland. Behind the Circle is the most secretive circle of the Order of the Cobra, the Avengers of Horus. These Avengers are assassins and saboteurs, employed to attack the owners of Egyptian relics, either forcing them into bankruptcy or killing them outright. In this way, the Circle of Thoth speedily finds ancient artefacts on the open market, sold off to pay debts or as part of an estate. The Avengers of Horus are also employed to strangle the trade of Egyptian artefacts, slaying the dealers and collectors who fund the rape of Egyptian culture.

Membership and Organization

The Order of the Cobra is divided into numerous levels and branches, reflecting the convoluted web of secrecy the Order maintains. The lowest level of membership is amongst the Cultic circles in Egypt, where the social elite of Egypt are used as unwitting pawns. Above these dupes are the mystics,

philosophers and frauds employed by the true priests of the Order, used to spread the worship of Egyptian gods. These clerics are tattooed with the image of a hooded cobra's head, painted in red. Most wear this mark on their shoulder, though some wear it on the palm on their hand.

These priests answer to the true members of the Order of the Cobra, the council of High priests. This council is made up of the direct descendants of the original fifteen members, with each high priest devoted to an Egyptian god, including Anubis, Amon Ra, Isis and Thoth.

The Circle of Thoth is an organization independent from the rest of the Order, recruited by the high priest of Thoth. These agents are completely unaware of their role in the Order, believing themselves as nothing more than socially conscious scholars working towards a common goal. Organization on this level is loose and democratic, with no particular leader.

The Avengers of Horus are a much more rigid organization. Though small in number, the Avengers are made up of professional thieves and assassins. Each cell is made up of half a dozen agents, led by a controller who in turn leads a dozen cells. These controllers report to high controllers, who in turn are beneath the council of the High Priests. Like the clerics, these controllers are tattooed with the red image of the cobra.

Resources

The Order of the Cobra possesses many varied resources. The cultic worship in Egypt draws large sums of money into the Order's coffers, as do the legitimate antique businesses run by the Circle of Thoth. As well, the criminal organizations funded by the Order of the

Cobra grants the qabal close underworld connections. Racketeering, gambling, bootlegging, smuggling and narcotic businesses contribute to the Order. Whatever the Order cannot buy or extort, it can steal. With the assistance of their priestly leaders, the Avengers of Horus are capable of astounding feats of burglary, placing most items of worth in their potential grasp.

For several years the Order has been building influence in the high social circles of Egypt. Through their pawns, the Order can The Order of the Cobra is well informed of military movements in their region, information that they sell or use for their own benefit. The Order has begun to build the foundations of a private army, consisting of children recruited from the street. The Order of the Cobra has taken to adopting the waifs they find on the streets of major settlements, turning them into the future warriors of their cause. Trained by mercenaries in contemporary weapons, these youngsters are fanatical soldiers in the army of the new Egypt.

Adventure Hooks

The Order of the Cobra has a significant presence in Egypt and in the lands beyond. Adventurers might run afoul the Order when an acquaintance of theirs acquires an Egyptian relic. Should their acquaintance be slain, he may have left his friends the relic in his estate, unleashing the Order of the Cobra upon the unwitting adventurers. In such a case, the party will find the Order to be a devious enemy. The agents of the Order of the Cobra may try to extort the item, or even resort to assassination attempts.

Characters who have made a living by selling Egyptian artefacts may very well attract the wrath of the Order. The Order of the Cobra is merciless when dealing with those who desecrate their culture. If captured, the offenders are interrogated to uncover all that they know, and then slain.

The Egyptian revolutionaries led by the Order are secretive; though even the best kept secrets can be leaked. Nations such as Britain or the Ottoman Empire may contact the characters and enlist them as spies to investigate the dissidents. While probing into the dissident organization, the investigators may very well uncover the true leaders of the movement.

Prince of the Nile

The Mummy of Tutankamen

Tutankamen

Male human fifth rank ancient dead, 6th level aristocrat: CR 11, SZ M humanoid; HD 6D12, HP 45; Inn +2; Spd 60 ft, fly 20 ft clumsy manoeuvrability; AC 25; Atk slam +12 (1d6+9, disease); SA disease: mummy rot, fear, spell-like abilities; SQ damage reduction 20/+3, immunities: fire and sonic, power is knowledge, rejuvenation, resistance 20: lightening, resistance to blows, stiff upper lip +2, vulnerability: cold turn resistance +5; AL LE; SV: Fort +2, Reflex +5, Will +13; Str 26, Dex 12, Con -, Int 14, Wiz 26, Cha 24.

Skills and Feats: bluff +17, concentration +5, diplomacy +15, gather information +13, innuendo +13, intimidate +11, leadership +15, listen +13, pilot: chariot +10, search +12, sense motive +18, speak languages 3, spot +5; Alertness, cleave, great cleave, lightening reflexes, power attack, skill focus: gather information, toughness.

Languages: Ancient Egyptian, English, French, Ancient Greek, German, Latin

Salient Abilities: alter form, curse of vengeance, command undead, weightless.

Spell Like abilities: Caster level 10th level Once per day: blur, control weather, light, searing light, flame strike, sunburst.

Background

Tutankamen was born the eldest son of Ankenaten. The young man was raised in a troubled household, for while

his mother wished to worship the traditional pantheon of Egypt, his father demanded that the royal family worship Aten, the monotheistic god of his creation. It was at this time in Egypt that the greater sun god Aten warred with the Egyptian pantheon for the faith of the Egyptian civilization. During this struggle, Ankenaten demolished the priesthood of Amen Ra and the other deities, replacing them with the clergy of Aten beneath himself. The conservative Egyptian civilization rejected this concept, though they remained under the Pharaohs command and were helpless to resist Ankenaten's orders.

While the heretical King stamped out Amen Ra's priests, the young Tutankamen fostered his faith. When Ankenaten died suddenly, Tutankamen arose and rebuilt the priesthood of Ra and the other gods. The populous of Egypt was overjoyed at the return of the old gods, though the new priesthood failed to command the same powers that the old priests were remembered to have possessed. In time the people came to accept the lack of magical power, they began to believe that the legends of old were no more than fairy tales.

In truth, the Red Death had planned these events since his arrival on Earth. The priests of Ra and the other gods had proven to be a terrible threat to the Red Death, so the dread entity had hidden his presence from them and allowed them to practice their art without interference. With the coming of Aten, the Red Death saw his opportunity. The entity corrupted the young Tutankamen, sending spirits of

the ancient dead to convince him to rekindle the religions of old. After Ankenaten had slain the true priests of Egypt, the Red Death used its power to mutate Ankenaten into a degenerate madman. With Aten's highest priest incurably insane and the Egyptians in a silent revolt, the sun god lost his power on Earth and was forced to turn his attention back to other planes of reality. During Ankenaten's rule, the Red Death had sought out the remaining cults of the old pantheon and sent its minions to devour them. Ankenaten himself had executed all of the true priests of the old religion, leaving only the menial labourers and the aristocrats whom joined the priesthood as a formality.

When Ankenaten died, his son allied with the Egyptian nobles and struck against the tiny priesthood of Aten, slaughtering the last true clerics of Gothic Earth. Tutankamen resurrected the old priesthood, though he was unable to find any of the priests that practiced their religion before the coming of Aten. The new priests of Egypt were all inexperienced youths, ignorant of the true power of a cleric. None of these new priests noticed that the Old Gods would not speak to them, nor did they realize that their magic was greatly retarded. The pantheon of Egypt had long since turned away from Gothic Earth, and while they granted a few spells to the faithful, they offered no direct guidance nor would they remove the magical interference, which they perceived to be more of Aten's doing.

Without knowing, the boy king had become the most valuable pawn in the Red Death's arsenal. In the absence of the Egyptian gods, the Red Death had eliminated the most powerful clerics on Earth. The boy king was only a youth of 18, but as pharaoh his connection to

Amen Ra gave him considerable magical abilities without cost. His life had been spent learning the art of nobility and in only a few years he had accomplished some skill in dealing the ambitious nobles who threatened to steal his power. However with his initial purpose completed, the Red Death feared that the Pharaoh would only hamper his further designs. Nonetheless, the dread entity suspected that he might need a powerful pawn later, so he manipulated several nobles into assassinating the young king and burying him in full glory in the safety of the Valley of the Kings. In the peace of the grave Tutankamen would rest peacefully, gathering strength as his mummified body absorbed positive energy, so that his old pawn would be in excellent condition when the time came for him to awake.

Current Sketch

Tutankamen's body slumbered until 1910, though his consciousness had been awakened long before that date. From his grave, the boy king watched in horror each time his nation was conquered and plundered by invaders. The cycle of conquest and destruction spun like a top while the old gods went forgotten, the monuments of the past crumbled and the sacred graves of kings were defiled. Helpless in his crypt, Tutankamen swore that he would avenge the lost divinity of Egypt and return the treasures of the pharaohs to their rightful resting places. Just as the Great War loomed over Gothic Earth, Tutankamen felt his withered body move and his desiccated heart begin to beat inside his hollow chest. The boy king used his physical might to escape his sarcophagus and emerged into the Valley of the Kings. It was at that exact same moment that a band of Egyptian tomb robbers

had entered the lesser tomb of an ancient priest of Anubis. Tutankamen slew the invaders with ease, and with their deaths awoke the mummy of the priest. Together, the king and his new servant mummified the robbers and created the first soldiers in an army of the dead.

Throughout the chaotic Great War, Tutankamen marshalled his forces. The pharaoh awoke the sleeping spirits of other ancient dead, raising an army of the dead. These mummies served him as his lieutenants, with each ancient dead gathering their own legion of deathless servitors. As the powers of Europe clashed against the Ottomans, Tutankamen worked his spell upon the Egyptian people. For years he fostered the growth of cults that preached Egyptian superiority to the downtrodden people. As the War dragged on and on, these cults converted more and more willing followers amongst those who were eager for peace and freedom from foreign rule. As the cultic worship spread, Tutankamen stretched his hand into the underworld. Through brutal assassination and intimidation, the pharaoh became ruler over the smuggling rings and bandits of the

desert. By the end of the Great War, in 1925, Tutankamen criminal empire extended well beyond the borders of his nation, stretching his influence throughout the African continent.

As Gothic Earth is consumed by the rising darkness, Tutankamen prepares to seize his kingdom. Though still Egypt remains a primarily Islamic nation, the cultic worship of Egyptian gods has gained significant strength. In the new age of chaos and decay, the people of Egypt reach desperately for a new icon, an icon that Tutankamen intends to supply. In the hidden boonies of Egypt Tutankamen has already founded new settlements under his rule. With the proceeds from his underworld empire the boy king has created an army of mercenaries, trained and equipped as well as any nation. Led by loyal members of the Egyptian cults, this army prepares to invade Egypt. At the same time, Tutankamen's servants manipulate pawns in the governing factions of Egypt, converting useful stooges to their cause and ensuring their rise to power. Steadily the time draws near when the ancient pharaoh will emerge from the shadows and claim his realm once more.

The Rising Dark

An Alternate Setting for Masque of the Red Death

Since the time of the Pharaohs, the Red Death has permeated Gothic Earth. Immortal, incorporeal and enigmatic, the true motivations of the dread entity have remained a mystery to arcane scholars. Yet by the twentieth century, it is clear that whatever the ultimate aim of the Red Death, it means to destroy civilization. For millennia the Red Death worked to destroy all knowledge of magic, both divine force derived from gods and arcane knowledge such as wizardry. The very rise of science that made civilization possible destroyed the magical knowledge that stood between the Red Death and its fell plans. By the dawning of the twentieth century, humanity has been completely disarmed against its eldritch powers, signalling the next step in the Red Death's plans. Now that civilization has served its purpose, it too must fall.

The Great War

In 1914, the civilized world marched heedlessly into the Great War, a quagmire of blood and mud that would pit human lives against the relentless might of machines. Woefully unaware, humanity had played into the grim clutches of a dread entity known only as the Red Death. As whole nations destroyed themselves on the battlefield, they worked the vile will of the Red Death, destroying civilization and weakening humanity against its evil influence.

Through its servants, the Red Death manipulated the leading minds of the battling empires to increase the

devastation. In late 1914 Kaiser Wilhelm appointed the renowned scientist Fritz Haber to his war ministry, who in turn sponsored the manufacture of new technological devices, such as chemical weapons, battle tanks and aircraft. In response, the British Empire appointed the famous Lord Kitchener as Field Marshal, ensuring that their own forces would pursue the war in the more honourable, traditional means, such as cavalry charges and battle formations. The resulting conflict between these two forces soaked Europe in human blood.

Despite the technical advantage of the Central Powers, the Allies possessed limitless human ammunition, which they expended in massive quantities. Careful manipulation by the minions of the Red Death maintained the balance between the powers, ensuring a long and brutal conflict. The Russian Communists ended the war in the East, while the xenophobic Americans shun the slaughter. Though the British dismantled much of the Ottoman Empire, Germany fomented rebellions in Ireland. All the while the wartime economy burns Europe's resources like a wildfire, creating a massive depression felt around the globe.

The war would drag on and on until 1922, when the economic disaster finally reached the front. Denied adequate rations and wages for nearly a year, soldiers from both sides desert en masse. The deserters aggregate into roving bands of robbers who despoil what little remains of Europe, even seizing isolated regions and enslaving civilians. The warring nations are forced

to agree to an armistice and end the war, though many of the robber bands elude capture and retain their own small spheres of influence.

The Twenties

The Rising Darkness campaign setting begins in the year 1924. Though the Great War has been over for five years, the entire world is still suffering from the wounds. Those nations who did not enter the war were devastated by economic collapse and by the frequent general strikes that crippled their industries. Though devastated by internal rebellions and multiple purges in government, the Russian communists sponsor socialist insurrections throughout the world, spreading chaos and unrest.

In the age of growing decline, the people of the world reach out for a new source of strength. Religious extremism takes root in North America, creating violent intolerance and a global crackdown on vice. Alcohol, prostitution and gambling are completely outlawed, though the decadent demands of society urge these industries underground. Organized crime thrives on prohibition, with gangs and rackets sprouting like weeds. Few businesses escape the predations of brutal racketeers; fewer still are the politicians who resist the seductive temptation of underworld bribes, or the harsh hand of blackmail.

In Europe the ghosts of the old war still haunt the survivors. The bandit deserters of the Great War maintain their iron grip on isolated regions in Eastern Europe, mocking the nation states they once served. While ponderous governments are fearful of renewed conflicts, the ordinary citizens of Europe cry out for action. Dynamic groups such

as communists and anarchists threaten the social order, giving rise to a reactionary movement, known as Fascism. Squads of veterans roam the urban jungle under the banner of political parties, extorting votes and attacking rival organizations wherever they meet.

Society in Decline

The Red Death exists, not as a physical entity, but as a dread intellect comprised of pure malicious mentality. As the foul force imposes itself upon Gothic Earth, it alters the minds and thoughts of the limited beings that populate the planet. The roaring twenties are an age of decadence and decline, of corruption and corpulence, of repression and rebellion. All across the globe, civilization exhibits a common series of disturbing trends.

Corruption: The foul stench of corruption permeates the halls of power in Gothic Earth, staining everyone who sits in office. The hand of organized crime and espionage infiltrates all levels of government, twisting public servants into pawns of shadowy forces. While mobsters bargain bribes for immunity to the law, foreign spies recruit naive dupes with the promise of fast cash and easy thrills. Absolute power corrupts absolutely on Gothic Earth, a vicious cycle endlessly repeats as ambitious individuals quickly gain power, descend into self-centred decadence, are destroyed by their own vice and are replaced.

In a world where authority is analogous to depravity, heroes will be villains and outlaws the last guardians of justice. Those who rail against the evil permeating society will find themselves attacked by the establishment, either by slander, subterfuge or even open arrest.

The laws of society will be twisted to defend the corrupt institutions that control society; justice itself is little more than an illusion to disguise the tyranny of the shadowy rulers of Gothic Earth.

Paranoia: As the world begins to deteriorate, the people of Gothic Earth are infected with a growing paranoia. Individuals lose trust in governments, organized religions and other social institutions. Citizens in the city rarely cooperate with the law, while rural civilians implement frontier justice without hesitation. The taverns and cafes of Gothic Earth buzz with rumours of conspiracies and clandestine affairs, as nation states blames one another for the decline of the world economy. Suspicion stains the lives of millions, for as murders and disappearances increase around the globe with every year, neighbour begins to suspect neighbour. Precious few people are so trusting as to help a complete stranger, making the world a cold, alien place.

Rebellion: In the aftermath of the disastrous Great War and the crippling economic depression that followed, the downtrodden masses of Gothic Earth are almost universally opposed to the institutions that rule them. The British Empire is plagued by Irish terrorism in retaliation for English domination, while North America is host to extremist religious groups building cultic colonies in the far corners of the wilderness. Russia itself is under permanent martial law while the Bolshevik government frantically quashes all signs of rebellion, even as it ferments socialist uprisings and general strikes abroad. In France, Germany, Italy and Eastern Europe, new dynamic political groups battle in the streets for supremacy, while tired old

regimes form coalition after coalition in pathetic attempts to end the chaos.

Fatal Attraction: With each passing day more unsuspecting souls become embroiled in the new dynamism. Charismatic fringe leaders preach on street corners, offering their followers an escape from the age of decline into which their world has fallen. These leaders are more than human, for they are living icons, invested with the power of the hopes and dreams of their followers. Nearly all of the denizens of Gothic Earth have attached themselves to one leader or another, either a politician, a military strongman, a preacher, philosopher or some other charismatic individual.

Though these figures embody the ideals of society, they also personify its secret flaws. Ambition, avarice, hatred, hypocrisy and tyranny lie just beneath the surface, a secret poison infecting the masses that clamour to their dynamic idol. As time passes the people unwittingly spread the corruption in their leaders to all corners of society, destroying the very world that those icons claimed to save. This fatal attraction is evident in all society, and though the majority of Gothic Earth may rail against the growing fanaticism the influence of these mighty iconoclasts reaches to all corners of civilization. No land remains untouched by these demagogues; there is no escape from the tide of extremism that threatens to erode civilization.

The Corrupted Earth

As the Red Death imposes its essence upon the Earth, the physical laws of reality begin to twist and warp. The psychic emanations of the dread entity cause a very real distortion throughout the earth, culminating in

particular area of the planet. Within these geographic areas the known laws of physics are skewed, magic is hampered and nature itself is corrupted. No corner of the planet is untouched by the Red Death, though neither is all the Earth equally corrupted. There are five distinct levels of corruption in Gothic Earth, ranging from the nearly uncorrupted land, to areas completely infused with the vile essence of the Red Death.

Pure: Precious few corners of Gothic Earth are untouched by the Red Death, yet even in its conquest of the planet the Dread Entity has been unable to discover a few hidden nooks. Lands such as the Hidden Kingdom in Africa, the hallowed groves of the Circle of Nine, or the lost plateau of Shangri-La remain pristine places, uncorrupted by the foul power that permeates the Earth. Within these sanctuaries magic flourishes, just as it does in other worlds in the multiverse. The laws of science and nature function normally and magical creatures escape the corrupting influence of evil.

Tainted: Nearly all the earth exists in this stage of corruption. The Red Death has spread its foul roots into the earth, twisting nature to its malign will. In a tainted land, the Red Death's influence is small but noticeable. Technological devices are less reliable than theory would dictate, as environmental effects and ill luck plague mechanisms and electronics. Tainted areas are permeated by the Red Death's omnipresence. In such a space characters must make powers checks to avoid attracting the Red Death's attention to evil acts or the casting of a spell. Furthermore, the Red Death may enact curses laid in such an area.

Haunted: A haunted area is a location infused with negative psychic energy. Unlike ethereal resonance, a haunted area is formed, not by the impressions left by the living that once resided there, but by the thoughts and perceptions of those who reside near to the area. The dark nooks and corners of civilization become sinkholes for feelings of fear and dread, slowly transforming these otherwise innocent locations into truly frightening places. A haunted area is formed whenever a sizable number of people share a dread of that locality.

Most haunted areas are abandoned buildings, dark forests. The haunted area slowly twists in appearance to fit its status, trees and plants grow gnarled and twisted, buildings glare with window-eyes, and shadows seem to cling to every surface. Animals who dwell within a haunted area take on unusual behavior, darting back and forth on the edge of vision, staring out at visitors who pass by, and secretly shadowing anyone who enters their realm. Weather conditions fluctuate within these areas; dark clouds, fog banks and thunderstorms often collect over these locations.

The collective feeling of fear and dread infect the minds of all who enter a haunted area. Within a haunted area all fear, horror and madness checks suffer a -1 profane penalty. The presence of the Red Death is strong in a haunted realm; all powers checks are increased by +1% and turning checks suffer a -1 profane penalty.

Dark Realm: While a Haunted area is created by the negative feelings of outsiders, a Dark Realm is corrupted from within. Like a truly massive body, evil beings warp the psychic world around them, creating a sinkhole that ever draws malign energy towards them,

trapping it in the material world. When a truly evil creature resides in a given place for a sizable period that local retains the taint of evil. The psychic emanations of non-evil beings disrupt dark realms, so only isolated locations are transformed.

A dark realm is a truly twisted place where the laws of nature and science are bent to the demented will of the vile creature that dwells within. Intruders find themselves under attack from the land itself, as if it were an immune system attempting to repel and invading disease. Flora growing in a dark realm are warped and gnarled, often forming shapes that resemble grasping claws or hideous faces. Brambles, rocks and roots poke through the cold earth, tripping careless wanderers. Animals behave strangely in these areas, predators may flock to a dark realm, docile creatures become aggressive, or fauna may shun the accursed place entirely. Weather patterns seem to conspire against intruders; dark clouds and storms cling to the area, as does mist and fog. Buildings loom menacingly over any who would try to enter, the laws of perspective themselves may even bend to create strange and inexplicable optical illusions. Straight paths are revealed to be twisted, level floors appear to slant and hallways seem to stretch out of proportion.

Skills such as animal empathy, climb, handle animal, listen, navigation, ride, search, spot, swim and survival suffer a -1 circumstantial penalty. Creatures who make their home within a dark realm are accustomed to the unusual conditions, gaining a +1 circumstantial bonus to the skills hide, listen, move silently, search and spot. The taint of evil is powerful within a dark realm. Turning checks and saves

against fear, horror and madness suffer a -2 penalty. As well, the presence of the Red Death is unusually strong, increasing power checks by 4%.

Finally, within a dark realm the laws of science are bent. Electrical devices short-circuit, mechanical gears seize up, vehicles malfunction, fuels burn unevenly, radios belch out static; generally, machines do not work as they should. In a dark realm any attempt to use or repair a complex device, such as an automobile or radio, suffer a -2 circumstantial penalty.

Domain of Dread: Similar to a dark realm, the warp surrounding an evil creature creates a domain of dread. However, while a dark realm is created unconsciously, a domain is the deliberate creation of the Red Death. The Red Death infuses an individual with dark powers and grants them a realm of their own. Though this “lord” may leave the domain, they are compelled to return to their domain. Domains are formed around the usual haunts of the lord. A werewolf’s forest, a ghost’s home, or a vampire’s catacombs are common examples of a domain.

The same warping effects of a dark realm effect a domain of dread, though they are even more severe. Skills such as animal empathy, climb, handle animal, listen, navigation, ride, search, spot, swim and survival suffer a -2 circumstantial penalty. The lord of these domains are accustomed to the unusual conditions, gaining a +2 circumstantial bonus to the skills hide, listen, move silently, search and spot. Turning checks and saves against fear, horror and madness suffer a -4 penalty. As well, the presence of the Red Death is unusually strong, increasing power checks by 8%. Any attempt by a good character within a domain to use or

repair a complex device, such as an automobile or radio, suffers a -4 circumstantial penalty.

Within his or her domain, a lord gains dark powers. Lords are immune to turning, enchantment and fear effects in their own domains. Many lords gain abilities to assist them in their service to the Red Death. For example, a werewolf in his forests may gain the ability to cause fear with a howl, a ghost might be able to seal off doors and windows in its house, or a vampire may be able to prevent coagulation, and increase his blood drain, within his tomb.

Last Hope

By the twenties, the Red Death's machinations near fruition. Civilization has begun to collapse into depravity and violence and humanity teeters on the brink of a new dark age. Yet while dark things stalk the night, so to do brave heroes. Amidst the jaded masses are singular individuals who stand against the corruption and injustice that plagues society. Even in this dark hour, the dread entity is neither all knowing nor all-powerful. With bravery, cunning and luck, a number of heroes may just turn the tide and save mankind from the vile clutches of the Red Death.

Credits

Contributors

Jared Jenkins aka Hengis the Hammered hengis80@hotmail.com.

Author of Face Value. I am just a guy that loves RPG games and stories. I have been an avid Warhammer fan since age 13, and fancy myself to be a well above average painter of gaming miniatures. Oddly enough though, my travels have never led me across playing any D&D games. I have read several novels from Salvatore, and others, until I recently stumbled across the Ravenloft series. I simply couldn't put it down, and purchased 3 more novels besides "I, Strahd". Vampires have always intrigued me, plaguing me with nightmares since I was a boy. I hate them...but find myself constantly seeking movies, and books about them. Oh, the many sleepless nights when playing Nintendo's "Castlevania" in your underwear at 3am in the morning...scary isn't it? I plan on remaining a faithful contributor to QtR, and so should the rest of its appreciative readers... "Many hands make the work load light".

Conrad Clark, aka Chaos Nomad Dyazion1@aol.com. Author of The Reapers of Ashkazeer. An avid philosophy enthusiast, Conrad tends to enjoy spending time in bars, torpedo-fishing inebriated punters, often sending them over the edge and into a perpetual spiral of madness –and yes, he made the power checks... Areas of interest are: the Philosophy of Mind, specifically Personal Identity; the Philosophy of Religion; Modernism; and, The Gothic.

He first became interested in Ravenloft during the Red Box era. His favourite authors include Poe, and Tolkien.

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Creator of Sephren's Pyramid. Born in 1983, Moscow, Russia. Student of Moscow Institute of Radio, Electronics and Automatics (MIREA). Been playing D&D since approximately 1996-97, entered the mists in 1998. Enjoy gothic fiction, movies... and jungle music. Favourite writers: J.R.R. Tolkien, H.P. Lovecraft, B. Stoker, and Ed Greenwood (yes, I play Forgotten Realms too).

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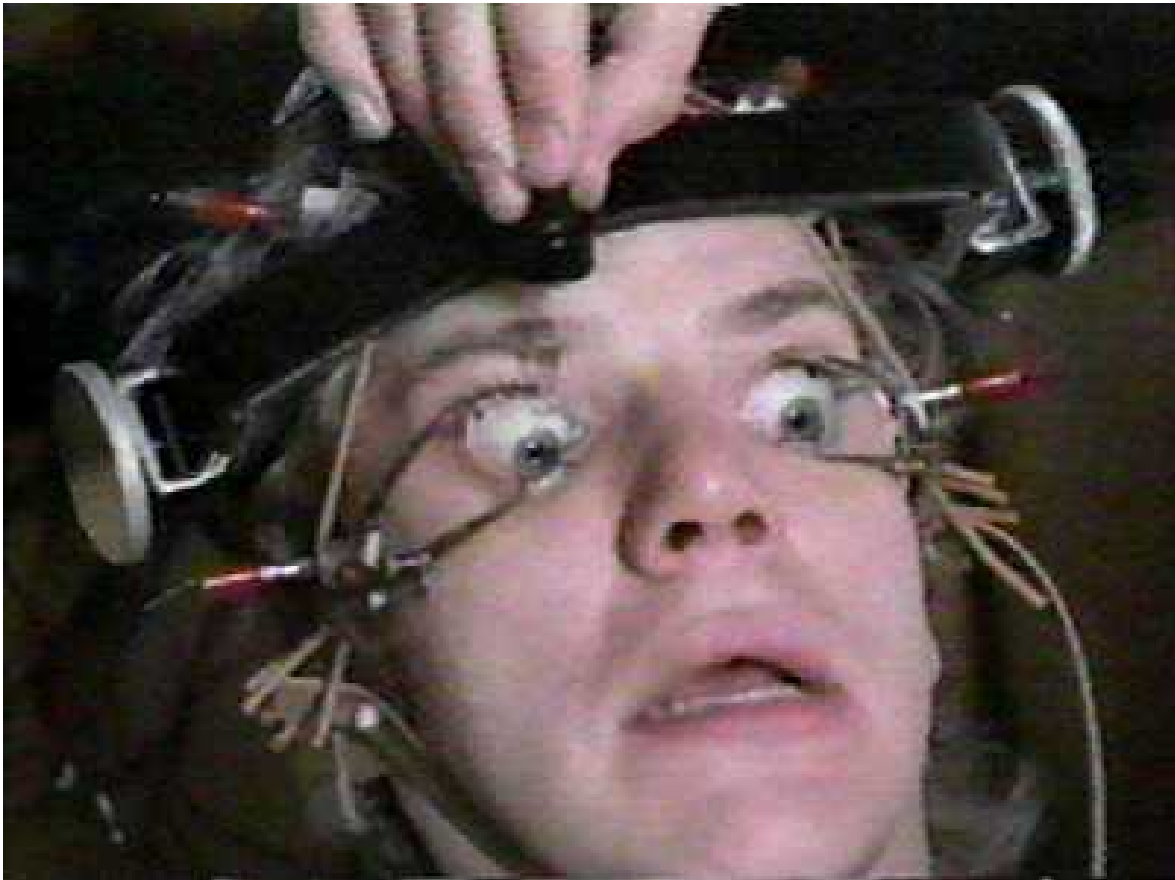
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Coming Soon!

Quoth the Raven Presents



Nightmares