

HELLFROST LAND OF FIRE

• REALM GUIDE #16 •

REALM OF THE MEDUSAE

Introduction

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For thousands of years the medusae have slumbered beneath the Statue Hills, waking only once every century or so to check on their minions and put their long-term plans into action. The return of the ophidae has given them new hope, for now it is possible to sire a new generation. Soon their eggs will hatch. Soon the hatchlings will grow to adulthood. Soon the medusae will emerge from the subterranean homes to conquer the surrounding desert. This supplement expands on material found in *Hellfrost: Land of Fire*.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE REALM

Today the land may be commonly known as the Realm of the Medusae, but they are but the most recent of many cultures and races to call the hills (and surrounding desert) their home. Although always arid, in the days before Hekata rose to power there was enough rain to support settlements, albeit only small towns and villages. Indeed, before the downfall of the jinn rainfall was still enough to provide for subsistence level existence.

Though the landscape was hard to traverse and farm, the region rapidly grew to become a trading crossroads. Merchants from the Grazelands, the land now known as the Free Emirates, Hekata, and the distant cities of the Empty Zone all came here to conduct business. Though the native cultures produced little of worth, the people grew prosperous from the caravans that flowed through their settlements.

The names of the human cultures that once dwelt here are long-forgotten, erased first by the scorpionmen and ophidae during their long and bitter war which saw many humans enslaved, and later by the armies of Hekata, who came here as liberators but imposed their own culture on the inhabitants. Scraps of writing clearly show a hieroglyphic script, not uncommon at this time, for the cakali had yet to extend their teachings this far. Unfortunately for scholars, their words cast no light on the names of the people, their settlements, or their gods. Even the Bedu speak of these ancient cultures only in terms of the hill people, the desert people, and the valley people. It seems these names originated in Hekata, for similar titles have been unearthed there.

Weathered remains of buildings, mere stumps after five millennia, show little sophistication. Mud bricks were favored over stone, and if they built grand temples or palaces they have not withstood the passage of time. Likewise, no tombs have been found. Perhaps they cremated their dead, maybe some of the tombs associated with Hekata or the tunnels now used by orcs and hyaenidae once housed their dead, or possibly their tombs have simply yet to be discovered. For now, they are a mystery, more lost cultures among many.

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RULES OF THE REALM

Apply these rules in the Realm of the Medusae.

* **Arid:** The Realm of the Medusae is extremely arid. The chances of rainfall are 1% in summer, 5% in spring and fall, and 10% in winter. Even when it does rain, there is only a 10% chance the water soaks the barren rock and sand.

* **Eyes Everywhere:** The medusae are a paranoid lot, ever suspicious of their sisters. The hills and forest are seeded with spies—serpent, hyaenidae, and orc. Each day, intruders must make a Cooperative Stealth roll, with the character with the *lowest* Stealth as the lead, opposed by a Notice d6 (a generic value used to represent the many sentries) in the hills, and d8 in the Forest of Stone. Characters maneuvering through the valleys have a +2 bonus. Failure means the characters' intrusion has been discovered. An orc or hyaenidae attack is likely to occur within the next 2d4 hours.

* **No Trading:** The Realm of the Medusae has no shops. Once the characters enter this realm they must rely on whatever resources they have at their disposal or can scavenge from the dead.

* **Noisy Forest:** Throughout the day and night the Forest of Pillars is extremely noisy. Creaks and groans echo constantly as the cracked pillars expand and contract with temperature changes. Notice rolls involving sound are made at -2 because of the constant noise.

* **Temperature:** The heat in the Forest of Pillars is intense during the day. It is only slightly lower at night, being kept higher than the surrounding lands by the pillars, which slowly release the heat they have stored. The nighttime temperature drops just 1d2 levels.

During daylight hours, the temperature in the valleys of the Statue Hills is Scorching. On the exposed hill tops and in the Forest of Pillars is it Very Hot.

HOW MANY MEDUSAE?

This simple question has kept scholars and explorers engaged in debate since the days of Hekata. The lowest estimates place their strength at a few hundred, the highest in the thousands. For all the tales and legends, the total number of medusae alive today number just 30. That will soon rise dramatically, for after millennia they have once again bred with captive ophidae. Hundreds of eggs lie undisturbed, and they are close to hatching.

Even if the lords of the great cities knew just how few they were, it is unlikely they would even consider launching expeditions to eradicate them. The medusae and their servants do not trouble the outside world (save for raiding foolish caravans that stray too close to the border), the region is remote from the cities, and the various myths regarding their powers would lead to mutiny if an army were ordered to go there and wage war.

HIBERNATION

As noted in the core setting book, medusae are not immortal, and extend their lives through entering a state of hibernation. In this state their body ages at a rate of just a few months for each century that drifts by. Entering torpor is not like falling asleep.

First, it takes months of mental and physical preparation to condition the medusa for her extended rest. Unlike preparing for torpor, a medusa can awaken from hibernation and be fully alert in a heartbeat.

Second, unlike a sleeper, the medusa is not oblivious to the waking world. While her senses are greatly dulled, she can still employ them. It is rather like sensing the world through a thick fog. Treat a slumbering medusa's Notice as d4. Still, it does mean they can listen to reports from their underlings, and then decide whether or not they need to rouse themselves to deal with the situation. Some medusa have even learned how to give brief orders while in torpor, though this is physically and mentally demanding, and leaves the medusa weakened. For the purposes of oversleeping (see below), each order given counts as an additional decade of sleep.

Torpor is not an indefinite means of prolonging life, and there are risks. For each century of unbroken sleep after the fourth, the medusa's Strength and Vigor drop one die as her body begins to wither. Once either attribute drops below a d4, she can no longer rouse herself. Unless awakened by her minions (or physical injury that causes at least a Shaken result), she will eventually die. Lost attribute dice recover at the rate of one die (not per attribute) per year of being fully awake.

Medusae are experts at long-term planning. Sleeping for centuries means that much will change in the world. Their servants are given instructions to help them cope with this mistress' prolonged absence, and they have proven very adept at following them to both the spirit and the letter. Since Suleiman walked the earth, no medusa has died from excessive hibernation.

Once they awaken, they spend the first few months learning what has transpired since they entered hibernation. They may then spend a decade or more planning their next moves before returning to sleep. Without ever hibernating, a medusa can expect to live for around five hundred years.

Exploration

Although the medusae are rightly feared, the greatest dangers to explorers are the heat and the lack of water. There is little one can do about the former. Once the sun rises, the exposed rock rapidly heats.

Travelling through the winding valleys protects one from the searing rays of the sun, but it is like walking through an oven. With only slight air flow to provide any respite, the air rapidly grows hot enough to scorch the lungs. Movement across the hill tops is cooler, but this leaves one exposed to the many spies employed by

the medusae. In the Forest of Pillars, not even nightfall brings respite from the heat, for the stony remains of the trees radiate heat absorbed during the day.

The valleys provide cover from sentries up above, but often they narrow to a width that permits only single file. In some instances explorers must turn sideways to navigate along them. In the latter case, it is only possible to use one hand in combat, this robbing intruders of their weapon or shield.

Despite being regarded as arid and barren, those wise in the lore of the desert and blessed with a little luck can find nourishment. Pools of water lie just under the surface where rocks overhang the valleys, and there is even edible plant life in such places. Edible small animals, such as jerboa, scorpions, and snakes hop, crawl, and slither through the valley bottoms, sheltered from the burning sun except for a few hours each day. On the hills, they hide in cracks, coming out to hunt only in the hours before dawn or after dusk.

Bedu joke that a man may not have a thick skin before he enters the Realm of the Medusae, but he will quickly gain one on his travels. Fortunately, and contrary to many stories, the medusae are largely inactive—perhaps one or two are awake at any one time. What explorers must beware are their orc and hyaenidae slaves.

Those who claim feelings of being watched are rarely suffering from heat exhaustion. Concealed in rock cut caves and the remains of watchtowers of old, these loyal servants keep a close eye on who enters the realm, as well as the troop movements of rival medusae. Warlike, greedy, and hungry, they use their knowledge of the landscape to prepare deadly ambushes.

Military

Medusa appreciate order, and their slaves are arranged on the principles of units of ten. Ten warriors form a squad (led by an elite warrior), ten squads form a company (led by a non-Wild Card chieftain), and ten companies form a regiment (led by a Wild Card chieftain). Typically, every company has two priests and a war drummer as part of the command squad.

To prevent unnecessary disruption, orcs and hyaenidae are never employed in the same units. In practise, such rigid organization is virtually impossible to achieve. Squads of ten are easy enough to form, but not every medusa has enough warriors at her disposal to create whole regiments.

For orcs, this rigid command structure means the usual means of promotion through murdering your superior have been abolished in favor of earning rank through loyalty and hard work. Not only does this make the orcs unusual, it makes them a superior enemy.

In addition, each medusa maintain a personal bodyguard of one to five companies. These fanatics rarely leave her nest, and membership is reserved for elite troops. Unofficially, they are known as Eyes, for it is also

part of their duties to report any dissension in the ranks to their slumbering mistress. Few medusae trust hyaenidae to watch over their slumbering bodies and fabulous wealth. In game terms, all bodyguard units are made up of elite orc warriors, and every squad is led by a non-Wild Card chieftain.

Even though they can receive reports while asleep, medusae prefer to remain undisturbed. Standing orders are passed down through the generations, hammered home into every warrior the moment he is old enough to talk. Punishment for those who disobey these orders is swift and harsh—officers never know when their mistress may awaken to request a status update, and their fate is worse then death, for it is said to be turned to stone traps the soul.

Major Locales

In many cases the existence of these locales is only rumored, and of the more monstrous locales, they are mentioned only in fanciful tales designed to warn people from entering the realm of the medusae. Whether or not they truly exist will only be settled when a brave enough party of adventurers investigates the region in detail.

AMPHITHEATER OF THE DAMNED

On the central southern slopes of the Statue Hills is a natural, circular depression. The inner slopes have been artificially terraced, though the workmanship is crude. Ingress into the depression can be gained from clambering down the hills and through the terraces, or by walking through a gateway flanked by lifelike statues of warriors, their weapons held aloft in salute, that marks the entrance from the forest floor.

The centre of the depression is flat, an immense circle measuring 100 yards across. Gazing up, one feels one is standing inside an amphitheater. Dotted throughout the arena floor are dozens of statues. Almost every race is represented, as are many fearsome beasts. Most are badly damaged, cracked by time, and missing limbs. Even so, it is still possible to discern that they are remarkably lifelike, and were once masterpieces of sculpture. Given their origin, this is not surprising.

The depression is indeed an amphitheater. Here, medusae settle disputes by having champions fight to the death. Those defeated are rarely put to the sword—the medusae have a more pleasing manner of executing the losers. Though rarer now, gladiatorial events pitting orcs against captives from other races once kept the slaves amused and their appetite for blood quenched.

Fortunately for interlopers, the arena is used only rarely, so the odds of encountering a medusa are very low. Unfortunately, not all of the statues are inanimate. A few are stone golems, imported long ago to fight in

MAKING GOLEMS & STATUES

While golems and animated statues are usually humanoid, it is possible to create them in the shape of any creature. Below are some guidelines.

LIVING STATUES

Living statues are mortal creatures who fell victim to the petrifying gaze of a medusae and who have been given false life. Whether or not a medusa's gaze really traps the soul is irrelevant—a living statue is not a sentient being, and has absolutely no personality. To create one, take the base stats of the living creature and apply the following changes.

- * Smarts drops to d4 (A).
- * Vigor increases one die. Above a d12, Vigor increases by a single point (so d12+1, etc).
- * Ignore any armor (worn or natural). Drop the damage die of edged and piercing weapons one step. Damage falling below a d4 becomes zero.
- * Add Arcane Resistance, Armor (+3), Construct, Fearless, and Slam (Str damage) to the special abilities. Drop any Undead ability.
- * Retain the creature's original Size.
- * Decide which other abilities to retain. Because of the medusae's ritual, most abilities still apply. For instance, a stone manticores can still fire tail darts, venomous creatures can still inject poison, and so on. Spellcasting is impossible due to the creature having no intelligence. Common sense should always apply—a stone royal guard mummy may have mummy rot, but it's no longer susceptible to fire.

STONE GOLEMS

Unlike the ghastly living statues so beloved by medusae, stone golems only take the form of living creatures—they were never alive. To create unusual stone golems, take the base Traits for the living creature the golem represents, and apply the following changes.

- * Smarts drops to a d4. Any (A) rating is lost—golems may not be geniuses, but they are capable of logical thought.
- * Increase Vigor by two die types. Above a d12, Vigor increases by a single point (so d12+1, etc).
- * Apply the Armor, Construct, Fearless, Hardy, and Slam special abilities. Size is variable. Creatures with a Size rating retain that value if the golem is intended to be life-sized, though it is always possible to create larger or smaller golems.
- * Other special abilities based on the base creature stats should be determined by the GM. Golems can have natural weapons, such as bite and claws, but most others except Combat Edges should be dropped—golems are not living statues.

the arena as gladiators, while others are living statues, victims of the medusae's fell gaze given an artificial semblance of life through complex rituals. While they fight any creatures stupid enough to step into the arena (unless given orders to the contrary by a medusa), they do not venture past the gates. They will, however, climb into the terraces in pursuit of intruders.

ANARI CASTLE (RUINED)

The Anari conquerors only built cities in what is now the Free Emirates, but their emperors were keen to expand beyond the protected strip of land into the interior of Al-Shirkuh, lured by nomads' talk of fabulous cities filled with gold, silver, and gems.

In order to provide trade caravans and armies with a safe haven in the hostile wastes, the Anari constructed a huge castle in the western hills of the Realm of the Medusae. The fortification was large enough to house 400 fighting men and the staff needed to support them, a monstrous edifice to the growing insanity of the emperors and their grand dreams.

Although frequently troubled by orcs and hyaenidae subservient to the medusae, the snake-headed devils did nothing to remove the interlopers—the castle lay far from their nests, and the invaders soon learned the limits of where they were welcome. Attempts to expand south were thwarted by the jinn, and northward the ghastly legions of Hekata swelled their ranks with new recruits from the doomed expedition forces. In the end, the castle marked the furthest permanent expansion of the Anari into the true desert, and it was an isolated outpost.

The Anari learned to their cost just how hostile the desert could be. With no natural water supply, no oases within hundreds of miles, and little rainfall, the garrison was forced to rely on caravans from their distant cities to supply all their provisions. These proved prime targets for hostile Bedu tribesmen and the medusae's minions.

Today, the ruin is abandoned. Bandit gangs occasionally seek refuge here, or use it as a temporary headquarters, but they rarely stay long. Nomads claim the ruins are haunted by the spirits of the Anari soldiers, who perished of thirst or went mad and leapt from the walls. Even the orcs and hyaenidae give it a wide berth.

CURSED VALLEY OF PYRAMIDS

In the northeast of the Forest of Pillars lies the mouth of a wide valley. The medusae's servants fear to venture here, making it appear a sanctuary for trespassers.

Dotted across the valley for many miles are small, mud brick pyramids. Each rises no more than 20 feet into the air, and has similar dimensions at the base. If inscriptions once marked the stones, they are long crumbled to dust, for the structures are in a poor state.

What the pyramids might contain has never been discerned. It is entirely possible one or more were opened in the olden times, but no inscriptions relating to the strange edifices have been unearthed. The logical con-

clusion is they are tombs, perhaps of the earliest kings who ruled here. Near the entrance are great piles of shattered pottery, indications of a long tradition of offerings. It requires some digging to reach the layer of pots deposited by the Hekatics, for the orcs and hyaenidae have also honored whatever rests within the tombs.

At the far end, cut into the sheer cliffs that mark the valley's terminus, are a pair of huge stone doors. These are engraved only with a single image, a gargantuan head with an enlarged cranium and tentacles sprouting from its maw, its colossal form straddling the join where the doors meet. What lies beyond it anyone's guess.

Some strange magic protects the site, for unless one travels along the valley floor it is impossible to locate the end of the valley from other routes. Records laid down long ago tell of hardened explorers become lost in the hills even while walking the slopes above the valley, and of feelings they were being guided away from the cliffs by some monstrous, alien personality.

GRAND TEMPLE OF SS'ESSLIS

While the medusae remain hostile toward the ophidae, they actually follow the same god—the medusae believe they are the appointed followers of Ss'esslis (his inhuman cult will be detailed in *Realm Guide #17: The Snakelands of Old*), destined to rule the mortal realm in the name of the Coiled Serpent. To honor their deity, they erected a huge temple.

Under ancient tradition laid down long ago, only the queen and her appointed successor (the next oldest medusa) may study to become priests. When one dies, another is chosen to take her place.

The Grand Temple supposedly lies at the heart of the Forest of Statues. Legends and stories indicate much of the temple is below ground, the upper structure being little more than a fortified entrance watched over by fanatical orc guards. The stories go on to tell that within the main hall, located at least three levels below the sun-baked surface, is a huge statue of the snake god, a statue made of solid gold with emerald eyes the size of fists and a red tongue carved from a single, perfect ruby. Not only is the temple guarded by fierce orcs, but it is home to many gigantic serpents. Talk of curses placed upon the gems is popular with storytellers.

A network of tunnels extends deep into the surrounding hills, linking the various medusae nests. These tunnels are heavily trapped, and the whereabouts of the defenses known only to the individual medusa to whose lair they lead and her closest supporters.

HEKATIC RUINS

The Hekatic pharaohs' war with the scorpionmen led to their armies conquering the Statue Hills, an outpost of the scorpionmen. Too arid to farm and of little military use, the pharaohs nonetheless built temples here to mark their victories and fortifications to guard against counterattacks by the vengeful scorpionmen.

Around -1925, the medusae entered the Statue Hills. The Hekatic defenders put up a brave resistance, but their swords and arrows were no match for the gaze of the fell snake-women. Abandoning their holdings, the armies marched first to Hekata, and then to wage a war of vengeance on the ophidae, for it was obvious to the pharaohs the medusae were a tool of the snake-men. Although victorious, they returned to the arid hills only much later, and their second foray was short.

Still visible today on the hilltops are the weathered remains of stone temples and mud brick forts. Nothing of value remains, for the orcs and ophidae have had over two millennia to pick over the remains.

Everwatch Fort: Built by Pharaoh Banenre II, it served as a refuge from the conflict tearing apart Hekata. Banenre's dreams of forging a new kingdom with him as its eternal ruler were short-lived, for no sooner was the fort completed than Apophis rose from his slumber and brought the pharaohs to heel. Fearful of the great lord's power, Banenre departed for Hekata to swear allegiance to the unliving god, leaving his soldiers, several companies of skeletal warriors, behind in readiness for his return. What became of Banenre is unknown, but he never again walked the Statue Hills.

For over 1500 years, the pharaoh's loyal warriors have obeyed their last order to the letter—protect the fort. Their numbers have been greatly reduced by orc attacks down the centuries, but they still patrol the battlements in the heat of day and chill of night.

What attracts treasure hunters here is the story of the pyramid. That the fort was constructed by a pharaoh is logical, for no others wielded the authority for such a project. What else could be inside the pyramid but a pharaoh's treasury? The pyramid is mostly solid. A secret door allows access to a stairwell cut into the hill. At the bottom is a series of treasure vaults, protected by traps and guarded by undead creatures.

The fort is a simple mud brick compound with a small pyramid of similar construction at its core—a far cry from the magnificent monuments for which Hekata was renowned.

Noble Tombs: Many of the nobles who once ruled here in the name of the pharaohs still lie in their rock cut tombs cut into the steep sides of isolated valleys. The various necropoleis contain anywhere from 5 to 50 chambers. With little wealth to pay workers, noble dynasties were interred in the same funerary complex.

The medusae's servants have plundered dozens of tombs down the ages, but they quickly learned the meager rewards were not worth the dangers, and so gave up the practice. As nobles of a worthless border realm, their grave goods were those of paupers compared to their kith and kin back in the Hekatic homeland. Cunningly worked traps destroyed their bodies, while vengeful mummies, awakened in or shortly after -302, threaten their immortal souls.

Unfortunately for would-be heroes, the nomads that live in the surrounding region have inflated the wealth of the nobles to levels that would make an emir faint with

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jealousy. These tales have lured many a greedy soul to an untimely death.

JINN GATES

At the southeastern edge of the blasted hills, at the mouth of a narrow valley that marks the easiest point of entry into the core of the domain, stand two colossal stone columns. Once they were decorated with writing, but time and the elements have these away. Nomad tradition, which has filtered along the trade roads to the great cities, takes two forms.

Faithful claim they were created by Geb-Agni, who came to hate the medusae after the ophidae deity Ss'esslis stole the secret of how to transform things into stone. Written upon them were fell curses that keep the medusae from ever leaving their homeland. Since they are never found elsewhere, they logically conclude the curse is obviously still working.

Devoted swear the columns are actually two marid jinn. Suleiman, wise in all things, tricked them into entering the realm. Some say he taunted them, claiming that the medusae were masters of the earth, not they. The pair had barely put a foot inside the accursed realm when they gazed upon the glittering eyes of the unholy creations of the ophidae.

Over the centuries, the gates have become sacred places. Faithful believe that Geb-Agni is present here, for he is lord of all stone, while Devoted claim the spirits of the jinn serve those who give proper supplication in the hope Suleiman will take pity on them and release them from their captivity. The area between the gates shows clear signs of intense heat being applied many times. Those who do not know the legends (Knowledge: Folklore roll required) often believe some diabolical trap incinerates those foolish enough to step through the gates.

Spirit Name: Eye-Shield (Faithful) or The Stone Twins (Devoted).

Ambience: In the gap between the gates, living creatures feel as if they have grit in their eyes. A Spirit roll is required each time one enters the area to become distracted by the constant irritation. Failure means a -1 penalty to all Trait tests. On leaving the area, the irritation immediately ends.

Deity: Geb-Agni (Faithful) or majin jinn (Devoted).

Senses: Notice d4.

Communication: None.

Powers: Those who complete the ritual of sacrifice gain a +2 bonus to Spirit rolls to avoid being petrified by a medusa's gaze. Notice is reduced one die type, to a minimum of the supplicant becoming unskilled. The ability and its linked penalty last but ten rounds (one minute), but can be activated any time as a free action within a year and a day of the ability being granted.

The same bonus also applies to *entangle*, *hamper movement*, and *sluggish reflexes* powers with a stone trapping, though for those thinking of entering the Realm of the Medusae this is a secondary benefit.

Sacrifice: In order to awaken the spirit, supplicants must destroy metal items to a value of 500 dinars. These must be melted down to slag between the gates, a process taking an entire day (one must construct a furnace and bring it to an intense heat).

THE LABYRINTH

Stories of labyrinths are popular entertainment among all civilized races. The heroes of these tales must show cunning and resourcefulness to navigate them and avoid the many pitfalls, though of course there is always an element of combat against some deadly guardian to keep audiences interested.

Legends say the labyrinth of the Statue Hills was constructed by a Hekatic pharaoh to protect his enormous treasure hoard while he lived. A moral tale, it tells how the pharaoh forgot the safe route as old age addled his brain. Since only he could open the magical locks that protected the treasure house at its heart, he was forced to enter the maze. Naturally, he never came out.

More modern stories tell that Suleiman created the labyrinth either to protect secret wisdom or as a spiritual journey for those who seek Oneness. Of course, only a hero of pure heart will ever find the center.

Before one can tackle the maze, one must actually locate the entrance. Rather than being an elaborate gateway proclaiming doom to all who might enter (as storytellers often claim), it is nothing more than a narrow crack in the side of a hill. Within, the labyrinth is made up of rough cut tunnels, rather than smooth, paved passageways. Despite the traditional links to Hekata, it is entirely possible the stories are naught but legends of a complex natural cave system.

Various attributes have been applied to the labyrinth. Traps are always present, but there are many tales of walls that slide across the passageways, altering the layout at random intervals. The one that most fascinates audiences is the story of a bronze golem cast in the shape of a minotaur (a popular choice, though no storyteller or sage recalls why). Its breath is super-heated steam, its horns are deadly points, and its axe glows red hot.

The minotaur may in fact be a khalkotauroi, but if this is so, it beggars the questions of how it got there, these bull-shaped bronze golems were created by the jinn, and they arrived centuries after Hekata had fallen to ruin.

THE MEDUSAE QUEEN'S PALACE

The largest medusa hive is that of Queen Syraxix. Supposedly located beneath the northern Statue Hills and accessible only via the labyrinth of tunnels that sprawl out from the Grand Temple, the palace is actually a warren of tunnels and chambers. Hundreds of elite orcs, not to mention other monstrosities subject to her will, guard her palace from unwanted intruders.

At the center is the queen's audience chamber and private rooms. The expansive chambers are lavishly decorated with artifacts from down the ages. After nearly

three millennia of (non-continual) existence, she has gathered a vast hoard of treasure, including many powerful relics. Some stories say her followers looted Hekata and the jinn lands after they fell to ruin. If even a tenth of these stories hold any truth, there is wealth enough to buy an entire city, perhaps an entire emirate, hidden beneath the sun-blasted hills.

Though few who come here in search of coins and gems realize it, these trappings form a large part of the queen's tremendous wealth. Unfortunately, many items are very difficult to move without magic.

THE TWELVE STATUES

Everyone alive today assumes the Statue Hills were named for the medusae. Before the rise of the jinn, everyone knew the name related to a specific legend dating back many millennia.

The story went that a rich and possibly mad noble (or merchant, priest, or magician, depending on the audience and the storyteller) had 12 life-sized statues constructed and placed atop the dozen highest peaks. This alone is hardly a noteworthy feat. What makes his endeavor unusual is that each statue was cast from solid silver, with skin of beaten gold, ivory hair and nails, and blue or green emeralds for eyes. Today, even one statue would cost tens of thousands of dinars.

The story of the statues is still heard in the marketplaces of Al-Shirkuh, but it has been displaced in time, and now relates to Suleiman. The Faithful believe each statue represented one of the major gods. Devoted claim they were images of his chosen disciples, the ones responsible for spreading the true faith across the desert.

As is often the case, such stories have more fiction than fact. The statues were cast of iron (a rare metal in those distant days), and each was a golem, a sentinel set in place to watch over the approaches. This naturally demands a question be asked—given that the land was hardly prime agricultural, mining, or military territory, what were they guarding?

Six of the golems have survived the passage of time and impact of weapons. No longer standing still, they stalk the valleys and hills, slaying everything that crosses their path. Could vague stories of a secret Hekatic diamond mine be true, or was something so precious its safety could not be entrusted to mortals buried here?

VALLEY OF THE ORACLE

In a valley in the eastern hills, reachable from the surroundings sands, stand the remains of a temple. All that is visible on the surface is a raised stone platform (ascended by just three steps), two rows of weathered columns (some standing, some prone), and a huge statue of a cowed figure inscribed with lettering indecipherable even by magic (the altar). What god the builders worshipped is unknown. While there is writing, there are no statues or carved images.

The site is regarded as a divine oracle by the Faithful

NEW ORC TRIBES

Several unique orc tribes serve the medusae.

* **Earth Shakers:** This tribe honors Apep (see *Realm Guide #5*). Warriors (including chieftains, berserks, and elite warriors) treat their Size as +2 for the purposes of generating knockback only. Clerics only have spells from Apep's list.

* **Snake Biters:** Despite the name, this tribe does not bite snakes (although it does eat them). Every warrior is subjected to multiple bites from venomous snakes over his life in order to build up an immunity to the poison. They have +2 to Vigor rolls to resist poison.

* **Snake Charmers:** Warriors of the Snake Charmer tribe catch small venomous serpents, which they carry around in large sacks. These sacks can be thrown to a range of 2/4/8, and release a Small Burst Template swarm of snakes the round *after* impact. Their preferred tactic to empty the sacks into valleys being traversed by intruders.

* **Stone Eyes:** This tribe inhabits the Forest of Pillars, where they act as guards for the medusae. They suffer no Difficult Ground penalties in this terrain.

* **Valley Rats:** Long accustomed to life on the steep valley sides, every member of this tribe has Climbing equal to his Fighting die.

and home to a jinn oracle by the Devoted. There is a thin slot in the statue's mouth, just wide enough to accept a coin. After offering a dinar, the statue reveals the answer to one question. Being on the periphery of the realm, few orcs ever come here, making it relatively safe for those who need divine solutions to mortal problems. Nomads admit its replies are very cryptic, but even living oracles rarely speak in clear terms.

Alas for those in need of wisdom, the oracle is a total sham. It is actually an immobile golem preprogrammed to randomly speak a cryptic answer from a set list. It is clever enough not to give the same answer to questions posed in the same day. This has somehow helped maintain a thin veil of believability in its legendary powers that has lasted the age. Similarly, the temple served no deity, and the writings are gibberish, nothing more than random marks (which explains why *Speak Language* is no use).

When the oracle was constructed and by whom is lost to history. The money slides down through the statue into a subterranean vault. Originally the vault was reachable by means of a secret passage cut into the nearby cliffs, but this was buried beneath an avalanche centuries ago. Given that the oracle is still used by nomads today, and has existed since at least the days of Hekata, the secret depository holds a truly colossal amount of money.

Of course, the builder installed many traps and placed many guardians to deter thieves who discovered the secret of the oracle.

PERSONS OF NOTE

Only madmen, those who seek a perverse immortality, those who wish to die, and the servants of the medusae walk the barren hills and scorching valleys.

THE BLIND MEDUSA

A century ago, a medusa became embroiled in a lengthy war to capture territory from a rival. As the conflict dragged on, she dared break the ancient law proscribing assassination. Her plan was unsuccessful, but her treachery was discovered. She was dragged before the queen, who was awakened from hibernation to dispense justice.

The punishment was especially cruel—the medusa's eyes were torn from their sockets, and she was cast into the wilds, where it was intended she would die a slow death. Against all odds, she survived. Through an immense force of will, she has learned to see through the eyes of the snakes that adorn her head, though she is incapable of petrifying victims.

One hundred years have given her much time to ponder the meaning of life. She no longer cares for the machinations of her race, nor their plans for conquest. She desires only to learn about the many races and cultures that now walk the earth. In return for that wisdom, she is quite prepared to reveal information about her sisters, even to would-be assassins and thieves.

Since medusae are universally hated by civilized beings, she cloaks her form in a heavy cowl. Nomads native to the surrounding desert have consulted her at times, and while they do not call her a friend, she is not regarded as an enemy, either.

Why Come Here?

If the threat of fierce orcs and barbaric hyaenidae is not enough to keep the curious away from a realm largely devoid of food and water, the threat of encountering a medusae is more than enough to weaken even a tested hero's courage. So, why would the adventurers risk life and limb coming here?

* Orders. There are several cults that detest snakes, but none are foolish enough to send agents to the Realm of the Medusae. Even those that seek knowledge or treasure can think of better places to dispatch minions. This isn't to say a hero would never be ordered to visit the accursed land—offend the wrong patron and a trip here might be deemed a suitable penance, or method of permanently removing a thorn in the patron's side.

* Knowledge. While the medusae remember the glory days of the ophidae and Hekata, they are not inclined to discuss such topics with outsiders. However, their lairs are likely to contain many scrolls written in such

times. Although largely worthless in monetary terms, the knowledge they might reveal to a sage is incalculable. Better still, they may indicate how the medusa came into being, and whether they have any weaknesses.

* Treasure. Greed is an ancient and potent motive for heroes as well as rogues. As well as stories of intact Hekatic tombs replete with gold funerary objects, the tales of the vast wealth of the medusae is legendary. Anyone who survives to return with even a fraction of their accumulated riches would be set for life, but such an endeavor would require brains as well as brawn.

* Glory. For low Rank parties, the ready supply of orcs and hyaenidae is an opportunity to make a name as a brave fighter. Those who have already slain such creatures, and who perhaps seek immortality in poems, may wish to come here to test their wits against that of a medusa. It is not a challenge for the faint of heart, but it is a quest worthy of endless praise.

* Short-Cut. Technically, traversing the Statue Hills is a shortcut across the desert. However, given the rough terrain and winding valleys, not to mention the arid state of the land and thousands of hostile orcs, one would have to be insane or desperate to attempt such a journey.

Adventure Seeds

In addition to the seeds buried in the text above, here are a few extra to sow in your fertile imagination.

* Through divination, a noble (or other rich and influential citizen) has learned that his only child has succumbed to a medusa's gaze in the dreaded Statue Hills. While he knows their condition cannot be reversed, he offers great wealth to anyone who can return his offspring's stone form to him intact. He does not know the exact location of the "statue," though.

* A blind paladin of Karmelos seeks to test his mettle against a medusa, believing the gods took his sight for this very reason. Although he has learned to somewhat compensate for his infirmity in battle, his lack of sight leaves him unable to travel far. He seeks courageous souls to escort him into a medusa's lair, where he plans to face one in solo combat.

* A nobleman has enjoyed the many sins life has to offer, and all without a care for his immortal soul. Now that old age creeps up on him, he desires to laugh in the face of the gods. Rather than have his soul condemned to the Bottomless Pit, he wants to have it trapped on the mortal world for all eternity. In order to achieve that, he wants to stare into the eyes of a medusa. He is hiring guards to protect him from the many orcs, and lead him to one of the snake-headed sisters.

* An alchemist or cleric of Marqod recently unearthed an ancient scroll. Written on it was an antidote to the medusae's deadly gaze. Unfortunately, one of the key ingredients is a quart of medusa blood.

* Orcs are raiding the Northern Trade Road, and threatening the safety of Black Palm Oasis. Their lair is within the Realm of the Medusae.

Gods & Monsters

This section details one minor deity, variant powers for medusae, and one new monster.

HANDARSAGA

Titles: The Immovable One, Creator of Absolute Order, Hater of Chaos, Father of Order, Lord of the Present, Upholder of the Law.

Aspects: Stasis.

Affiliations: Geb-Agni, Shamash.

Symbol: A clenched fist made of stone.

Priesthood: Guardians of Order (priests); Guardians of Law (paladins).

Herald: None.

Duties: To impose order, to resist change.

Sins: (Minor) making a hasty decision or Wild Attack, running except to flee a foe; (Major) going berserk, being the target of a *quickness* or *speed* spell; (Mortal) perverting the course of law and order.

Holy Days: Harmony End Day and Law Day (see *Realm Guide #2: The Jinn Lands of Old*) are high holy days. The first Yaus al-Maat of each month is a holy day.

Signature Power: *Entangle*.

Powers: *Barrier, hamper movement, knockdown, sluggish reflexes.*

Trappings: Clerics who honor Geb-Agni's version of the cult must always use earth trappings. Those of Shamash must always use light.

Special: Clerics cannot take the Fleet Footed Edge.

Shamash cares nothing for balance. In his eyes, the universe can only function smoothly if order is imposed. To ensure chaos could not return, he appointed Handarsaga to maintain order in his place while he sought out Iblis, father of chaos. Handarsaga detests change, at least rapid change. Order is best preserved when things move slowly, and thus he is regarded as the god of stasis, of the here and now. He does not lack imagination, merely the drive to push through change without long and careful thought. Naturally, he has no love for Upuaut, whom he considers flighty and irresponsible for giving into his wanderlust, for without planning there is only chaos.

While Shamash is the dominant affiliation, Handarsaga is also associated with Geb-Agni. This branch of the cult believes stone, an unyielding substance, is the foundation upon which order is built. This is clearly visible in the buildings of Al-Shirkuh—mud brick structures perish and collapse into chaos, while stone ones endure the ages and maintains their orderly form.

Shrines are rare, for while he upholds Shamash's laws, he does not make them. Outside of his cult, he has few worshippers, though those who feel events are moving beyond a pace they can manage may offer prayers.

Priests are advisors and long-term planners. A hasty decision may seem right at the time, but without thoroughly thinking through every possible outcome, such

decisions are often the tools of chaos. Thus, they preach patience and forethought over knee-jerk reactions. A few work as architects, favoring symmetry in their designs.

Paladins are guardians of law and order. They are not interested in whether a law is just, only that it be obeyed to both the spirit and letter, for without law there would be no society. As such, they serve in cities alongside the watch. Whereas some watch members may turn the other cheek, paladins of Handarsaga cannot be bribed, threatened, or tricked into ignoring a crime. Paladins are not judges or executioners—the courts decide such things.

Ceremonies are boring to outsiders. Clerics impose order on their minds through a variety of means. Some copy out the laws of the land, others build perfectly symmetrical piles of stones, or stand rigid, refusing to move a muscle while they offer praise to their god.

Character Guidelines: Spirit is essential for not only invoking miracles, but for resisting attempts to way you from your duties. Knowledge (Law) is a vital skill for paladins, who need to know what constitutes a crime in the many realms. Strong Willed suits the cult's mentality of not reacting to outside influences too hastily, and Cautious and Stubborn are the perfect Hindrance for their mindset. Many paladins favor defensive Edges over ones that allow multiple attacks, believing it is better to be patient and watch for an opening than rush in without fully knowing what you are up against.

HUWAWA, SPAWN OF

According to legend, Huwawa was one of Iblis' lieutenants, a minor deity, but a fearsome one. Shamash cut Huwawa in twain with his fiery scimitar (some stories say he decapitated him), but the parts still wriggled and writhed. Shamash cut each of these parts in half, but still they would not die. After slicing them into hundreds of small chunks and seeing they still moved, Shamash cast them from the heavens. The writhing slivers of flesh fell to the mortal world, where each immediately grew into a lesser version of Huwawa.

Spawn of Huwawa are monstrous beings. Gigantic bipeds, their skin is scaly, their hands are the paws of a lion, their tail is a living serpent from whose fangs drips venom, and their face is a coil of sickly green flesh, similar in appearance to the entrails of men. Fortunately, they are mortal creatures.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d8, Strength d12+2, Vigor d10

Skills: Fighting d8, Intimidation d10, Notice d12, Stealth d6

Pace: 6; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 12 (2)

Treasure: None

Special Abilities:

* **Armor +2:** Scaly skin.

* **Claws:** Str+d6.

* **Fear (–1):** Anyone who sees a Huwawa must make a Spirit roll to avoid Terror.

* **Fiery Breath:** As an action, a spawn can exhale a stream of fire. This fills a Cone Template. Anyone un-

der the template must make an Agility roll at -2 or suffer 2d10 damage and have a chance of catching fire.

- * **Roar:** As an action, a spawn of Huwawa can emit a terrifying roar. Anyone within 12" who hears this must make a Spirit roll to avoid Terror.
- * **Size +3:** Spawn of Huwawa average 15 feet tall.
- * **Tail:** Str+d4, Reach 1, venomous poison. A spawn of Huwawa can make a single Fighting attack with its tail each round as a free action. This never incurs a multi action penalty.

KHALKOTAUR

According to storytellers, the great ifrit nobles created golems in the form of bronze bulls and bestowed unto them the ability to breathe fire. These they used to pull their iron chariots or as mounts. What became of the khalkotouroi (plural form) after the downfall of the jinn is unrecorded. Some sages claim they were destroyed, for undoubtedly the jinn rode their chariots into battle against Suleiman. Others claim the creatures still exist, locked away in some subterranean vault, awaiting the command from a powerful ifrit to awaken and wreak vengeance on mortals.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d4(A), Spirit d8, Strength d12+4, Vigor d10

Skills: Fighting d6, Notice d6

Pace: 7; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 14 (4)

Treasure: None

Special Abilities:

- * **Armor +4:** Bronze bodies.
- * **Construct:** +2 to recover from being Shaken. No additional damage from Called Shots. Immune to disease and poison.
- * **Fiery Breath:** Khalkotouroi can exhale fire using the Cone Template. Every target within this cone may make an Agility roll at -2 to avoid the attack. A khalkotaur may not attack with its gore in the round it breathes fire. Damage 2d10 and victims have a chance of catching fire.
- * **Gore:** Khalkotouroi use the charge maneuver to gore their opponents with their long horns. If they can move at least 6" before attacking, they add +4 to their damage total.
- * **Horns/Kick:** Str+d6.
- * **Size +3:** Khalkotouroi are large creatures.

VARIANT MEDUSAE

While the most common medusae are snake-headed, scaly-skinned humanoids, there are others with different physical forms and abilities. In some instances the differences are obvious. Other times, they come as a shock to those who think they know the race. Each of these variant medusae uses the same basic medusa stats, but has one or more additional special abilities from the list below.

- * **Alternate Poison:** Not every medusa has snake-hair that injects venomous poison. Variants may have deadly, paralysis, or knockout venom, or spit venom

PERMANENT PETRIFICATION?

That a player character can die on the result of a single Spirit roll might, at first, seem rather harsh. Combat is certainly deadly, and any damage roll can Ace, but there are ways to lessen the danger—Parry can be increased with Edges or shields, a character can use terrain to make himself a more difficult target, armor can be worn to help lessen the effects of blow, and magical healing can be quickly applied. None of these are any use against a medusa's gaze. GMs thinking of altering the medusae's petrifying gaze should remember that these creatures are extremely rare; unless the heroes go looking for one, they are never going to encounter one—they are not "wandering monsters" found roaming the open desert. Second, they are ancient beings of legendary might, not common foes to be slaughtered *en masse*. Killing a medusae (after defeating its many minions) should be a noteworthy event, not just another encounter.

For GMs that want a cure for petrification, there are options. *Dispel*, though, is not one of them—allowing such a quick cure not only cheapens the medusae, it raises the question of why no one else has done this. A relic of Geb-Agni might reverse the condition, a rogue majin elder might know a certain charm, a scroll hidden in an ophidae temple might contain a spell, or perhaps a list of ingredients needs to be gathered in order to create an alchemical brew.

Whatever the chosen cure, it should be usable just once—if the heroes can remove petrification on a whim, not only do the medusae lose their most feared power, but you can bet your last dinar the players will abuse it and go around transforming every statue in the realm back into its living form.

using the medusa's Shooting to Range 1/2/4. Similarly, the strength can be varied, giving victims a penalty (or maybe even a bonus) to Vigor rolls.

- * **Arrow Hair:** This medusa can pluck a snake from her head and fire it like an arrow using her bow. Damage is 2d6, but Shaken or wounded targets are also subject to the snake's venom.
- * **Serpentine Form:** Instead of legs, the medusa has a serpentine form from the waist down. They may make a Fighting roll to grapple a foe using their long lower bodies. The round it entangles and each round thereafter, the medusa causes Str+d6 damage. The prey may attempt to escape by getting a raise on an opposed Strength roll. A serpentine form medusa may not use her tail to grapple and perform other Fighting actions in the same round.
- * **Thick Scales:** The medusa has Armor +2, giving her Toughness 8 (2), but has difficulty moving fast. Pace is lowered to 4, and her running die to a d4.