

Once upon a time, there was an Emir. This Emir had a menagerie, the finest menagerie in the world. People travelled from all over to see it. The beasts roamed free in the palace, and the Emir was happy.

But the day came when one of the visitors asked, "Don't you wish your lovely animals could talk?" And thereafter the Emir had no peace, waking or sleeping, for thinking, "If only my beasts could talk."

And so he called for sorcerers, and they came, and a great many of them made a great magic: That each beast could become human, at His Eminence's pleasure, wheresoever the Emir saw fit that they should.

And so they dined with him: Malik the Lion and Bassam the Hound and Noor

the Pythoness. They said little, in their human forms, but they surrounded the Emir, and watched for his enemies, and indulged his whims. And soon he would have no other but his retinue of beasts to be his courtiers, his court.

And the visitors stopped coming; and then the ambassadors stopped coming; and finally the Emir's own family left him, there in his palace, with his watchful beasts.

And there the ensorcelled beasts are still, to this day, although the Emir must long since have passed to dust. The ensorcelled beasts, and the wondrous treasure of the Emirate, out forgotten in the blown sands of the desert.

—Look, sir, I have a map.

The Palace of the Jewelled Menagerie

Malik the Lion (Cat, Giant, Lion)
Retinue: 1d8 lions **Weapon:** Scimitar
Jewel: Two rings; one cabochon ruby, one star sapphire. Donning the ruby gives the wearer the speed of the lion for one hour a day. Donning the sapphire gives the wearer the stealth of the lion for one hour a day (as *elven cloak*).
 The Emir looks to Malik to keep order. Alone among the menagerie, he is obeyed outside his kind. In any coordinated attack against intruders, he acts as the Emir's general.

Tariq the Boar (Boar, Giant)
Retinue: 1d6+1 boars **Weapon:** Axe
Jewel: Earring, large, gold, with a garnet like a drop of blood hanging from it. The wearer gains the strength of the boar for one hour a day (as *pale blue ioun stone*).
 In human form, Tariq wears a vest of tuatara skin. His clan and Farid's are mortal enemies, and fight when they see each other anywhere but in the Emir's presence.

Noor, the Pythoness (Snake, Giant Python)
Retinue: 1d6 pythons **Weapon:** Bow
Jewel: A gold head-band, with an emerald nestled between her eyes. The wearer can *charm* creatures with three or fewer hit dice with a successful Charisma check.
 Noor and her retinue have a 1 in 20 chance to be estivating in the Emir's lair on a given day. An estivating animal is always surprised, but will regain 3d10% of its faculties per round.
 Noor's arrows have a 1 in 10 chance of *charming* their victim, in addition to their normal damage.

Seventy miles into the parched desert, there is a palace. The city around it has long since been reclaimed by the scouring sands. But the palace stands, still.

There are seven beasts left of the Emir's menagerie. They all roam freely over the palace grounds, but each has its lair. They all have a following: a retinue of non-magical beasts of their kind.

The seven may change to human or back again at will, except in the dining room: they are always human there, by ancient decree of the Emir. And if they go ten miles outside the palace walls, they are feral: beasts with no memory of ever being human. Leila, the Phoenix, was lost this way.

The Emir, in his fondness for his beasts, gave each of them a magnificent jewel for its own. They mold themselves to fit their owners, these jewels, changing as the menagerie morphs from beast to human and back again. Seeped with magic, down through the centuries, they have become imbued with the strengths of their owners. When worn by beasts, they are but jewels; when worn by humans—including the beasts' human forms—they confer a spell-like ability for a time.

The Emir caused a river to be built for Saud, the Fish; a river that runs through all his houses and under his covered walkways. Its culmination is a lake, in the Emir's lair, thirty feet down below.

The beasts interact infrequently, preferring to hunt with their own kind. Each has a 50% chance of being away from the palace, except, of course, for Saud; but will return in 1d3 days to wait on the Emir. Any travellers to the desert who come within ten miles of the palace will meet with one of the hunting parties.

They are fiercely loyal to the Emir, and will fight any who come near him, as well as any who enter their particular area of the palace. In their rooms, each keeps a weapon for their human form; and the guard house also has an array. They are mostly indifferent to fights in other lairs, although those closest to unoccupied rooms will investigate untoward noise.

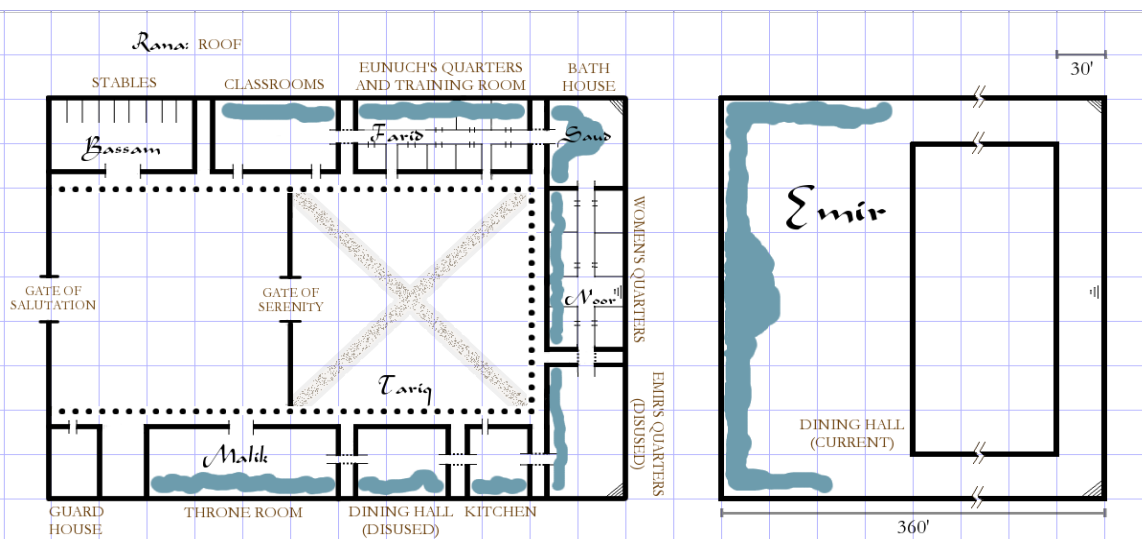
In addition to the menagerie, there are two Djinni in the palace, brought by those long-ago sorcerers to run the palace. The Djinn of the Household makes sure there is food, and fresh water, and that the wastes of the animals are cleaned daily. He serves a formal meal in the new dining room, underground in the Emir's lair, after full night has set, for the Emir and whichever of his beasts are in residence. The Djinn of the Grounds keeps the buildings maintained, and ensures that Saud's river flows in the path laid down by the Emir. The Djinni are always invisible. They will fight neither for nor against the menagerie. When all beasts, magical and otherwise, are destroyed or fled, they will become a whirlwind and scatter a giant sandstorm around the palace; and then they will be gone, and there will be no mark to show such a magical palace ever existed.

Bassam the Hound (Hell Hound)
Retinue: 2d4 hounds **Weapons:** A pair of jambiya
Jewel: A golden torque, etched in platinum, showing a hound mid-spring. The wearer gains the hound's immunity to fire for ten minutes a day.
 Bassam will always come running at the sound of altercation, out of his endless curiosity and boundless joy in a fight.

Farid, the Lizard (Lizard, Giant, Tuatara)
Retinue: 1d8 tuataras **Weapon:** Dabus
Jewel: A platinum sculpt around the spikes of his back, looping around his forearms. Wearing this causes ghostly spikes to form, acting as leather armor and dealing 1d4 damage per round in any grapple.

Saud, the Fish (Fish, Giant Rockfish)
Retinue: 2d4 rockfish **Weapon:** Five javelins, carved from boar bones. Tariq considers this an honor for any fallen comrade.
Jewel: A net of gems, looped around his fins. The wearer can breathe underwater for up to 3 hours. Saud prefers to grapple his enemies, in his human form, into his river, where his retinue can assist.

Rana, the Eagle (Eagle, Giant)
Retinue: 1d20 eagles **Weapon:** Shakra
Jewels: A golden breastplate, with an eagle's head in bas relief. The wearer is protected as *shield*, and deals 1d4 piercing damage per round for the bas beak in any grapple.
 Rana has been known to lend her long eyesight to others' hunting.

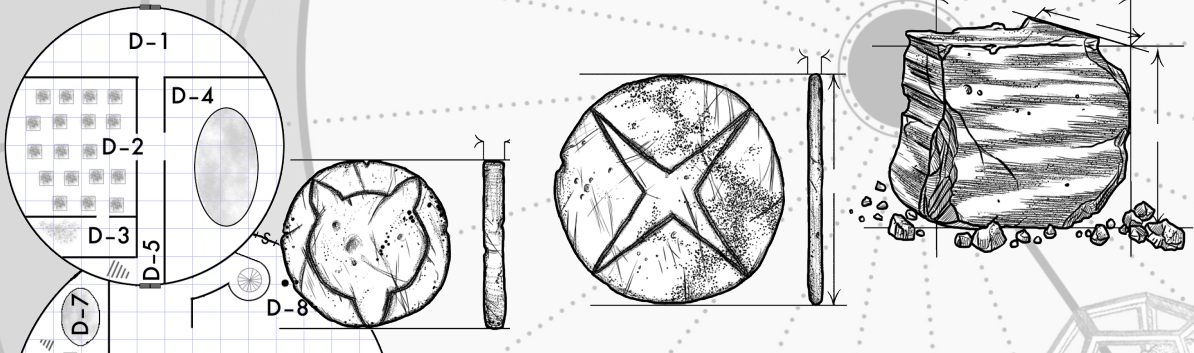


The Emir: The Emir lives, but has long gone mad, from his immortality and the lack of true human contact. The shifting magic of his palace worked with his desire to become a beast, as his beasts became human for his sake—but his mind had gone, and instead of one true animal he became a hideous hybrid. A chimera, now, he stays in his underground retreat, reclusive but for mealtimes in his relocated dining hall. He is the only one who can be either beast or man in this room; but he has no control over his state. Every thirty minutes, or every two rounds if in combat (where he has even less control over his being) he has a 50% chance to change form.

Treasures of the palace: The Treasury of the Emir, once above ground, has bit by bit moved down here to be with him. Each beast and its retinue has taken a portion of the once-magnificent Emirate treasure to its lair, as its proclivities lie; but even so, it remains an impressive amassment: its worth is equal to a dragon's hoard.



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