

a DOZEN DESERT ENCOUNTERS

BY PHILIP REED

Encounters are the backbone of any adventure. It is a series of encounters, often connected by threads, that come together to form a complete adventure. For those GMs who wish to construct their own adventures, the encounters that follow may serve as either distractions from the larger adventure or the inspiration for a series of GM-crafted encounters of which one of these twelve encounters is only a launch pad.

One way in which to make the creation of an adventure much, much easier is to select a harsh environment that brings with it its own hazards and established expectations. Personally, I am a fan of setting adventures in arctic environments; the cold snow and blowing winds make for a setting that allows for more sneak attacks, higher chances of getting lost (and, of course, stumbling across forgotten dungeons), as well as a selection of entertaining monsters.

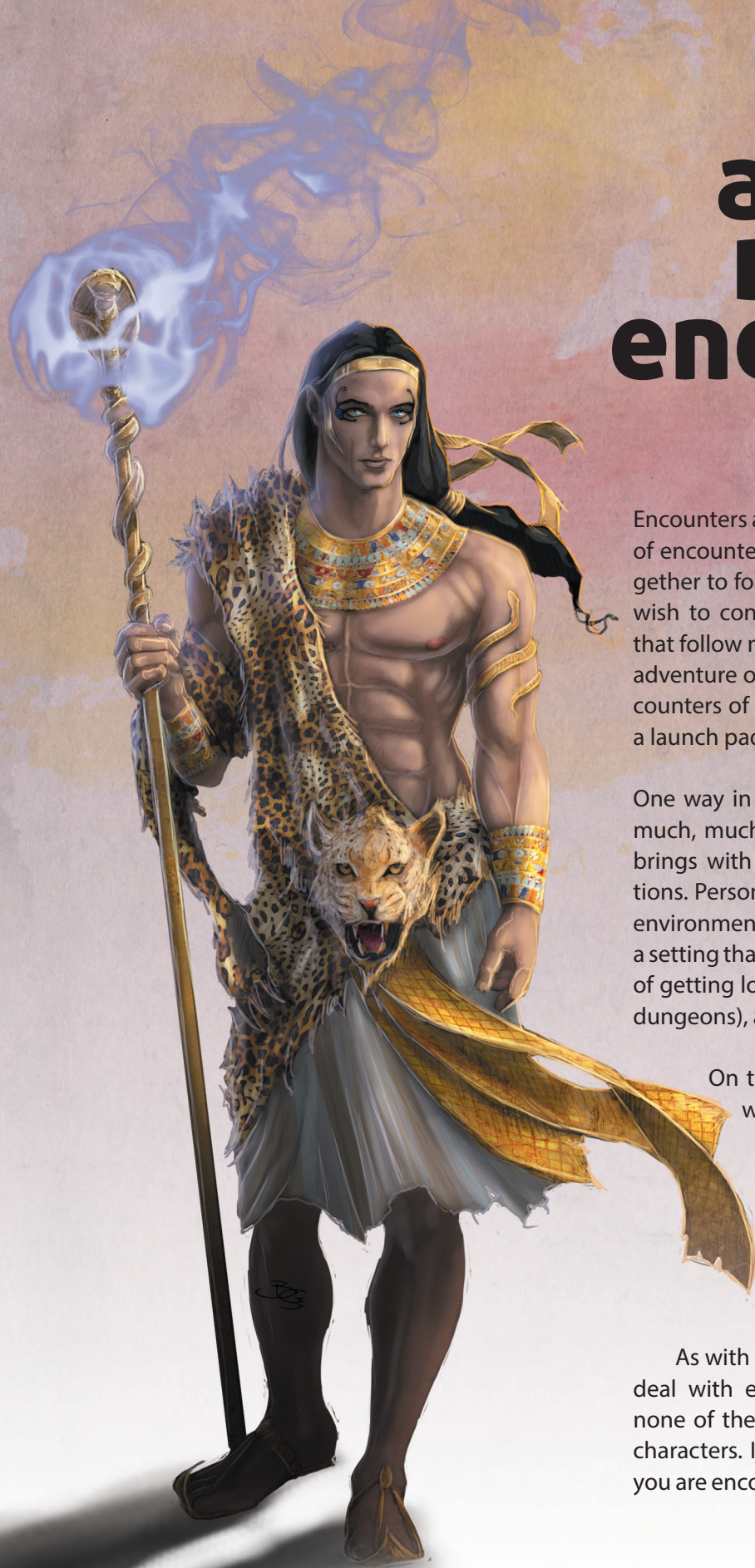
On the other side of that hazardous climate coin, we find the deserts . . . which also allow for blowing sands to hide secret locations and conceal the movements of enemies. It is the deserts of fantasy worlds for which this PDF has been created . . . though I now know that I certainly must create a collection of arctic encounters one of these days.

As with the other entries in the **A Dozen . . .** series that deal with encounters, I've provided the broad strokes; none of the twelve encounters include detailed maps or characters. Instead, each page provides an overview that you are encouraged to adapt, expand, and make your own.

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Bao Grefenstein



anatomy of an encounter

1. A title, to help set the mood.
2. An opening block of text that may be used as read aloud text when using the encounter during your game session. Or, if you prefer, text that you will rework to better suit your personal style.
3. The encounter description, which is freeform and very open to interpretation. My goal with each and every encounter described within these pages is to provide you, the GM, with a fanciful and unusual encounter to toss at the party when you wish to shake up their world. Most of these encounters are useful only a single time and should not be repeated.
4. Each encounter includes a single illustration to help set the mood.

1 The Lamia SORCERESS

Although she is a beautiful woman from the waist up, your attention is drawn to the creature's lower half, which resembles the body of a powerful lion. Lamias are rare in this part of the desert; what could this one want from you and your friends?

Late at night, after the PCs have made camp and settled in for the evening, their rest is disturbed by the approach of a towering, majestic lamia who calls out to the camp from a distance. The woman makes certain that the party is aware of her presence before she continues into the light of their fire.

"Hi," she says to them. "I am Jasmit Sumal, sorceress and a traveling merchant. I am in need of your help. My companions have fallen into a nearby tomb and try as I might, I am unable to free them. I was heading to town to seek help when I noticed your fire. Will you help rescue my friends?"

Sumal explains that her group were walking across the desert before sunset when the sands gave way and her friends crashed through the roof of a buried tomb. She managed to escape, and she tried using magic and ropes to aid them, but she ultimately determined that she would need the help of others to pull them from the sand-covered chamber.

The PCs may pass on the opportunity, telling Sumal that they have plans and do not have time to assist her. She thanks them for their time and continues the long walk to the nearest town.

True heroes, though, will choose to aid the woman and she thanks them for their help.

"It's only a few miles," she tells the party as she guides them to the site. When they get there, they find a sandpit on a large dune, the sands flowing steadily into the lost tomb that has been buried for an unknown number of centuries. Calling out to her friends, Sumal is distressed when there is no response.

What has happened to the lamia's friends? Can the PCs help the woman to find them, or are they too late?

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USING THE ENCOUNTERS

The important thing to remember about all of the encounters that follow is that they are not fleshed out, complete adventure locations and events. Every single encounter includes just enough information to trigger your own imagination; it is my wish that as you read through these encounters, you find yourself overwhelmed with ideas of your own. Each one is a snapshot stolen from my own imagination . . . and now we need for you to take these fragments and transform them into scenes that your players will never forget.

For additional inspiration when taking the encounter ideas that follow and making them your own, I highly recommend grabbing a scrap of paper or a journal and writing down every idea that comes to mind as you read the words I've provided.

Then, once you've got all of your thoughts in place, grab a 3 x 5 index card – or open a note file on your phone or tablet – and string concepts together one piece at a time to form a sequence of events that take my ideas and, with work, make them your own.

For example, in the encounter shown above, I have presented the gamemaster with a roleplaying encounter between the player characters and a lamia. The woman's friends have fallen into a tomb, and she asks the PCs to help rescue them. When the party gets to the site, the others are gone . . . but were there ever any "friends" to even rescue? How you, the GM, interpret the situation will guide the action. If there were friends, the heroes will need to explore a dungeon. But, just maybe, there were no friends and this is a trap set by the lamia.

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a masked WARRIOR FROM THE DEEP DESERT

A mask hiding his identity, the warrior raises his shield arm and unleashes arcane lightning the instant that he sees you and your companions. You dodge the initial attack, but it is clear that this man means you harm. Ready your weapons, adventurers, and prepare for battle!

The attacker can be anyone the GM chooses from the party's past. A merchant who feels that he was wronged, or an innkeeper they failed to properly tip, the exact nature of the prior relationship is unimportant save that the NPC was mistreated in some way. (The mistreatment can even be a lie the NPC tells himself.)

The NPC recently acquired a magic mask, a cursed item, that manipulates the wearer's mind and makes any perceived slight against the wearer into something far more twisted and terrible . . . in his mind. The cursed mask causes an insanity that leads to an uncontrollable anger. The wizard who created the mask long ago had only a single goal: inflict chaos and destruction on the world.

The wronged party has now tracked down the heroes and plans to exact his revenge. The mask grants the wearer the ability to cast offensive arcane spells as a mid-level caster; the exact spells should be chosen by the GM with a focus on those spells that the heroes cannot easily shrug off.

Will the party fight the stranger to the death, or will they manage to uncover the masked attacker's identity? Unless they can remove the mask from their attacker, he will keep coming after them until either he dies or they die. The curse is strong and difficult to break.



CLERIC FROM THE STARS

As the party wakes in the desert after an uneventful night, their eyes are drawn to the rising sun and the unmistakable silhouette of an approaching man. Shielding their eyes from the blinding desert sun, they can see that their guest is dressed in the garments of a cleric of the Goddess of Cosmic Justice.

For centuries, the people of the desert have told stories of Nandin Indrapramati, the traveler from distant stars who is said to wander the sands. Every story of meeting Nandin starts the same way: *“At dawn, we met a stranger who approached as if departing the rising sun.”*

Nandin Indrapramati is a minor avatar of the Goddess of Cosmic Justice and not a true being in his own right. The Goddess sends this form to test those who have perhaps strayed from righteousness, and she often selects adventurers to put through the specific, strange test.

Any members of the party who were born and raised in the desert may have heard of Nandin Indrapramati. A successful Knowledge check (difficulty set by the GM) is required to be aware of the test of Nandin Indrapramati and to recognize this encounter as one of those tests. Failure to succeed in this check will mean that the PCs face the encounter with no understanding of what they are going through.

The Test of the Goddess

Nandin calls out to the party, asking if they perhaps have food and water that they can share with a stranger. The man tells them that he cannot pay coin for their generosity, but he does have a gift for them if they will share their morning meal with him.


If the heroes are generous and immediately offer to share with the man, he thanks them for their kindness and joins them. Nandin offers information that may aid them in their journey (the GM should share some small detail about their destination, such as “the key to the second door is in the urn at the foot of the steps” or “the

woman at the Sinking Sun tavern is well-informed and knows many secrets”). Then, after the meal, he thanks the party and blesses them; for the remainder of the day, each hero receives a +1 luck bonus to any die rolls.

If the group hesitates, but does share, Nandin thanks them after the meal and then tells them of a minor danger that is in their path, such as a quicksand trap or that the desert winds will be particularly brutal this day.

If the party refuses to aid the man, they have failed the test. He thanks them and leaves, but not before secretly cursing the group; each PC will suffer a -1 penalty to all die rolls from now until the sun sets.





THE QUEEN OF THE BATS

Riding across the desert at night, the party is surprised by a cloud of screeching, angry bats that fly low enough to be a threat. Swinging their weapons and holding up shields to protect themselves from the swarm, the heroes are so focused on the bats that they fail to notice the stranger who follows the large cloud of bats.

The swarm of bats attack the heroes, biting at the party members and behaving very much unlike natural bats. The cloud is under the command of Kit Samira, an evil sorceress who uses a ring of bat control to direct the creatures to attack her enemies. Roughly half of the bats are an illusion that is projected by the ring; the combination of real and illusory bats forces a -3 penalty on any attack against the swarm. The illusion can be disbelieved, which will eliminate the attack penalty.

Samira is protecting her home from a perceived threat and will only halt the assault if the party can convince her that they mean her no harm (or if it turns out that the group is too powerful for her, in which case she will resort to trickery and try to convince them the attack was a mistake on her part and that she is sorry).

Once they engage her in conversation, Samira explains that she lives in a cave that she found several years ago. The woman is talkative if given the chance and, so

long as the adventurers promise that they mean her no harm, she is willing to shelter them for a day or two. Can the party overcome their aversion to evil to spend time with the woman in her cavernous home?

Of course, Samira has no plan to allow the heroes to leave without paying some sort of price for straying too close to her home. If the PCs do find themselves invited to her cave, they will want to be wary and keep an eye on the sorceress at all times. Samira's true plan – once she realizes that she cannot defeat the adventurers in combat – is to lure the party into her home where she will murder them in their sleep.

If the adventurers defeat the sorceress – who fights with both her swarm of bats and several offensive spells – they'll get the chance to loot her home where they'll find healing potions, a few spellbooks that she has collected over the years, and very little in the way of gold.

mage of the sands

While crossing the desert, far from the towns and villages that ring the sands, the party meets a lone wanderer, a mage adventurer who travels the desert in search of treasures and arcane secrets. The man works alone, preferring to trust in his magic over placing his trust in others.



For many years, the mage Farhan Al-Fath has traveled the desert, criss-crossing the wastes as he journeys from town to village to city, seeking out the ruined tombs, castles, and abandoned settlements where he may find riches that have been undisturbed and largely forgotten for centuries.

Al-Fath has learned to be distrustful of strangers, and readies his spear when he meets the party in the desert. The man is kind, but cautious. If the PCs treat him with respect and make no move to attack, he will share with them what little knowledge he may have learned in his travels.

Al-Fath is currently looking for any sign of a merchant caravan that was expected in the village of Lahak several weeks ago. *"The merchants were last spotted leaving Sabashahr, their wagons loaded with goods and their guards rested and well-armed,"* Al-Fath says, *"but they have since vanished as if the desert swallowed the lot of them."*

Though he prefers to work alone, Al-Fath offers to split the reward that the villagers have offered if the PCs will help him locate the missing caravan. He has been searching the desert for days without luck and, though he hates to admit it, has determined that extra eyes would help to track down the missing merchants.

The caravan was attacked by raiders, humans who prey on travelers who cross the desert, and the party will find signs of a struggle as well as a few bodies. Though the sands have shifted since the incident, a skilled tracker should be able to follow the trail to the bandit's fortress: a tower that was abandoned many years ago and has since fallen into disrepair. The tower is guarded by many bandits.

a CURSED THIEF

Before the incident, Sara Haghshenas was an unknown thief who did all she could to remain out of the eyes of the law.

When in town, a local wizard sends word to the heroes that he wishes to meet with them. To show that he is serious, the man instructs his hireling – Dietmar Hass, a halfling warrior – to approach the party at a tavern and offer each of them a single small emerald (worth 2d10+10 gold/each) if they will agree to a meeting with the wizard.

The half-orc wizard, Corneel Dollen, lives in a rented room not far from the tavern where he spends most of his time reading palms, identifying magic items, and selling scrolls and potions to those who know of his services and have the coins to pay him. The man is mostly content to live in peace and anonymity, choosing to work only with those who have heard – from a friend of a friend – of the wizard's location. He pays his landlord extra for the use of a sitting room on the first floor of the three-story home.

"Thank you for your time," Dollen says to the party after they are ushered into the sitting room by his hireling. "I am not one to often ask for the services of those I have not met, but the fact that you are strangers to me – as well as to this town – is actually a benefit at this time. I have been robbed, recently, by a woman by the name of Sara Haghshenas. She took from me two rings of great power that I wish to have back in my collection."

Corneel Dollen describes the rings (select any two low-level magic rings from your preferred game system)



and then continues. *"The woman should be easy to find, because she triggered one of my traps as she sought to escape with the rings. You will want to look for a feline-faced woman who looks as beastly as she does human. The transformation is permanent and the curse cannot be undone,"* he holds up an amulet, *"except by he who wears this unusual device."*

"Find the woman," Dollen says, "and tell her that if she will return my possessions, then I shall undo the curse. If she refuses, slay her and take the rings from her body. Or not. I care not how you get them, so long as you retrieve the two rings and deliver them to me. Do so, and I shall give each of you one potion of your choice from my supply. What say you? Will you undertake this assignment?"



THE ACCUSATION

On the outskirts of the city, after a long journey across the desert, your hope of a quiet evening of rest is shattered when a stranger points and begins yelling for the guards. "Intruders," she shouts from the shallow waters of the river. "Invaders from beyond! Stop them! Stop them before they kill us all!"

The woman is xenophobic and acts this way whenever she spots strangers near the city. Her home, a room in a palatial estate that sits on the edge of the city, affords her the chance to see many strangers each day, and guards who may hear her cries have learned to ignore her demands for action.

If the party tries to approach and speak with the woman, she yells in terror and runs to the estate to seek the safety of her room. She refuses to speak with the PCs and, if cornered, lashes out violently and tries to escape. It is best if the heroes let the woman go.

So long as they do not harm the stranger, the guards of the estate will leave the heroes alone. The armed guards will chat with the adventurers, explaining that the woman's family was killed by invaders several years

ago and that she has never learned to trust strangers. "Please forgive her," the guards explain, "and put her out of your mind. There's no reason to worry about her or any of the people of the city. So long as you obey the laws and do not cause trouble," the guard says, "and you are not vagabonds, you're welcome to stay in our city."

Unfortunately for the heroes, the woman is not quite willing to let their presence go unpunished. The woman has grown tired of stranger after stranger "invading" her city and has decided that it is time to take action.

She hires a few young thugs and instructs them to kill the intruders and dump their bodies outside of the city. At some point during their time in the city, the PCs will have to deal with a random attack by 3d4 thugs who are quick to run if the party proves tougher than expected.

an arcane summons

A ghostly form rises from the desert sands, appearing – at first – to be nothing more than a mirage brought on by heat and exhaustion. “Heroes. I bring word from the Princess Benkaei Maibe of the Fortress of Snakes. She asks that you visit her at once so that she may ask of you an important favor.”

The Fortress of Snakes is less than a day’s ride away when the party is approached by the arcane messenger. The entity is a projection, an illusion broadcast by a wizardess who lives in the fortress. She has enough power to allow for only a moment of communication and, if pressed by the PCs, she will tell them that the princess will pay them for their services if they will meet with her and agree to complete a simple task.

Once they reach the fortress, the PCs are treated like royalty. The people of the fortress – it was once a military establishment, but is now a city and home to the princess and a few hundred followers – go out of their way to make the heroes comfortable and happy. Any wounded characters are healed by the local clerics, armorers and craftsmen offer to make any necessary repairs at no charge, and all food and board is at no charge.

When the heroes are finally summoned to meet the Princess Benkaei Maibe, they are ushered into a grand chamber where they are met by the wizardess . . . and the frozen body of a young woman. The princess was attacked by enemies of the fortress, and her body was blasted with a ray of ice that has left her as the PCs now see her.

The wizardess offers to pay each hero 50 gold coins if they will retrieve the wand of salvation from a nearby dungeon. The wand, they are told, has only a single charge remaining, and the wizardess is certain that it carries the magic necessary to free the princess from this frozen state. The woman increases the offer to 100 gold for each member of the party if they appear to hesitate.



THE DESERT ASSASSIN

Though they are rarely encountered, members of the guild of assassins have been known to operate in the deserts of the world. The murderers prefer to stay in the shadows, out of sight, so it's a strange day when you encounter an assassin who isn't hiding his true self from the world.

Borce Klyashev is far, far from his home and has only a single desire: to complete his assignment so that he may return to the city and get out of this blazing, terrible desert. The man has decided that he is so far from his home and fellow guild members that there is no need to hide his identity. When he spotted the party in a small tavern in one of the desert's towns, he decided that hiring help would be the best way to complete his assignment quickly.

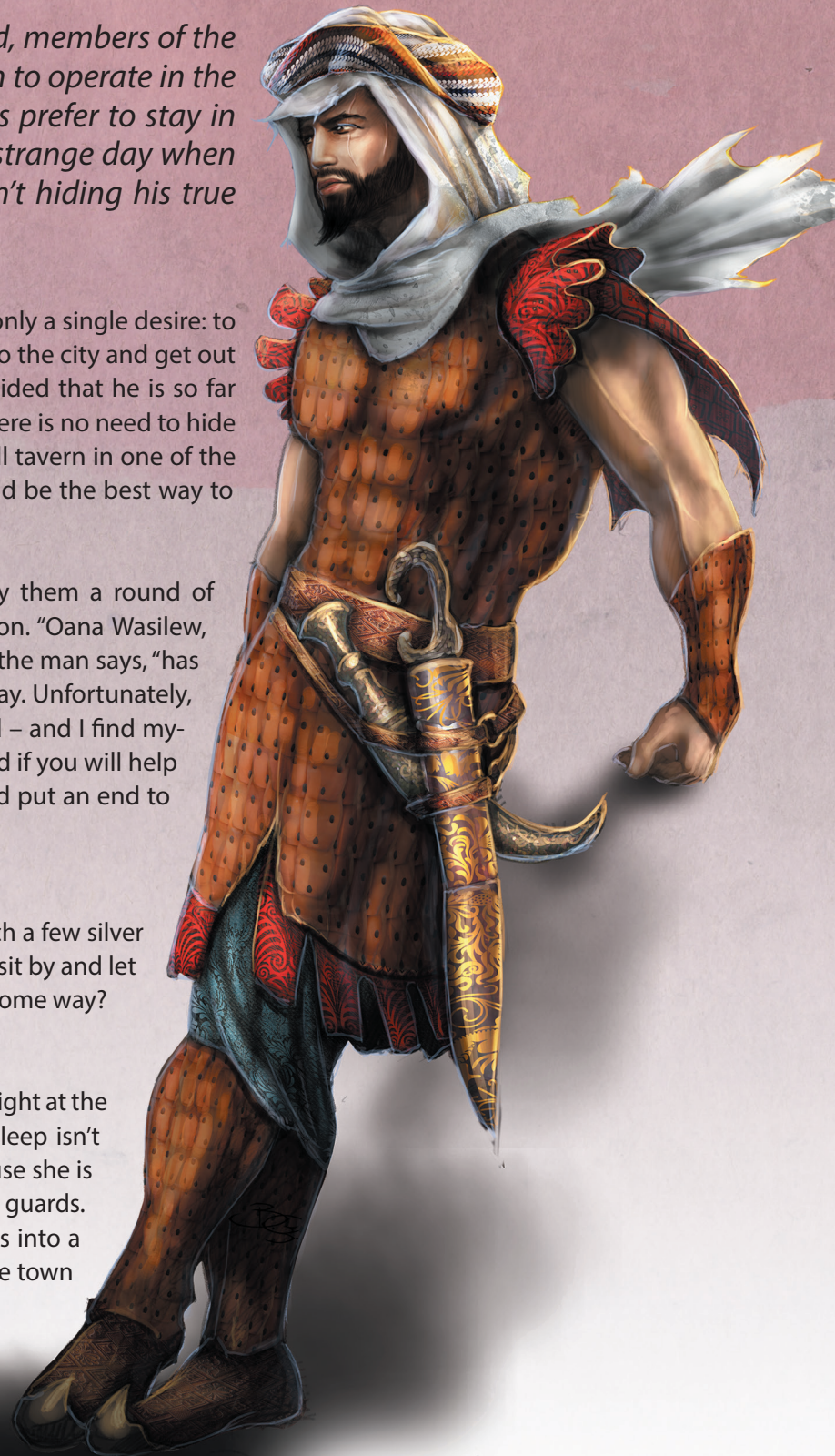
Klyashev approaches the PCs and offers to buy them a round of drinks in exchange for listening to his proposition. "Oana Wasilew, she who owns the stables near this very tavern," the man says, "has angered my betters and now the woman must pay. Unfortunately, she is well-guarded – better than I had expected – and I find myself in need of help. I can pay each of you ten gold if you will help me to infiltrate the woman's house this night and put an end to her existence."

The Party Refuses

Klyashev thanks them for their time and gives each a few silver coins. "For your silence," he tells them. Will the PCs sit by and let the assassin continue on, or will they interfere in some way?

The Party Agrees to Help

The man tells them to meet him shortly after midnight at the woman's stables. His plan to murder her in her sleep isn't as clean and easy as it first sounds, though, because she is aware of his presence in town and has hired extra guards. What should have been an easy enough job turns into a battle as the guards attack. Worse yet, they call the town watch. Can the PCs escape with their lives?



Bao Gajardin

SECRET JOURNEY OF THE WERE-TIGER REFUGEE

"Strangers," the man – a tall human, his skin bronzed by the sun – calls to the party when he meets them on the desert road. "There are bandits on the road and, as we are traveling in the same direction, would it be okay if I joined you so that we can face whatever threats may lie ahead as a group?"

The tall, heavily-muscled man introduces himself to the party as Zuhair Ya'eesh and, if asked, says that he is walking to the Fortress of Sil'abad only because his mount was killed when desert worms attacked him several days ago. *"I could barely save myself, let alone the creature, from the attack of those sand demons."*

Ya'eesh volunteers that he is on a mission for the people of Maftun, a small and inconsequential village that sits several days' ride to the east, deeper in the desert than many civilized people have dared to establish a permanent residence. *"We're a small community," Ya'eesh explains if asked, "living off of the metals that we mine in a quarry not far from the village. I am going to Sil'abad to hire men to guard our caravan so that we may transport our metals to the city and sell them."*

If the party accepts Ya'eesh's request to join them, the man thanks them and proves to be a valuable ally if the group runs into the bandits that are said to travel the road. Ya'eesh does nothing to raise suspicion and is always ready to help in any way that he can.

Late one night, after they have traveled with Ya'eesh for a few days and fought beside him, the moon's light triggers a transformation in the man. For as much as he has helped them, Ya'eesh wasn't comfortable sharing the darkest secret that he carries: the man is a were-tiger, and the light of the moon has brought out the beast.

Ya'eesh has little control over his actions when changed, and he attacks the group shortly after midnight. Do the heroes kill the man, or do they fight only to defend themselves and then seek help to remove their new friend's terrible curse?



THE LAMIA SORCERESS

Although she is a beautiful woman from the waist up, your attention is drawn to the creature's lower half, which resembles the body of a powerful lion. Lamias are rare in this part of the desert; what could this one want from you and your friends?

Late at night, after the PCs have made camp and settled in for the evening, their rest is disturbed by the approach of a towering, majestic lamia who calls out to the camp from a distance. The woman makes certain that the party is aware of her presence before she continues into the light of their fire.

"Heroes," she says to them. "I am Jasmit Sumal, sorceress and fellow traveler, and I am in need of your help. My companions have fallen into a nearby tomb and try as I might, I am unable to free them. I was heading to town to seek help when I noticed your fire. Will you help rescue my friends?"

Sumal explains that her group were walking across the desert before sunset when the sands gave way and her friends crashed through the roof of a buried tomb. She managed to escape, and she tried using magic and ropes to aid them, but she ultimately determined that she would need the help of others to pull them from the sand-covered chamber.

The PCs may pass on the opportunity, telling Sumal that they have plans and do not have time to assist her. She thanks them for their time and continues the long walk to the nearest town.

True heroes, though, will choose to aid the woman and she thanks them for their help.

"It's only a few miles," she tells the party as she guides them to the site. When they get there, they find a sandpit on a large dune, the sands flowing steadily into the lost tomb that has been buried for an unknown number of centuries. Calling out to her friends, Sumal is distressed when there is no response.

What has happened to Sumal's friends? Can the PCs help the woman to find them, or are they too late?



FACING THE ARCHER'S ATTACK

Without warning, an arrow glances off of your armor, a minor hit that stuns you for a second but does no true damage. "Murderers," the woman screams as she takes to the sky, a jet of flame carrying her twenty feet into the air where she draws a second arrow and takes aim. "You will pay for your actions!"

Dressed in flowing, flaming cloth that billows and flares outward with the wind, the stranger fires arrow after arrow at the party, clearly attempting to wound – if not kill – each PC she targets.

How the adventurers react to the surprise attack will govern the outcome of the conflict.

Attack!

If the PCs choose to return the attack, the stranger will fight to the death. Her infinite quiver allows her to rain arrows upon the party, while her dress of flaming flight allows her to hover for up to five minutes. The magic dress doesn't allow true flight, but it does give the woman the ability to move at one-half her normal speed while levitating anywhere up to 30-feet above the party.

If she is unable to defeat them before the magical flight comes to an end (the dress only allows the flight power once each day), then she will draw her flaming sword and continue the attack at melee range.

Try To Learn Why She is Attacking

If the party holds their fire, and they do not attack the woman, she will eventually agree to talk. Lara Jelavic is the mother of a missing child, a child she was told was kidnapped by the heroes. If they can convince her of

their innocence, Lara will break down in tears, apologizing for her actions and explaining that the person who told her that they were responsible – Aphobis Sensusnet – is a wealthy wine maker who identified them the instant he heard that her child was missing.

In truth, Sensusnet kidnapped the child and plans to put the boy to work. He doesn't know the PCs, but he has seen them and decided that they would make as good a patsy as any other.



ANOTHER SCAVENGER

Life in the desert is challenging, difficult for many who must survive not only the strange beasts that call the land home but also the intense heat and scorching rays of the sun. As the sun begins to set for the day, you and your friends come across yet another one of the desert's many scavengers.



Sifting through the scattered debris of a sand-covered wagon and its cargo, the woman doesn't hear your approach until you are within a dozen feet of where she has crouched down to better investigate the wreckage. Instantly, upon hearing you, she leaps to her feet and whirls to face you, knife in hand.

"I claim ownership," she says as she eyes you and looks left to right, watching the other members of your party. *"By the laws of the sand and sun, this site is mine and mine alone."*

The Party Gives Her Space

If the adventurers agree that the wreckage is hers, she turns back to her work . . . but keeps one eye on the party at all times. After ten minutes or so, the heroes can see that she is sorting the find, stacking possible salvage in one place, definite valuables in another space, and tossing the obvious junk as far from the wagon as she can. If they allow her to work in peace, she will eventually introduce herself as Lily Harijan.

"I could use some help transporting this to town," she says as she motions to the items that she wishes to keep. *"What say you? I'll give you lot 25% of whatever gold I can get from selling these pieces to the merchants."*

Nothing she has found is particularly valuable, but the PCs may choose to help her in order to learn more about the nearby city that they may not have yet visited. Harijan has lived here her entire life and turns out to be very talkative.

The Adventurers Choose to Fight

If the heroes disagree that the site is hers, and if they choose to attack the woman, she snatches a few small items and makes a run for it, attempting to avoid battle. If cornered, the woman will fight, but she will always be watching for a chance to escape.

If she does escape, she will return within a few hours with friends. She and her friends do not appreciate strangers interfering with the ways of the desert.