

# HELLFROST LAND OF FIRE

• REALM GUIDE #10 •

## THE PLAINS OF ASH

### Introduction

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Once the home of the cakali, once a center of enlightenment and invention, once a green and pleasant land, the Plains of Ash is now a blasted wasteland, a testament to the unearthly might and fury of the jinn. To most it is a featureless waste, a stain on the landscape to be avoided out of fear of what might lurk there. To the cakali, it is their spiritual home, and a reminder that freedom requires sacrifices. This supplement expands on material found in *Hellfrost: Land of Fire*.

### ORIGINS OF THE CAKALI

Humanoid, intelligent, and honorable, the origins of the cakali race have been much debated by human scholars and sages down the ages. That the race is old is beyond argument—inscriptions and texts from ancient Hekata clearly indicate the cakali were known during that age, and even the arrogant sphinxes reluctantly speak of them as an advanced race who existed long before their ascent.

Unfortunately, human bias has led to some question whether the cakali are a true race, one forged by the gods, or a slave race created by the sorcerers of Hekata. Others argue the race was created by Duamutef, though again such tales can be most ungenerous. Some who profess this belief claim the cakali were nothing more than Duamutef's hunting dogs, and their appearance on the mortal realm came from some accidental escape or an act so foul that it resulted in banishment from the heavens.

The early cakali were a nomadic people whose grazing and hunting grounds were centered on what is now the Plains of Ash. Barbarous and scattered, the tribes were united by Anup, a philosopher whose wisdom saw them rise from a primitive people to heights of civilization only now being equaled by humans. Indeed, at the time the cakali achieved their enlightened state, men were still scrambling around in caves and hitting each other with stone axes. Although Anup became the race's first king, he was never worshipped as a deity. Instead, he was honored as a spiritual and temporal teacher. After the War of Copper Jars, this led many cakali to believe Suleiman was Anup's spirit made flesh, returned to lead them from darkness into a new era. Such claims are impossible to verify, but this has not stopped most cakali from adopting the Devoted creed.

Anup preached peace over conquest, and while various human empires rose, expanded, declined, and fell, most notably that of Hekata, the cakali were content to stay within their realms, venturing forth only as teachers and merchants, never as conquerors. That Duamutef is most often portrayed as a cakali may be a folk memory of individual members

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## RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in the Plain of Ash.

\* **Black Ash:** The choking ash is a threat to health, and makes travel arduous. Each day spent in the Desert of Ash, travelers must make a Vigor roll (+2 if wearing a sand hood) or suffer a level of Fatigue from inhaling ash. This is removed as per Bumps and Bruises.

The fine ash varies in depth from a few inches to many yards. Even at its thinnest, it is difficult to traverse. Overland Travel Pace is always halved. In combat situations, the terrain is difficult ground.

\* **Depressing:** The bleak landscape offers little joy. Each morning, travelers must make a Spirit roll or suffer a -1 penalty to all Spirit rolls for the remainder of the day. Penalties are not cumulative—either the bleakness has got to you or it hasn't.

\* **Fire Magic:** The land within the Plain of Ash still contains much magical energy. Attempts to cast spells or miracles with a fire or heat trapping are made at +1.

\* **Firestorms:** As if to ensure the cakali never settle here again, firestorms (see *Realm Guide #2: The Jinn Lands*) regularly ravage the plain. Each day, the GM should draw a card. On a red Jack through Ace, a firestorm sweeps across the region at some point during the day.

\* **Lifeless:** The land is a blasted waste, largely devoid of water, flora, and fauna. Those who know where to look may find sustenance, but it is not easy. Survival rolls to find food or water suffer a -8 penalty.

\* **Spoiled Rations:** Each day, explorers must make an individual Survival roll. Failure means they have failed to adequately protect their provisions from the black ash. They lose one quart of water and one pound of food from their remaining supplies.

of the race appearing out of the desert to pass on Anup's wisdom or of the great schools that accepted students of all civilized races without prejudice.

Why the jinn, whose heartlands lay close to the cakali's kingdom, never attempted to subjugate or destroy the race has remained a mystery. While it is true some cakali offered the invaders their services as scribes, accountants, and architects, the race neither bowed down before the unearthly beings nor brokered any official pact. Again, certain humans have used this strange event to slight the race, accusing them of serving the jinn as slavers. More enlightened souls have suggested the cakali knew some secret or possessed some object the jinn feared, though exactly what is open to endless speculation and debate. If the cakali know anything, they are refusing to say.

Those so inclined to spout anti-human rhetoric fuel their arguments by repeating what is already a known fact—the cakali sided with the jinn when the War of

Copper Jars erupted. Again, exactly why is unknown, for until then the cakali had been neutral in jinn affairs.

As history records, the cakali were ultimately betrayed, and which led to them openly taking up arms, and in turn led to the destruction of their homeland with the loss of countless lives.

That the cakali were welcomed by Suleiman is not questioned by Devoted, for one, Durukan, numbered among his closest disciples. Indeed, as old age crept up upon him, Suleiman spent more time talking with Durukan than all his other disciples combined (though in some altered texts the cakali is replaced with a human). Some scholars have even suggested Suleiman was educated by the cakali, though with all relevant records destroyed this cannot be proven.

Though they have reverted once again to a nomadic lifestyle, the cakali do not see themselves as a fallen race. They still retain their deep-rooted sense of honor and follow Anup's wisdom, but they know they will never again rebuild their cities. Scattered they may be, but no enemy can ever again attempt to destroy the entire race by targeting their population centers, and the past can never be reclaimed, no matter how hard one tries.

## BONDSMEN

Due to their unusual practice of taking bondsmen, accusations of being slavers have dogged the cakali for endless generations. While the early cakali tribes did engage in open slavery, it was abolished by Anup. In its place, he created the system known as bonding.

Unlike slaves, bondsmen are not unwilling participants in the relationship, they are not seen as property, and they cannot be bought, sold, or traded. It is true they do not receive a wage, though generous masters often give them gifts as tokens of appreciation, and over time close friendships can form.

Becoming a bondsman is always a conscious decision. Under no circumstances will a cakali ever force, trick, or cajole another into servitude, even if he has saved the other's life. In many cases, bondsmen who owe a life debt are those who cannot escape death without the cakali's direct help. For instance, a traveler staked out in the desert by bandits to die a slow, lingering death will likely be saved. Whether he offers to repay the debt is his choice.

Likewise, no cakali is required to demand a bonding for giving aid—he is responsible for feeding, clothing, and equipping his servant, and few cakali can afford even one bondsman. Similarly, accepting an offer of becoming a bondsman is the cakali's choice—he is under no obligation to agree.

Possessing a bondsman is not a simple contract between the two parties—it requires sacred oaths to be recited in front of witnesses and is sworn in the name of the gods (Faithful) or Suleiman (Devoted). Breaking the bond is a serious offense, and one punished by the unseen powers that drive the universe.

As for the terms of the pact, which can never be altered from their original wording, the bondsman is duty

bound to obey his master, serve him loyally, never slight his name, protect his honor, and, if assigned to serve as a bodyguard (a rarity), protect his life. In return, he can expect to be fed and watered, equipped as necessary to fulfill the role his master sets him, be treated fairly, and be protected from harm. Most cakali treat a bondsman with the same respect they show his master.

## CODE OF HONOR

All cakali obey a strict code of honor. In part this is the same code all nomads follow, but it goes much deeper. Cakali do not kill defenseless beings, do not lie (though they may refuse to speak), do not own slaves, never judge a man by his education (not all beings embrace Anup's wisdom), and try to avoid dishonoring others without good reason. Defaming the name of Suleiman is considered a slight to their honor.

## Exploration

The Plains of Ash is a depressing place. As far as the eye can see there is naught but black ash, broken sporadically by some blasted and melted remnant of an ancient cakali city. Those who know their history are burdened by the knowledge that every step they take is not only through a ruined landscape, but may cause them to tread on the incinerated remains of the many thousands of souls who once called the realm home. Even when the sun sets there is little comfort, for strange howls carry on the wind. While explorers convince themselves these are naught but cakali dirges, there remains a nagging worry they are the cries of the dead, for many restless ghosts haunt the Plains of Ash.

The black ash is more than just a weight on one's spirit. The fine particles are whipped up by any disturbance, and the wind is heavily laden with them. Even with adequate coverings, within an hour travelers find their spittle is black, their nasal passages are clogged with grime, and their eyes are raw from the constant assault by the dust. Even camels, created by Duamutef to withstand the airborne sand particles of the trackless sands, cannot block out the ash.

The ash clings to everything it touches. Exposed flesh is quickly covered with a grimy layer, which must be constantly scraped off to allow the body to sweat. Clothes and armor become impregnated with dust, requiring a dozen washes to scrub clean, rations become tainted, and waterskins left open for even a few minutes are found to have a scummy layer of ash floating on the surface of their contents. Within the plain there is no escaping the ash.

Travel is arduous. Every step causes an explorer to sink, on average, to shin height, and in some cases much deeper. Sand riggers have no hope of traveling through the ash, and camels endure difficulties. Great care must be taken with every step, for there are sinkholes and area of black mire, quicksand covered in a layer of black ash.

No oases exist here. Any water immediately turns the ash into a thick paste, which makes travel dangerous after the sporadic winter rains have fallen, as pools of "quicksand" develop. Skilled explorers may find a pool beneath a rock, but such water must be consumed or potted quickly, lest it to become tainted. Food is in equally short supply, for very little flora or fauna flourishes here.

## Religion

The majority of cakali are now Devoted, seeing in Suleiman the reborn spirit of Anup. That he chose to return as a human is not seen as odd, for the cakali were already an enlightened race, while the humans were being led from the darkness of oppression into the light of freedom. To depict Suleiman as a cakali is seen as a grave insult both to the great teacher and the cakali race.

Those who retain the Faithful creed are most likely to honor Duamutef. He is seen as the creator of the race, and as the god of the desert and nomads their savior, for it was he who reminded them of the old ways that have enabled them to survive once again in the harsh desert.

While the great cities and their schools are long gone, Qedeset remains an important deity. Less concerned with invention these days, cakali offer his praise in his aspects of diplomacy, trading, and storytelling. Though they invented the alphabet still used today, the race has developed a strong oral tradition—thought cannot be destroyed, as the cakali say. Thus, as well as being teachers, clerics are viewed as historians and record keepers.

Upuaut, another cakali deity adopted by humans millennia ago, is worshipped frequently, though he rarely has truly devoted worshippers. Not only is it a fool who embarks on a journey without his blessing, but the cakali retain knowledge of many secret paths through the desert.

Apsu is given praise, for water is necessary for life, though true centers of worship exist only in the few oases governed by cakali tribes. Ashtart, once important in the cities of old, may be honored in such places as well, though her cult is extremely small. Other deities are worshipped based on personal choice and profession.

## FUNERARY CUSTOMS

Many cakali who know their time is nearly at an end endeavor to reach Blacksand Oasis. After the funerary rites are completed, the corpse of a Devoted is cremated in accordance with tradition and the ash thrown into the wind that keeps the black ash at bay. If all is well and the soul has achieved Oneness, the remains are blown into the plain to join with the remains of those who perished in the disaster. Should the ashes fall to the ground or blow in another direction, then the soul has entered the Bottomless Pit. Faithful cakali who die at the oasis are carried far into the ash and buried as deeply as possible. Here their mortal remains will lie for eternity, their flesh slowly mummifying in the dry dust.

## ASTROLOGY MAGIC

**Arcane Skill:** Astrology (Smarts)

**Starting Powers:** 3

**Powers:** *Aim, analyze foe, arcane resistance, armor, banish, becalm, bless/panic, boost/lower trait, charismatic aura, deflection, fog cloud, fortune's favored, gift of battle, insight, luck/jinx, precognition, quake, storm, summon beast, summon jinn, warrior's gift, zephyr.*

Astrology has been practiced in Al-Shirkuh since before the days of Hekata's great empire, both as a mundane and magical study. Through knowledge of the ever-changing patterns, alignments, and conjunctions, arcane astrologers can manipulate the magical strands to control the weather, influence others for good or ill, invoke blessings and curses, and gain forewarning of impending harm.

**Casting:** In order to cast his spells a mage must be able to see the stars or consult star charts. All Astrology rolls are made at a -2 penalty. This represents a quick glance, giving the arcane astrologer only a cursory insight into the complex threads of energy. For each additional concurrent action spent studying the stars, the mage gains a deeper insight into subtler, more powerful alignments. Each action spent doing this earns him a +1 bonus.

Extra actions don't have to be declared in advance of casting, but cannot exceed half the mage's Smarts die. This study is not a true part of the casting process, and thus the mage cannot be disrupted during this time. However, if he fails to spend a round studying the stars, any accumulated bonus is lost. For clarification, arcane astrologers may take other actions while studying the heavens, but they suffer a multi-action penalty—this includes studying and casting in a single round. Penalties for poor lighting apply to the casting roll if the mage has no charts and the sky is obscured.

An astrologer begins play with a set of star charts. If lost or destroyed, they can be replaced at any temple of Qedeshet for 50 dinars or recreated with a week's work and a successful Astrology roll.

**Example:** *An astrologer has Smarts d8. If he casts in a single round, he has a -2 penalty. The mage spends four extra actions studying the heavens, the maximum he is permitted. On the fifth round he casts his spell at +2.*

**Trappings:** Astrological spells take the form of predicted events, and rarely have trappings with game mechanics attached. For instance, both *armor* and *deflection* represent foresight of impending attacks, as well as fortuitous omens allowing the target to duck and parry incoming blows, rather than mystic energy shields or swirling debris. *Summon beast* might be rationalized as knowing when a specific benevolent creature will happen to cross the mage's path.

## Trade & Tribute

Trade is not as frequent as it once was along the Ash Road—the sole trade route within the Plains of Ash—since the Silk Road closed, but Blacksand Oasis remains an important hub. Here, merchants from the Caliphate and Sultanate gather to trade with their counterparts from Jadid, City of Trade. The oasis also serves as the marketplace for local Bedu tribes.

In return for offering water and safety, and the chance to catch up on gossip, the Yalarfal tribe charges a tax of 0.5% of every cargo's value. With coins being of little use in the middle of a desert, the tax is paid in goods the tribe needs or can trade with other nomads. They also sell their unique dung-smoked cheese, an acquired taste, but one growing in popularity in the cities.

Treasure hunters hoping to find remnants of the destroyed cakali civilization are out of luck. The sale or trade of such relics is strictly forbidden. Any items discovered are confiscated (to be returned to the ash), the possessor harshly punished, and his name remembered for the future. Unless they seek a major atonement for their crime, they will forever be treated as scorpion guests not only at the oasis, but by all cakali (word travels quickly, even in the vast desert).

## Major Locales

The Plains of Ash may appear to be a lifeless blight on the land, but there are places of interest and danger in its harsh interior, and on its fringes.

### BLACKSAND OASIS

The only oasis of note along the Ash Road, Blacksand is a major stopping point for merchants and explorers. Most inhabitants speak Bedu and Cakalic, and many are passably fluent in Sandspeech. While there are no rules enforcing these choices for player characters, those born here should keep this in mind when picking languages.

The main waterhole covers an area roughly half a mile square, while the grasslands that feed the vast herds of goats extend as much as five miles into the desert, bordering the Plains of Ash to the north and west.

**Cakali Encampment:** Much of the oasis' cakali population live on the west side, closest to the Plains of Ash. Although not members of the tribe, they live and work closely with the Bedu, and have a vested interest in protecting the oasis. Their *de facto* head, an elderly khamsein mage, serves as an advisor to Sheikh Jamal, and most Bedu children grew up learning from cakali teachers.

**Merchants' Encampment:** In order to safeguard visiting merchants and their precious cargoes, the tribe created a merchants' enclosure on the southern edge of the oasis. Surrounded by a hedge of thorny plants, the large

space permanently houses just one structure—a tent used by Faithful to worship their gods. When caravans pull in, they erect their tents and stable their mounts within the encampment. There are no defined plots, and priority goes to the caravan that arrived first.

Water is provided by a stream that runs in a loop from the main oasis, and tall trees provide plentiful shade. Sluice gates allow the sheikh to control the flow of water. When no merchants are present, these are typically shut to prevent unnecessary evaporation.

Security within the compound is left to the merchants. Bedu warriors guard the only gate and patrol the perimeter, a free service provided by the sheikh. Access is strictly controlled, with non-merchant visitors requiring a pass. These take the form of brass amulets, and are issued by the sheikh's wizar to local merchants (responsible for collecting the import tax), friends of the tribe, and honored guests. Visitors with items to trade, or who wish to buy, are interviewed by the sheikh's wizar. Misuse of a pass is a serious offense.

Visiting caravans are also issued a number of passes, allowing the merchants and caravan masters to leave the compound at will. Few of the baggage handlers and camel drivers ever socialize with the permanent residents.

Sheikh Jamal is considered erecting a stone caravan-serai, but traditionalists are opposing this, claiming it goes against their heritage. Even the cakali have doubts, for the memory of what befell their permanent homes still haunts them centuries on. Until the matter is sorted, Jamal's plan to improve facilities remains a dream.

**School:** While city dwellers often imagine nomads as illiterate barbarians, this is rarely the case. True, oral traditions are more important than written ones, but all Bedu receive schooling in what is essential to them—how to survive in the desert and the ways of their ancestors. At Blacksand Oasis, there is a permanent tent set aside for teaching more than just these skills.

Staffed almost exclusively by cakali, Bedu children learn about other cultures, history, astronomy, geography, and mathematics. Such is the prestige of the school that nobles from nearby tribes send their children here to be educated. Schooling is only a few hours a day, but the Bedu of Blacksand, despite their isolated position, are some of the best educated nomads in Al-Shirkuh.

**Temple Tent:** Although the Yalarfal tribe are Devoted, Sheikh Jamal knows he must cater to the spiritual needs of Faithful merchants if the oasis is to remain prosperous. A tent has been set aside as an area of worship. Inside are small shrines to Apsu, Qedeshet (in his aspect as god of trade), and Upuaut. Unfortunately, this move has alienated a small number of the tribe. They view the tent as an insult to Suleiman's teachings and the tribe's beliefs.

Recently, the shrine of Qedeshet, a set of gold weighing scales inscribed with prayers and supplications, was stolen. No one has claimed responsibility, and the sheikh has managed to keep the theft a secret. Unfortunately, he knows trade caravans will arrive soon, at which point the theft will quickly become public knowledge and his honor will be seriously slighted. Keen to save face, he is

desperately hoping for an adventuring party to visit in the near future. He plans to can hire them to return the missing shrine with as much stealth as its theft.

## THE EVER-BURNING OASIS

The Ever-Burning Oasis came into being the day the jinn wrought their wrath upon the cakali, and it has burned for over five centuries. Cakali never come here, for the sight is a terrifying image of the doom that befell their people. The oasis is visible during the day from 10 miles away, and thrice that at night, appearing first as an orange glow on the horizon.

Trees still stand, their trunks and branches swathed in crackling flame that glows an unearthly yellow. The ground is a bed of glowing embers that pop and hiss continually. The air is thick with the stench of smoke and burning wood from the conflagration that neither time nor sporadic rains can extinguish.

Flame and heat are not the only dangers. Fire salamanders dance in the flames, fire sprites flit among the branches, cinder mote swarms drift lazily through the choking smoke, and lesser ifrits gather here in number.

At the center lies the pool that once supported life. Today it is a bubbling cauldron of water that, while it generates clouds of scolding steam, refuses to boil away. Even when taken out of the oasis, the water continues to boil. Ironically, this makes it extremely valuable to those who run steam baths, and a gallon sells for as much as 200 dinars in the great cities.

Some nomads believe phoenixes come here to die, whereupon they are reborn in the flames. While a phoenix egg is beyond value, all attempts to locate one have failed. Yet foolish, brave, or greedy souls try.

Those who wish to explore the inferno must rely on protective spells. Each round the characters are in the oasis they suffer 1d10 damage from the heat and risk catching fire. Casters suffer a -4 penalty to invoke spells or miracles with a water trapping. Fire and heat spells and miracles gain a +2 bonus. This replaces the usual +1 Plains of Ash bonus. No magic can extinguish the flames, even for a brief moment. The temperature within the oasis is Infernal regardless of the time of day or the season.

## THE JINNI'S GRAVE

Close to the heart of the Plains of Ash is a crater measuring some two miles across and half a mile deep. Unusually, its steep sides are yellow glass, for they were formed before the devastation that caused the black ash, when the tremendous heat of impact melted the sand. Despite five centuries of wind, the black ash of the surrounding landscape has never intruded into the crater. Early explorers, searching in vain for survivors in the blasted wastes, reported seeing a glowing sphere in the center of the crater, but such was its heat that none could get close enough to investigate, for magic was scarce at this time and there were but few clerics. No one has re-

## CLERICS OF QEDESHET

**Training:** Formal education dominates training. Novitiates learn by copying texts, attending lectures, reciting facts by rote, and reading. Languages skills are essential to the cult, and all students are expected to master multiple tongues. Frequent oral and written exams ensure students are keeping up with their work. Good grades are essential, as those who score low are held back for remedial education. Clerics also serve as diplomats, advisors, and merchants. Once they have achieved a basic level of education, those who wish to follow this path are trained in the arts of courtesy, flattery, and politics.

**Prayers:** Clerics rarely give straightforward advice. Instead, they prefer proverbs, forcing the listener to deduce the meaning and intention for himself. This serves diplomats especially well, for it allows them to pass on instructions without directly implicating themselves in anything unsavory. References to historical events and written works are frequently employed as a means of problem-solving and instruction.

**Adventures:** The promise of lost knowledge and new discoveries draw Qedeshet's clerics like moths to a flame. Al-Shirkuh is littered with ruins, many of which have never been explored. While exploring old tombs and crumbling temples is certainly fraught with dangers, the world of politics is no less dangerous or exciting. Characters might be called upon to investigate corruption in local government, broker a peace treaty, or help solve a problem besetting the city.

**Character Guidelines:** Priest or paladin, your greatest asset is your brains. Smarts is the most important attribute. Investigation and Knowledge are primary skills, but Streetwise is also useful for gaining information. Those who favor the god's aspects of diplomacy or trade also need Streetwise, as well as Persuasion. A high Charisma is useful for augmenting two of your key skills. Thanks to his high Smarts, languages are another area where clerics shine. So long as you can communicate with your comrades, invest in obscure or archaic languages rather than common ones. Since *Speak Language* is your signature power, Linguist is useful only when you need to be subtle or for those times you have sinned.

turned in centuries, and whether or not the sphere or the heat are still present is unknown.

Legends about the site are many and varied. One popular story claims this was the epicenter of the destruction, though many cakali refute this, claiming that fire rained down across the entire area simultaneously rather than spreading outward. A common cakali myth claims the crater was formed by the body of a mighty

ifrit, blown out of the sky by Suleiman during the attack that leveled the land. Sadly, this story has been misused more than once to blame the cakali for their own downfall, with critics of the race claiming the murder of an ifrit lord invoked the deadly jinn response.

## THE LOST LIBRARY

Famed for their scholastic pursuits, the cakali of old created many written works. Later, once the other races had achieved literacy, they copied texts from across Al-Shirkuh in a bid to not only produce a collective record of the race's achievements, but to ensure they survived down the ages. For millennia, these works were housed in the Great Library of Anup, a central repository that formed an annex to a temple of Qedeshet.

By all accounts the library was vast. Tens of thousands of scrolls, divided by topic and language, were housed in niches within row after row of wooden stacks. Here, the curious and learned from across the desert would gather to peruse the genius of their fellow beings. By the time of its destruction, the library had grown so large it dwarfed the temple, and the hall of worship became just another room in the colossal building. The location of the library is subject to debate. Most cakali believe it was located in Caklos, for the city was a major center of learning for many thousands of years. Others argue it lay elsewhere. Regardless of its location, it was destroyed during the rain of fire, its scrolls incinerated in the blink of an eye. However, that is not the end of the story.

Oral tradition, supported by scraps of text, indicate the library had several subterranean vaults. While scholars and sages argue over whether these housed valuable texts or were just storage areas for lesser works, the fact remains that the basements may have survived the devastation that leveled the upper city. Even if the texts are mundane, they are worth a fortune to private collectors and the cult of Qedeshet, for they contain knowledge otherwise eradicated by the jinn enslavement of the human race and destruction of the cakali homeland.

Down the centuries there have been many bogus claims from explorers, and con artists seeking to rob gullible scholars of their wealth have produced many forgeries, but the library has yet to be discovered. For now at least, it remains naught but a lure for greedy and curious treasure hunters.

## THE MANY-PLACE TENT

Suleiman was a great admirer of and friend to the cakali, and the vengeance they suffered pained his soul. After defeating a powerful marid jinni, he dragged her to the newly formed Plains of Ash and asked her what she thought of her people now. She replied cryptically that the death of a few slaves was a trivial thing compared to the survival of the world, and refused to condemn her people or grieve for the incinerated victims. Believing that the punishment should fit the crime, Suleiman bound her to the Plains of Ash until the end of days.

Marid emir Mehlika lives in a huge tent whose fabric is woven from the skin of ifrit jinn slain by Suleiman. While Suleiman bound her within the Plain, he did not force her to remain in one location. Each day, usually at dawn, the tent teleports to a new location. Aside from being unable to leave the ash field, distance is no obstacle. However, she cannot move her abode if it is within site of human or cakali eyes, nor if any members of the species are inside her home.

Her imprisonment forces her to wait on those who seek hospitality. Little better than a serving girl, she must ply them with cool water, which she pours from a relic, a very heavy jug that never empties. Stealing the relic is futile—as soon as it moves a few yards beyond the tent it teleports back inside. No force short of direct intervention by a deity can prevent this. Should the jinni be slain, the jug will shatter.

Mehlika refills waterskins, but only if asked. Due to a loophole in Suleiman's binding, once her tent teleports, the water she provided turns to ash. This has no effect on water consumed in the tent.

## THE TOMB HILLS

Although the Plains of Ash boasts no mountains, there are ranges of hills. Now covered in black ash, and never particularly high, these are indistinguishable from large dunes. A few months ago, a cakali pilgrim came across a small range of hills which had been scoured of ash by a fierce wind. Built into the sides of the hills were a series of stone doorways. Already short of water, and fearful of disturbing the ghosts of his ancestors, he did not bother to investigate further.

News of the discovery has spread along the trade roads like wildfire since the explorer reported his find at Blacksand Oasis. Already there are dozens of rumors about the nature of the site. One story favors the doors being the seals on cakali tombs, perhaps those of their philosopher-kings. Another says they might be repositories of ancient wisdom. One even suggests the doors might predate the cakali.

Until a party braves the harsh landscape and investigates further, the rumors will continue to spread and evolve, but no hard facts will be forthcoming.

## THE TOWER OF ASH

Cakali nomads traveling the Plain have reported seeing a tower rising from the black ash. Fearing to venture too close, they viewed it using *farsight* spells. Standing ten stories tall, it appeared to be made from black ash, for no joins indicating brickwork could be seen. A long entrance was discerned, an open portal at ground level. Despite the nomads watching for several hours, no sign of life was detected. What concerned the cakali most is that they passed the same spot not two days earlier, and the tower did not exist. The only creatures capable of raising such a structure are jinn, though why they would bother doing so now is open to debate.

## FESTIVAL TO QEDESHET

### COUNTING DAY

*Amt Yaus al-Sesbt Baot Alak Shemu*

According to myth, the early universe was a place of great chaos. Although Qedesht had invented Time, there was no means of recording its passage, and thus the gods did not know when to work. Furthermore, none knew how many things they had created or were supposed to create, for there were no numbers through which to express themselves. Qedesht taught Shamash the secret of counting and recording time, and thus order was imposed. Counting Day is an important day for many people. It is when farmers count the animals in their flocks, granary overseers calculate the amount of food gathered this harvest, merchants tally their profits, city officials calculate the annual tax, and so on. Clerics are expected to help out wherever needed, acting as accountants.

## PERSONS OF NOTE

While very few beings inhabit the Plains of Ash, there are those who call the land and its surrounds home. A handful of such persons and creatures are given here.

### HEARTHKEEPER GUILLEME AP-RODRIK

One of a handful of northern clerics currently exploring Al-Shirkuh, Guilleme has been charged with investigating the Plains of Ash and determining whether there is any link to the disappearance of Kenaz, the god of fire.

Although he has been a resident for over a year, his quest was sidelined almost from the start. Having discovered the Bedu do not believe in any gods and failing to grasp the Devoted creed at even a basic level, Guilleme has become a missionary. Instead of exploring the ash or unraveling local legends and myths for clues, he spends his days berating the nomads and attempting to bring them into the light.

Guilleme has done nothing to learn their language or adopt their customs. His attempts to educate the "barbarians" have resulted only in a few locals being able to speak a few words of Anari, and not all of them are suitable for polite conversation. For their part, the nomads believe their guest is insane, and his presence and shouting is tolerated out of charity, not respect.

Permanently sunburned (he sees this as a blessing, despite the discomfort), his red face sticks out like a sore thumb, as do his orange robes.

## FESTIVAL TO QEDESHET

### FIRE DAY

*Amt Yaus al-Sesbt Amt Alak Arkbet*

When Shamash laid order upon the universe he asked each of the gods to grant him a gift, that it might be imparted into the wondrous creation. Geb-Agni (back then just Agni, for their joining came later) gifted his father fire, saying that it would bring warmth to the universe and so encourage life to prosper. As recorded elsewhere, Shamash originally had two bright eyes, which bathed the universe in their radiant glow.

Upon being partially blinded by Iblis, Shamash's wounded orb lost its ability to generate heat and his other eye became twice as fierce. Thus did the universe go from being bathed in constant temperate heat to extremes of hot and cold, depending which eye Shamash cast out into the void. While mortals sweated during the day, they spent the long nights shivering, more so in winter, for this is when Shamash wearies after his constant travels. Unused to the cold, many perished. In order that men might live, dispel the shadows of Iblis that haunted the gloom, and remember Shamash while his good eye was scanning the underworld, Qedeset taught men the secret of fire.

Both wood and dried dung are burned in the campfires, hearths, and ovens of Al-Shirkuh. Collecting this is the duty of the mushaf (who collect dung) and harajam (who gather firewood). Beneath notice, these unskilled laborers toil endlessly to keep the citizens warm at night, earning only a pittance for their endeavors.

Throughout the hours of daylight, clerics of Qedeset aid the laborers in collecting dry wood and dung. At night, they deliver their gatherings to households, turning down all offers of reward, for Qedeset freely granted mankind knowledge of fire. The deliveries complete, the lowly dung and wood gathered are rewarded with a hot, hearty meal, a bed by the fire, and a small pouch of dinars.

Allowing a source of fire to go out on this day brings exceptionally bad luck for the next year.

**Note:** Clerics of Geb-Agni also partake in this ritual, for it was their god who allowed his fire to be given to mortals.

## KOTCHA BEARD-CUTTER

Kotcha, a female sand goblin, wandered into Blacksand Oasis several years ago. When the caravan moved on, she elected to stay. Although it took her over a year to earn the nomads trust, her skill as a barber eventually won them round. Her little tent has been outfitted

as a barber's shop, where she tends minor injuries, cuts hair, and trims beards in trade for the little she needs to survive. When the caravans call, she visits the merchants' encampment to ply her trade.

There is more to Kotcha than meets the eye, as is true with most sand goblins who profess to have an honest occupation. She actually runs the local blackmarket in cakali artifacts. The few explorers who know her reputation, which is obviously a closely-guarded secret, sell Kotcha items found in the ash. These are then sold on or traded to visiting merchants. Such finds are extremely rare, and so carry a high price among private collectors.

## NUYAN ALIM-KORKMAZ

A near-permanent resident of Blacksand Oasis, Nuyan, a cakali, claims to be on a life-long pilgrimage. He says an ancestor visited him in a dream, and bade him to scour the Plains of Ash until he found his bones, for until prayers are said his spirit cannot find peace. Skilled at surviving in the deep desert, he spends many weeks each year in the bitter ash.

In truth, Nuyan is a Jinn Slayer. He fanatically believes that any form of communication with jinn, even enslaving them to perform magic, is a dire insult to the memory of his race's ancestors, and that those who employ jinn magic within the Plains of Ash are the worst offenders. His frequent sojourns into the blasted waste are actually hunts for renegade ifrits, the masterminds behind the destruction, and jinn mages who have visited the oasis.

## Why Come Here?

A barren landscape of choking ash, ravaged by firestorms, and with little worth exploring doesn't sound like much of a draw for adventurers, so what might lure them to the forbidding Plains of Ash?

- \* Orders. While it is possible a cleric of Geb-Agni or Qedeset might be sent to the Plains on some quest, very few organizations have an interest in the region. Unless the organization is very small, it is likely to fully fund any expedition, relieving that burden from the heroes.

- \* Duty. Rather than being instructed, characters are more likely to come here of their own volition. Such a visit might relate to their occupation, but idle curiosity should not be underestimated. A cakali may desire to make a pilgrimage to Caklos to honor his ancestors, a cleric of Upuaut may simply wish to walk the ash as part of his constant wanderings, while a jinn mage might come here seeking wisdom from an ifrit, to create a spirit relic, or to collect black ash in the hope it can be used in some beneficial way.

- \* No Choice. It is possible the heroes have little option but to brave the ash. Perhaps they are on the trail of smugglers, kidnappers, or raiders whose escape route took them into the Plain. Such foes would need to be well-equipped if they intended to venture very deep. Maybe a fearsome

beast, such as a dragon, has made its home here and is troubling trade caravans or the outlying Bedu tribes.

\* **Treasure.** Rumors of the Lost Library and so-called Tomb Hills are commonplace along the trade roads, and heroes are likely to hear of them. Unexplored, and potentially boasting great rewards, they are a strong lure.

## Adventure Seeds

\* An alchemist from one of the great cities (GM's choice) desires a sample of corrosive ash, believing it would make his acidic potions more potent. Finding the ash will be extremely hard, and storing it just as problematic. Thieves caught by cakali patrols will face swift and harsh punishment.

\* The heroes catch wind of a rumor that within the Ever-Burning Oasis stands a building. The rumor claims it is home to an ifrit who possesses a great number of fiery relics. Whether or not the story is true, any party curious enough to investigate will need to invest in plentiful alchemical devices to ward off the heat and flames, a cost that may never be recouped.

## Gods & Monsters

This section details three minor deities tied to the cult of Qedeshet, two new monsters, and three hazards unique to the Plains of Ash.

### ENDURSAGA

**Titles:** Master Merchant, Lord of Trade, The Haggler, He Of Open Hands.

**Aspects:** Trade.

**Affiliation:** Qedeshet.

**Symbol:** Weighing scales.

**Priesthood:** Merchant Lords (priests); Far Traders (paladins).

**Herald:** None.

**Holy Days:** Counting Day (p. 7) is a high holy day. Amt Yaus al-Kemi Alak Arkhet and Tamith Yaus al-Kemi Alak Paret are holy days.

**Duties:** To promote trade, to make a profit.

**Sins:** (Minor) selling goods at a loss, knowingly selling stolen goods, failing to pay tax; (Major) not making a profit each month, cheating on weights and measures; (Mortal) committing theft or plundering a tomb, losing a regular trade deal.

**Signature Power:** *Speak language.*

**Powers:** *Boost/lower trait* (Smarts, Spirit, Notice, Persuasion, and Streetwise only), *charismatic aura*, *refuge*, *sentry*, *stun*.

**Trappings:** Any except necromancy, though trappings rarely have any physical effects.

In the old days, the gods each had their own goods as appropriate to their aspects. Many coveted the wares of

their neighbors, but they did not know how to acquire them, for trade (and theft) had not yet been invented. This led to many problems. Ashtart, for instance, grew fat because she was forced to eat all the food she grew, yet she had no cooking pots or cutlery, while Karmelos used his bare hands, for he had no weapons or armor and knew not the secret of forging them.

Qedeshet solved the problem by teaching the gods the secrets of trading, allowing them to exchange goods for something of equal value. The gods demanded he oversee all their trades to ensure they were fair, but Qedeshet had other matters to attend. Instead, he nominated Endursaga, his quartermaster, as minor god of trade.

The cult of Qedeshet endeavors to separate its scholastic and trade aspects, primarily because it doesn't want the temples to become rowdy centers of business full of shouting merchants. Thus, Endursaga is one of a few minor gods with dedicated temples. These are usually only found in the souks and bazaars, where they serve not just as spiritual buildings but as places where merchants gather to make deals. Most shops have the god's holy symbol marked over their door.

Both types of clergy are concerned with trade. Priests tend to operate in the cities, either operating as merchants or, more commonly, as mediators in trade negotiations. They are often responsible for setting the price of goods and evaluating the value of imports. Paladins frequently travel the deserts. Some follow set routes and carry cargoes known to fetch a good price, while others are speculators. It is not unknown for them to serve as caravan guards, though their spells are not well suited to combat. Unlike the northern cult of Var, paladins are not dedicated to catching thieves.

Ceremonies demand the sacrifice of goods. Each year, usually on Counting Day, a cleric must sacrifice goods with a value equal to 100 dinars times his Faith die type. This is not intended to reduce the cleric's profits—it is a trade of spiritual power for mundane goods. Clerics who fail to perform this duty have their Faith die lowered by one step for each 200 dinars or part thereof the sacrifice falls short. It remains at this reduced level until *double* the missing value is offered in sacrifice.

**Character Guidelines:** As merchants, clerics need good Streetwise for finding buyers. Persuasion is useful for negotiating contracts. Aside from combat skills, paladins should invest in Survival. The Expert Haggler Edge is an ideal choice. Since the cleric needs both Persuasion and Streetwise, Connections is a logical Edge.

### GUNARA

**Titles:** He Who Questions, Bloodhound of the Gods, The Curious One, Finder of Secrets, Upuaut's Bane.

**Aspects:** Investigation.

**Affiliation:** Qedeshet.

**Symbol:** A magnifying lens.

**Priesthood:** Tongues (priests); Eyes (paladins).

**Herald:** None.

**Holy Days:** Tamith Yaus al-Sesht Alak Arkhet is a high

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holy day. Holy days are held on the first Yaus al-Sesht of each season.

**Duties:** To investigate things.

**Sins:** (Minor) failure to complete an investigative contract within the set time; (Major) deliberately ignoring a clue, falsifying or doctoring your findings; (Mortal) refusing to reveal your findings to a patron.

**Signature Power:** *Boost/lower trait* (Investigation, Notice, Streetwise, and Tracking only).

**Powers:** *Altered senses, detect (no conceal), farsight, gravespeak, insight, speak language, wandering senses.*

**Trappings:** Any except necromancy, though trappings rarely have any physical effects.

Qedesht may be all knowing, but he is also very busy. All too often the other gods would come to him seeking answers to problems—where did I drop my necklace, where can I find a certain plant, is my wife having an affair. Fed up with the constant pestering regarding matters he considered trivial and beneath his attention, Qedesht promoted one of his faithful servants, Gunara, a humble librarian with a curious streak a mile wide and a nose for finding obscure things, to the role of minor god of investigation.

Gunara has no dedicated temples, but shrines can be found in all temples of Qedesht. Often they take the form of a side room, where patrons can hire clerics. Most cities have a shrine in the central marketplace. Here, worshippers leave offerings in the hope the god will help solve their problems of who murdered a love one, the whereabouts of a lost pet, the location of stolen objects, and so on. Usually a shrine is a stone pillar with hundreds of cracks. Prayers are written on scraps of parchment and stuffed into a vacant crack. Clerics frequently visit the local shrine to read the prayers. If one captures their interest, they contact the worshipper and offer to help—for a price.

Clerics work primarily as investigators, helping others uncover things. Typical roles including spying, aiding the authorities in investigating crimes or finding missing persons, tracking down obscure knowledge, and helping uncover lost ruins. Priests tend to be more bookish than paladins, who are more inclined toward field work than research. Most clerics work as freelancers, taking work where they can find it.

Ceremonies are private affairs, the cleric taking the time to thank his god for aiding him in his investigations. Traditionally, clerics donate around 10% of earnings from investigative contracts either to the cult of Qedesht or offering it up as a sacrifice. Such offerings typically involve the cleric purchasing an object and then deliberately hiding it for Gunara to find.

**Character Guidelines:** As befits a cleric's role, Investigation, Notice, and Streetwise are core skills. The Investigator Edge should be taken during character generation as a matter of course, as it is a perfect fit. Those wanting to work as spies or private investigators should invest in Stealth as well, while bounty hunters might wish to consider Survival and Tracking. Curious is a common Hindrance, but it is not a requirement.

## ISIMUD

**Titles:** Voice of the Gods, Giver of Words, The Storyteller, Herald of the Gods, Messenger of the Heavens.

**Aspects:** Communication.

**Affiliation:** Qedesht, Marqod.

**Symbol:** A scroll with the letters of the alphabet written upon it.

**Priesthood:** Anointed Heralds (priests); Anointed Messengers (paladins).

**Herald:** None.

**Holy Days:** Storytelling Day (p. 12) is a high holy day. Clerics are expected to nominate one Yaus al-Sesht as a personal holy day.

**Duties:** To translate between different languages, to deliver messages.

**Sins:** (Minor) interrupting a speaker before he has finished, altering any form of written communication, reading a message meant for someone else; (Major) deliberately mistranslating something, harming a messenger or herald; (Mortal) refusing to teach an illiterate person to read and write, killing a messenger or herald.

**Signature Power:** *Speak language.*

**Powers:** *Boost/lower trait* (Intimidation, Persuasion, Streetwise, and Taunt only), *charismatic aura, gravespeak, voice on the wind.*

**Trappings:** Any except necromancy, though trappings rarely have any physical effects.

**Special:** Followers of Isimud cannot be Illiterate.

While most legends place the creation of the universe with Shamash, one obscure text of dubious authenticity uses the name Isimud. In most texts this is translated as the Word, meaning the command of Shamash, but there are those who claim that while Shamash had the will, it was Isimud, a minor deity, who wielded the power.

Most often he is described as being the offspring of Qedesht and Marqod, the husband of Tashmetum, and Shamash's herald. When the gods deign to speak to a mortal, such as in his dream, it is Isimud who delivers the message. Some clerics argue he also grants spells, for he is the voice of the gods. Unusually for a minor deity his aspects are many, for as god of communication he is responsible for everything from writing to storytelling.

Temples are rare, but Isimud is honored in most halls sacred to Qedesht. Here, clerics and lay scribes spend their days translating texts or writing messages and contracts, for Isimud is also seen as the patron of scribes. Shrines can be found in Marqod's temples, for his skill at speaking and translating aids her duty as mediator of disputes. Small shrines, usually little more than a sacred scroll, can be found in the halls of mundane scribes and translators, and in libraries.

Clerics perform a variety of roles, though all are heavily related to communication. The prime services they offer are acting as translators (oral or written), storytellers, scribes, messengers, and heralds. Some serve a noble house or organization, such as a guild, while others are freelance operatives. In general, priests prefer to take jobs that involve a distinct lack of violence, while pala-

dins generally serve in troubled areas or in times of war. Regardless of their role, they are treated with the respect accorded heralds.

Ceremonies always involve some form of communication. Whether it is written or verbal is down to the individual cleric. Some clerics chose to tell stories, others spend the time quietly scribing, while others engage in debates on whatever topic happens to take their fancy.

**Character Guidelines:** Being able to converse is vital to clerics of Isimud. Persuasion and Streetwise are their core skills, with Intimidation and Taunt secondary ones. Linguist and Storyteller are favored Edges.

## ASH GHOST

The Plains of Ash is haunted by many ghosts. While a few are the spiritual remains of explorers, the most fearsome are the remnants of the cakali who perished in the conflagration. Bound to their homeland by their anger and lust for revenge, they have learned to retake their mortal form by forming bodies from the black ash. These are cakali shaped, but are otherwise faceless and featureless. Their weapons, regardless of the form they take, are always blunt.

Ash ghosts are rarely found walking the wastes. Rather, the spirits lurk beneath the dust, often close to their place of death, taking shape as they rise. Their physical form is merely a shell, and attacks against it do nothing to harm the spirit that lurks inside. In order to put the spirit to rest permanently, magic must be employed. Ash ghosts are subject to *banish*. This applies even when they are wearing their ash shell.

Ash ghosts are liable to attack jinn mages on sight, as well as tomb robbers carrying cakali artifacts. If intruders come in peace and make suit supplication, ash ghosts may leave them alone. They are filled with fury and driven by anger, and so do not enter into conversation.

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

**Skills:** Fighting d6, Intimidation d6, Notice d8, Stealth d12, Tracking d12

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

**Gear:** Various weapons made of solidified ash. Damage is always (Str+d6)

**Treasure:** None

**Special Abilities:**

- \* **Burrow (6"):** Ash ghosts can only burrow through the Plains of Ash.
- \* **Cannot be Disarmed:** An ash ghost's weapons are part of its shell and so cannot be disarmed. If a Disarm attack is successful, it reforms the weapon as a free action.
- \* **Elemental:** No additional damage from Called Shots; Fearless; immune to disease and poison; suffers no wound penalties.
- \* **Hardy:** Multiple Shaken results never cause a wound.
- \* **Reform:** If an ash ghost is slain by any means other than magic, it reforms in 1d4 rounds.

## FESTIVAL TO QEDESHET

### FUTURES DAY

*Tamith Yaus al-Sesbt Alak Neteru*

Before the invention of Time, there was only the present. The gods could not remember things they had already done, for there was no past and thus no memory. Neither could they plan ahead, for there was no future and no foresight. Chaos reigned supreme. According to legend, Qedesht explored beyond the edge of the known universe, wandering the fathomless void where the gods had no power. Here he discovered a tiny serpent called Time.

Time told Qedesht he had been snatched from the universe at the moment of its creation by Iblis and abandoned here, for Time was a servant of order. Qedesht carried the snake back to his celestial house, feeding it with his blood to help it grow. Thus did Time enter the universe. Time quickly grew to infinite length and infinite intelligence, for it had drunk from the wisest of the gods and thus knew all that had been and all that was to come.

In order that no god might know the future, and thus change the order of things to come, Time split its body into infinite strands. Qedesht, who sought knowledge of everything, started to run along Time's back, but each time he chose a particular strand to follow, it too split into infinite pathways. Clerics spend the day drawing up horoscopes, calculating the positions of the celestial objects, both fixed and moving, the phase of the moon, the height of the sun, and so on, based on a person's date of birth. From this, they answer questions of importance, such as whether a wife will bare a child, whether a man will find a good wife, and whether a business transaction should go head.

Diviners claim to look through the eyes of Qedesht as he runs along Time. But while the god of knowledge may look down one path of the serpent's back, he may walk down another, altering his viewpoint and thus what the future holds. For this reason, diviners warn those seeking knowledge of the future that the further ahead they look, the less accurate the outlook becomes.

- \* **Weakness (Air):** Takes double damage from spells with an air trapping.

## ASH MUMMY

Necromancy is ineffective against those who died in the cataclysm, for naught remains of them but ash. Bodies laid to rest in the ash, whether interred deliberately or who die while exploring, slowly mummify as the dry sand leeches the liquid from their corpses. While some

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ash mummies are the product of necromancy, others are inhabited by cakali ghosts. Most often they arise to thwart tomb robbers, though jinn mages, especially those who traffic with ifrits, are at risk of assault.

Not all ash mummies are wrapped in bandages. Many are naked. Their flesh, blackened by the ash, is taut, clinging thinly to their equally black bones. Few carry weapons, for grave goods are not common in Al-Shirkuh.

**Attributes:** Agility d4, Smarts d4, Spirit d8, Strength d10, Vigor d8

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

**Pace:** 4; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 9 (1)

**Gear:** Usually none for those deliberately interred, but a fallen explorer will retain the gear it had in life

**Treasure:** None

**Special Abilities:**

- \* **Armor +1:** Hardened skin.
- \* **Burrowing (4"):** These mummies can burrow through ash.
- \* **Combustion:** Anyone touched by an ash mummy, even if not injured by the attack, has a chance of catching fire. Initial damage is 1d10.
- \* **Fear:** Anyone seeing an ash mummy must make a Spirit roll.
- \* **Immunity (Fire/Heat):** Take no damage from spells with a fire or heat trapping.
- \* **Shuffling Gait:** Mummies roll a d4 running die.
- \* **Slam:** Str.
- \* **Undead:** +2 Toughness. +2 to recover from being Shaken. No additional damage from Called Shots. Immune to disease and poison.

## HAZARDS

### BLACK MIRES

Before the jinn rained down fire, the Plains of Ash boasted several small oases. The subterranean springs that feed them continue to bubble into the ash, creating an area of liquid known as black mires. Covered with wind-blown particles, mires are indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape. Treat them as quicksand, except the roll to notice them is made at -4.

### CORROSIVE ASH

Fire was not the only destruction brought down upon the cakali homeland. Corrosive black rain (some claim this was ifrit blood or spittle), so potent it could melt stone, also tumbled from the skies. While much of this eventually diluted, some areas of ash are still imbued with its corrosive properties. Typically it is found in patches equivalent to Medium and Large Burst Templates. Any creature that enters or begins its turn in an area of corrosive ash takes 2d4 damage with an acid trapping.

**Sandstorms:** Very rarely this sand is whipped up into a sandstorm and carried across the Plains of Ash. The

## FESTIVAL TO QEDESHET

### STORYTELLING DAY

*Baot Yaus al-Sesbt Ansbi Alak Shemu*

Storytelling is an important part of daily life among all the desert cultures. Stories keep alive the memory of events, impart knowledge, preserve one's culture, teach moral lessons, and entertain in equal measure. The art of storytelling is not simply one of monotonous repetition, for this is no way to capture an audience's ears. The best storytellers in Al-Shirkuh employ words, gestures, sounds, and images in their work, and perhaps just a little magic. Regardless of their regular job, worshippers of Qedesht must take time on this day to entertain others with stories. The subject matter is personal choice—some tell tales their fathers told them, other repeat cultural or religious myths, while the gifted create new stories.

Clerics must spend the entire day performing this activity. It is not unusual for clerics to ask for a monetary show of appreciation afterward, though all funds gathered in this manner must be donated to the next temple of Qedesht the cleric visits. Failure to do so is a minor sin, but the penalty remains until the error is corrected in full.

corrosive ash is heavily mixed with normal ash, and only long-term exposure is fatal. Instead, of Fatigue, characters who fail their Vigor roll suffer 2d6 damage (acid trapping) per hour of exposure. Unfortunately, it is next to impossible to differentiate a regular ash storm from a corrosive one until one's flesh starts to blister.

### SOUL ASH

Not every cakali soul passed over to the next world after the jinn's attack. Whether the spirits remained on the mortal world as a result of some fell jinn magic or out of anger or disbelief is unknown. While some haunt the land as ash ghosts, others have merged with the debris to form soul ash.

Moving across soul ash without disturbing the spirit within requires a Stealth roll at a -2 penalty. If the modified Stealth roll is 1 or lower, or the character does not bother making a roll, the ash emits a particularly heart-clenching wail, while the sand bulges upward to form larger than life faces of tormented cakali. Some explorers tell of fire-blackened skeletons rising up, though these do not appear to be undead, for they have never attacked the living.

All creatures within a Large Burst Template centered on the character who failed the roll must make a Spirit roll or suffer Fear until out of the soul ash. A critical failure generates Terror.