

HELLFROST LAND OF FIRE

• REALM GUIDE #17 •

THE SNAKELANDS OF OLD

Introduction

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For two millennia the snakemen of old have been spoken of only as ghosts, for it has long been known they were destroyed by the armies of mighty Hekata. If only such tales were true. Entering a state of self-imposed exile, the ophidae have waited patiently for the signal for them to emerge once and rebuild their once glorious empire. At long last the stars have aligned. Nomads in the surrounding regions sense a dark presence in the Snakelands, and fear once again sweeps across the desert. The serpent is on the ascent. This supplement expands on material found in *Hellfrost: Land of Fire*.

OPHIDAE SOCIETY

Ophidae society is arranged in a strict caste system based solely on physical appearance. Those nearest in appearance to true snakes are deemed purer, and thus considered more fit to rule. This is clearly evident by the differences in appearance of the nagas, priests, warriors, and drones, and the social position they hold. Conversely, the purest specimens are almost the rarest members of the serpentine race.

Only drones are capable of reproducing—the other castes are genderless. Females are accorded more respect than males, and assigned less physical duties. Reproduction is controlled by the naga. Too many young could lead to famine or other hardship, while too few risks the continual survival of the race.

The naga are the least common, with just a dozen mature specimens alive today and no more than thrice that in their immature phase, but they are considered the wisest of the race. Every naga that reaches adulthood (50 years) is automatically awarded a seat on the Scintillant Council. The Council is the ultimate power in ophidae society. Each naga has a single vote, and matters are decided by a simple majority vote. In the event of a tie, a council of seven priests is convened to cast an extra vote. Once the Council has spoken, all naga support the motion, if they were previously opposed to it.

The religious caste actually comprises two separate layers, with priests outranking paladins. Priests are advisors to the Council, astrologers, astronomers, record keepers, judges, scholars, and scribes. While the nagas receive wisdom and power from Ss'esslis through the complex motion of the stars, priests have a more direct route. Ophidae see nothing strange in this—the wisdom bestowed upon the naga is very cryptic, more potent, and beyond the ken of lesser castes. Paladins are the military commanders of the race. Their role is to lead the warriors in battle, ensure the nagas are protected, and advise the Council on matters of war. Clerics who break the will of the Council are judged by the naga

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RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in the Snakelands.

* **Desert of Fear:** Any non-ophidae must make a Spirit roll at the start of each day while in this area of the Snakelands. Failure means all Trait rolls suffer a -1 penalty for the remainder of the day.

Spirit rolls by non-ophidae to resist Fear made in this accursed area suffer a -2 penalty. The *fear* and *nightmare* powers are cast at +2.

* **Moonstone Wastes:** Within the wastes, the threads of magic are in a chaotic state of eternal flux. Each time a character with Arcane Background (any Magic) casts a spell, the GM should draw a card from the action deck. Draw the card after the arcane skill roll is made, but before the effects are handled. A red numbered card grants a +1 bonus to the roll, while a face card (including Ace for this purpose) gives +2. A black numbered card gives a -1 penalty, while a black face card incurs a -2 penalty. A Joker causes instant Siphoning as if the mage rolled a 1 on his arcane skill die.

Any mage or cleric who casts *detect arcana* in the Wastes must make a Spirit roll at -2 or suffer the effects of Terror as his mind shatters from viewing the chaotic mass of arcane energy.

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

* **Snake Magic:** All powers intended to harm, hamper, or otherwise negatively affect a snake, ophidae, medusae, or other serpentine beasts (including *beast friend* and *summon beast*), suffers a -1 penalty. Conversely, powers intended to aid a snake have a +1 bonus.

* **Snakes:** Aptly named, the Snakelands are home to many species of snake. Each day, the GM should draw a card from the action deck. A royal card (Jack through Ace) indicates the heroes will encounter a snake at some point during the day. Whether the encounter is violent is up to the GM.

collectively. There is no appeal—those found guilty are sacrificed to Ss'esslis (as are all criminals).

More common than clerics by a factor of twenty are the members of the warrior caste. They exist only to wage war on the Council's enemies, and protect the cities from invaders. Warriors who commit a crime are judged by three paladins (priests have no interest in warfare or military matters).

Twenty times at least more common than the warriors are the drones, the lowest caste. Strong but almost mindless, and almost human in appearance, they are the laborers and craftsmen who ensure the ophidae have enough tools and weapons to function. A drone that commits a crime doesn't receive a trial—judging them is considered a waste of effort, and they are easily replaced. Better to feed Ss'esslis and move on.

RACIAL PURITY

As evidenced by their caste system, ophidae are strong believers in racial purity. Every caste looks up to those of more serpentine form, and down on those of more humanoid appearance. Races that lack any serpentine features, which is all but the ophidae (medusae are considered an abomination and traitors to the race), are fit only to serve the ophidae as slaves, sacrifices, or test subjects for their medical experiments.

Ironically, it was the nagas' quest to create a caste that could pass as human that gave rise to the medusae. Despite their costly failure, the Council has not shelved these plans. For the race to assume its rightful place, the naga must once more begin the lengthy process of manufacturing a new race. This time, though, they will be far more cautious.

Exploration

In terms of hardship, the Snakelands are no better or worse than the Great Northern Desert, of which they are geographically a part. There are a few springs, and water exists in shaded areas of the hills. Animal and plant life, while far from abundant, is there for those who know where to look and how to hunt. The temperature is not excessively high, even in summer.

And yet nomads avoid the Snakelands whenever possible. Even when the Snake Road was well-traveled, caravan masters whipped their horses and camels to walk faster, and few would ever make camp off the well-traveled track that cuts through the landscape.

Though believed to be an uninhabited land, explorers and travelers can never escape the feeling they are being watched. Similarly, the air is thick with menace, though there is no obvious cause. While the snakemen that once lived here are (supposedly) no more, their ghosts still roamed the land, and wise men fear spirits and shades more than corporeal beings. For centuries the spirits were at rest, but something has disturbed their slumber. Caravans are found butchered, or simply vanish for the face of the earth. The sphinxes' creation of maritime routes to Rassilon has already crippled trade along the Snake Road, and these attacks may close it altogether.

Although named for the ophidae, the region has always been renowned for the variety of snakes living here. Constrictors are rare, but vipers can be found slithering across the hot sands or lurking in cool cracks in the rocky hills. Many species are venomous, and unlike elsewhere they have a disturbing tendency to attack anything that strays too close. Today, the ancient presence of the ophidae is clearly evident in the landscape. Sand-choked ruins, gigantic statues of snakes, and inscribed pillars are everywhere. As well as proclaiming military victories and honoring Ss'esslis, many inscriptions are of a scientific nature. Here and there one finds a Hekatic ruin, an outpost erected by the victorious pharaohs' armies to mark their defeat of the snakemen.

Major Locales

Until the ophidae see fit to reach out beyond the one city they currently occupy, their settlements of old remain ripe for adventurers seeking knowledge and treasure.

CITY OF BONES

The destruction of the ophidae is attributed to Hekata. While this holds some truth, it was the nagas' desire for vengeance following the first Hekatic invasion that led to their self-imposed exile. Had they not devoted resources first to creating and subsequently fighting the medusae, they may perhaps have survived the second invasion. What might have been is the territory of philosophers.

Some 60 miles northeast of Jafar, City of Snakes, lie the partially buried ruins of the City of Bones. It was here the ophidae first began experimenting with mutating other creatures into a more pleasant form, and for long centuries the naga considered it their finest achievement. Here the first medusae were created, and here they began their uprising. Although ophidae are immune to the petrifying gaze of their fell creations, they are not resistant to their venomous serpent-hair. Caught unawares, the ophidan elite fell in droves.

After the surviving medusae were exiled, the ophidae abandoned the city. Such was the abhorrence they attributed the city that they left behind their treasures and libraries. Two millennia have passed, and yet many of the buildings remain untouched by outsiders. The libraries are almost entirely dedicated to medical research.

While the barbers and surgeons of modern day Al-Shirkuh are considered masters of their art, they are simpletons compared to the knowledge the ophidae wielded millennia ago. Tomes of lore related to the medical arts abound, and there are a number of true relics with curative and mutative properties. While some of these hold common powers, such as *healing* and *shape change*, others hold powers forgotten today. Invariably, these are concerned with the partial transformation of non-ophidae into serpents (powers to transform heads into those of serpents, or arms into constrictors, for example). Most of the relics are miraculous in origin, though whether the ophidae actually created them (something no other known civilized race has done) is open to debate.

The ruins take their name from the many bones that litter the sand. These are not the remains of ophidae or medusae of old, but of more recent tomb robbers. While the ophidae gave up the city to the sand, they did not leave it unprotected.

CITY OF THE FIRMAMENT

The heavens have long fascinated the ophidae. Even today, they believe the stars are light reflecting from Ss'esslis' scales, and that the motions he makes through the heavens not only reveal his will but allow the naga to

tap into his wisdom. In the parlance of other races, the ophidae were enamored of astrology. Such was its hold over the Council that no decisions were made without first consulting the heavens. Images of constellations as the ophidae saw them are found on stelae and carved into the roofs of their temples and places of learning.

The City of the Firmament, as it has been named by nomads, was the ophidae's astrological center. It squats upon the highest peak in the central hills, overlooking the great valley through which the Snake Road runs, and clearly visible from the valley floor.

It is dominated by a vast dome crafted from an unknown type of rock so black it absorbs light. The roof is an engineering masterpiece, capable of not only sliding open, but also rotating. Within stands a gigantic telescope, mounted on a platform which can be turned independently of the dome. Its crystal lens, a work of absolute perfection created with decades of gentle shaping and polishing, is beyond anything modern lens crafters can produce. As an art object, it is worth many thousands of dinars. To astronomers and astrologers, its value is considerably higher. Unfortunately for thieves, it weighs a literal ton. (The ophidae left it in place because it was useless to them in the underworld.)

The observatory's dome is sealed shut, and its doors protected with powerful charms designed not only to keep intruders out, but also protect the building from the elements. Wind and time have battered the rest of the city into ruin, but the observatory remains in the same condition it was in when the city was abandoned.

Although yet to be reclaimed following their return, the city holds little for common treasure hunters. The race's withdrawal into the underworld was orderly, and their material treasures and written wisdom were duly removed. What remains of value are the carvings and murals, themselves enough to keep an army of scholars employed for decades, but ultimately impossible to remove without an army of slaves and camels.

CITY OF STONE

The Snake Road cuts through a wide valley. Firm under foot and spacious enough for caravans to pass each other, it is a welcome relief (albeit one tinged with a modicum of fear) from the hard slog through the sands to either side. The route is ancient, and certainly existed at the height of the ophidae's empire.

At some point in later history the valley was closed off by an immense wall. Portions of the structure still stand on the opposite sides of the roads, though they are no barrier to traffic. In the days when the wall stood proud, all caravans were diverted down a side valley in the southern slopes. Long, narrow, and winding, it descends into a hidden wonder of Al-Shirkuh.

Along either side of the valley, carved from the living rock, are the fronts of buildings. The scale of the entrances is monumental, as is the skill used to carve them. Although only carved reliefs, they were cut and shaped to be as grand as any modern palace. These were

no ornamental works of art, for behind the entrances are chambers. Despite the grand entrance, many are small inside, though a few go back many hundreds of feet and contains dozens of individual chambers.

Scholars have calculated the city could support a population of several thousand, and its narrow entrance made it easy to defend. Investigations have revealed the city was once supplied with water from a complex series of dams, which trapped flash floods, and aqueducts. At some point in time these were destroyed, though whether they were the work of jealous rivals, an invading army, or nature is unclear. Several springs also existed, but water no longer flows from them.

Who built the city, though, is a mystery. Much of the architecture has been modified by a wave of successive settlers. Evidence that Hekata, the sphinxes, and at least two unknown human cultures lived here is plentiful, but the base style remains a mystery. A distinct lack of snake motifs precludes the ophidae from having constructed it, though it is possible (though unlikely) that every trace was removed by later settlers. That is was built after the ophidae were exterminated is far more likely. Their removal left a power vacuum in the region, one which would have proven a lure to any neighboring lands. One theory holds the narrow valley was first settled by bandits, but over time they became legitimate traders.

Why it was built is more obvious. With the main valley being too wide to easily control and too arid to support life, the original builders forced caravans to pass through the narrow valley. Here they could control the flow of trade, and no doubt impose high taxes and charge heavily for use of their food and water. The idea obviously proved successful, for the creation of the city would have cost a considerable amount of money.

Carved into the cliffs of a side channel that cuts west from the city are numerous tombs. No expense was spared in constructing their facade, and they resemble the front of houses, complete with porticos. Strangely, the doorways were never sealed, perhaps indicating the living visited them to pay respects to their ancestors. Unfortunately, this lack of security has meant they have been plundered. Not that this stops tomb robbers. Rumors that the so-called burial chambers were merely outer chambers, and that the true burial place lies behind cunningly worked secret doors are rife.

DESERT OF FEAR

Surrounding Jafar, City of Snakes, is a landscape of sand, small rocks, and low dunes. It is a natural extension of the desert that dominates northern Al-Shirkuh, indistinguishable based on physical appearance alone. Yet travelers know when they have crossed the invisible border into what is widely called the Desert of Fear.

Intense feelings of dread wash over trespassers, causing them to imagine terrible horrors and haunting their dreams with visions of doom and despair. Nerves are easily rattled by the slightest scare, concentration is hampered by a creeping gear, and even those of strong spirit and normally good

morale report feeling a gnawing uneasiness in the pit of their stomachs that defies explanation. For brave souls it is a challenge. For those of weak minds it is a horrifying place to wander. See **Rules of the Realm** (p. 2) for details.

The Desert of Fear, which extends into the land 50 miles in all directions from Jafar, is an cursed land. before they fled underground, the naga invoked a potent spell designed to keep inferior races from violating the sanctity of their capital. Though the magic has waned considerably over the millennia (early explorers regularly suffered heart attacks induced by fright), it still helps protect the city. Such is its potency that no earthly power can combat its effects. The aura of dread ceases immediately one steps into the city proper.

THE MANY-COLORED TENT

Population: 60

Ruler: Many-Colored Sage Ikhlas bint-Masrur

Atop the westernmost hill in the Snakelands is a small community the nomads of the region call the Many-Colored Tent. The name comes from the enormous pavilion that sits at the center of the small community.

Large enough to sleep 30 in comfort, it is woven in a garish pattern made up of dozens of different colors. While the Bedu of the Oases of Dreams claim the tent is the mobile palace of a southern princess, it is actually a makeshift shrine to Ishkar, minor goddess of magic (see *Realm Guide #2: Jinn Lands of Old*). Surrounding it are a dozen smaller tents of plainer design. These serve as living accommodation and storage areas.

The small community, which settled here some 38 years ago, taking up residence on the site of a natural spring, has been engaged in arcane research. The clerics are attempting to discern the properties of the Moonstone Wastes (see below), which begin at the base of the hill. Almost four decades on, and they have little to show except some relics dating back to the age of Hekata, and mundane artifacts of ophidae origin.

The current head of the expedition is Many-Colored Sage Ikhlas bint-Masrur. Now in her fifth season as senior cleric, she was sent here by her superiors following an accident with a true relic in which two of his peers were killed and several more seriously injured. While she knows her position is little more than a form of banishment, she has thrown herself into the role. Supporting her are three fellow priests, five paladins, a lone priest of Qedeshet, and 40 civilian laborers paid for by the cult.

The clerics have sensed a dark force rising in the east, though they do not realize the ophidae have returned to the surface world—their investigations do not take them far into the heartland, and the naga are currently content to keep a close eye on the interlopers.

MOONSTONE WASTES

The area of desert known as the Moonstone Wastes lies in the far west of the Snakelands, at the edge of the hills that extend almost to the Oasis of Dreams. Here

the sand is milky white and very fine. From a distance, it looks like a salt plain. Nomads believe the area was once cursed by Iblis, but Geb-Agni sprinkled powdered gypsum on the land to purify it.

Ophidae history records that Ss'esslis' tail struck the moon during Hekata's invasion of their homeland around -1915, causing a piece to fall to the earth. As it neared the surface it disintegrated, showering the land in fine particles of moon dust. Hekatic records are a little hazy on the subject, but one astronomical stela does make mention of a "white star that struck the world and smote the army of pharaoh" around the same time.

Since that day, the Moonstone Wastes have been both a boon and bane for magicians. Here, the threads of magic behave in highly unpredictable ways, writhing and knotting in a chaotic, ever-shifting pattern that defies all comprehension. One spell might receive a powerful surge, another may fail completely. In the last 30 years, instances of the Siphoning have grown more prevalent. See **Rules of the Realm** (p. 2) for details.

Expeditions to study the strange behavior of the threads have been hampered by the presence of moon mote swarms (p. 10). Among the Faithful, it is a site of pilgrimage for clerics of Ishkar, for it was here the milky fluid from Shamash's wounded eye dripped onto the mortal world and gave rise to magic.

PHARAOH'S RUIN

Pharaoh's Ruin is not a city or monument, but the name of a battlefield of old. During the Hekatic pharaohs' first attempts to invade the Snakelands, the army of Hekata was defeated as it attempted to reach Jafar. Instead of sacrificing their warriors, the nagas unleashed a host of snakes. The massacre became known as The Battle of Relentless Fangs.

Nothing marks the battlefield, which lies southwest of Jafar, on what is now the very edge of the realm. Although thoroughly defeated, the Hekatics' lust for conquest could not be stymied by one defeat. The pharaoh responsible for leading the attack survived the battle, only to be later murdered, hence the name of the site.

Within a generation, the name of the ignominious defeat had been erased from the minds of Hekata's population, for while not truly victorious, its reformed armies had returned to the Snakelands and won many glorious victories against the inhuman race.

The vanquished army still lies where it fell. Naturally mummified by the hot sand, the warriors are now zombies with hard, withered skin. Through their veins flows a thin, black ichor, an unholy blend of serpent venom and necromantic energy. By slicing their flesh, they can coat their weapons in this deadly fluid. So potent is it that it can actually harm undead, creatures normally immune to poisons.

They are led by the shade of Pharaoh Perenmaat III, the pharaoh who led them to their deaths. Denied the Afterlife after his name was removed from his sarcophagus by his successor, he wandered in the void for centuries. Now he finds his spirit back on the mortal realm, drawn

NEW PROFESSIONAL EDGE

SNAKE CHARMER

Requirements: Novice, Spirit d8+

Snake charmers are a common sight in Al-Shirkuh. Most have some mundane talent, but a small few know secret tunes and movements that can literally charm serpents into obeying the musician's will.

The character can cast *beast friend* using Spirit as his arcane skill. The spell affects only living flesh and blood serpents and snakes of animal intelligence.

At Veteran rank, he automatically learns *summon beast*. This is subject to the same conditions above.

The snake charmer must play a flute, pipe, whistle, or similar two-handed instrument as part of the casting. This Edge is subject to the Siphoning.

here by the return of the naga. Perenmaat believes he can join his ancestors in paradise only by leading his defeated army to victory against the snakemen.

Sadly, the gods have not been kind in giving the pharaoh a second chance—the mummies cannot move beyond the site of the battlefield. Enraged, Perenmaat orders his warriors to attack any creatures who walk across their graves while he ponders a means to draw his enemy to the site of their former victory.

THE PILLAR OF SS'ESSLIS

Rising from the desert north of the Snake Road is a towering column. It has been shaped to resemble a serpent, its head rising up toward the heavens. Viewed from a distance, it appears as if the builders took the time to carve individual scales. Only when viewed up close does the true nature of the scales become apparent.

From a height of three feet up to six feet, each two inch by two inch scale is actually a square inscribed with a different symbol. Each ring of scales can be rotated, and thanks to missing scales, clearly a deliberate act even to the most casual observer, the scales can be slid both up and down the column. One ring is unusual. Placed at eye height for a figure standing five and a half feet tall, it is bordered top and bottom by gold inlay.

The symbols have defied translation, even with magic, though some glyphs have been given meanings based on logic, supposition, and looking at the ancient hieroglyphic languages used in the region. Some scholars of ancient tongues theorize they represent not individual words, but ideas or individual sounds. They thus constitute not a true language, but specific elements that go to make up a language. Others say they are nothing more than abstract images, and thus can never be deciphered.

The purpose of the column has not been explained, some theories abound. It has been suggested the column served the same purpose as a notice board. Snakemen

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would move the tiles around until a message was spelled out in the golden ring. What ruins this theory is that no glyph is repeated, making it impossible to use the same word twice. It is also a painstaking way to write out even a simple message. Others claim it was a religious place, where snakemen could write out prayers to their god. Again, the same problems as above apply.

Those more interested in treasure than scholastic study have mused the pillar is a complex lock designed to open a concealed portal, perhaps within the column itself. Each ring holds 17 inscribed tiles (there is one blank space per ring), and there are 17 rings of such tiles (the golden ring makes 18 total), giving 289 inscribed tiles. Since the golden ring can hold a maximum of 18 tiles, there are a truly staggering number of combinations. If it is indeed a lock, it must logically protect a treasure beyond the dreams of even the most avaricious noble.

THE WHISPERING OASIS

Ignore city-dwellers common vision of an oasis. This watering hole is not a crystal clear pond surrounded by waving palms, but a shallow depression filled with murky but potable water. It lies along the southern edge of the Snake Road, far to the west of the Snake Road, but nomads come here to fill up on water only is desperate. Even animals avoid the place.

Those who have stopped here report a faint whispering on the periphery of their hearing, as if the wind were stirring leaves. Aside from a few thorny bushes, there is no vegetation at the oasis, and thus no obvious cause for the sound. Few tarry long—though it carries no words, the whispering, sometimes described as sibilant, causes even the bravest nomads to shudder involuntarily and utter prayers designed to ward them from evil.

At the Oasis of Dreams, there are many who recall hearing of a caravan that stopped at the oasis in the time of their grandparents. During the night, a sandstorm scoured the land. As day dawned, the nomads discovered a stone building had been unearthed. Curiosity overcoming fear, they ventured inside, hoping to buried find treasure. All they found was a circular stairwell partially blocked with sand. Those with wise heads called for the caravan to move on, believing the gods has swallowed the structure for a reason. Greedier hearts prevailed, though, and a small group cleared and descended the stairs. Those left on the surface had fled long before the terrible screams had finished echoing up the stairwell.

By the time the caravan reached the Oasis of Dreams and a search party could be mustered, the sands had again devoured the building. No attempt was made to excavate it, and its exact location is now forgotten.

PERSONS OF Note

While the Snakelands boasts no truly permanent settlements (those of the ophidae excluded), and is a

realm of poor reputation, there are those who regularly walk the plains and hills.

ATHIR THE SCARRED

Athir can usually be found at the Oasis of Dreams or the Many-Colored tent. Born and raised in the desert, the Bedu is an excellent scout, and is one of just a few nomads who knows the Snakelands. He is not a greedy man, and his rates are very reasonable given the danger in which he places himself. What he truly craves is to be remembered in the epic tale of a mighty hero.

Athir's arms and legs are covered in scars. These are the result of a horrible accident years ago, when while aiding tomb robbers he fell into a pit full of vipers. While the snakes ravaged his flesh with hundreds of bites, Athir proved immune to their venom. A Faithful, he believes he has been blessed by Marqod.

Since that day, snakes have been strangely attracted to him. Athir believes that Iblis is angry with Marqod, and is trying to kill her mortal servant. Travelling with Athir through the Snakelands is dangerous. While he does indeed know the ways to many ruins, encounters with snakes occur on the draw of any black card, instead of the usual setting rule.

BEY FATH DAR-KAHIL

The youngest son of a minor Bedu sheikh, Bey Fath cuts a dashing figure wearing traditional Beda garb while sat astride his white horse. He no longer lives among his people, having chosen to follow his heart and become an adventurer. As a third son, he had no responsibilities, and his parents largely ignored him.

To hear him talk of his prowess, which he does a lot, one would think him a master swordsman, a horseman without equal, and possessed of a lion's courage. While he is many things, Bey Fath is not a hero. In fact, he's an incompetent swordsman, a poor rider, and a total coward. Worse, he's quite willing to steal the limelight from his companions, making himself out to be the hero of the tale and his compatriots mere supporters.

He's also a lovesick puppy with no understanding of true courtship rituals. Any attractive woman he comes across will be courted whether she wants it or not. He never forces himself on them—he just annoys them with a constant stream of small gifts, loudly recited poems created in their honor (bad ones), and an insistence on treating them like delicate flowers, no matter how worldly they might be.

What makes him useful to adventurers are his deep pockets, and his many friends among the tribes that live near to the Snakelands.

RAJIH IBN-FAHMI

A denizen of the Caliphate, Rajih is a follower of Ishkar. For the last eight years he has been a resident at the Many-Colored Tent, where he works supervising other

laborers. Half-Bedu on his mother's side, he is also the expeditions lead scout, and often disappears into the desert for days at a time to collect samples. Cheerful, and always armed with a story to help boost morale or lighten the mood, he is a trusted friend of Ikhlas bint-Masrur, whom he knew long before she was sent to the Snakelands. Unfortunately, Ikhlas' trust is misplaced.

Three years ago, Rajih was captured by an ophidae patrol while exploring the eastern portion of the Moonstone Wastes. Rather than sacrifice him or use him for experiments, the naga thought it wise to gather as much information as they could without revealing their presence to the wider world. They performed an ancient rite, permanently turning him into their puppet. On returning to the camp, Rajih explained his lengthy absence by revealing a minor relic (given him by the nagas after learning of the expedition's purpose), claiming he found it in an old ruin.

Still loyal to the nagas, Rajih sends them regular reports on the expedition's activities, and those of visitors to the settlement, through a *voice on the wind* relic given him by his new masters. It takes the form of a black snake pendant captured from a Hekatic priest long ago. When activated, the snake disappears. It appears before the recipient in the blink of an eye, hisses its message, and then transform back into an inanimate object. This means that Rajih can only send one message at a time. Fortunately, the nagas reply within 24 hours.

Why Come Here?

A land of plundered ruins haunted by the spirits of vengeful snakemen and inhabited by countless venomous snakes, the Snakelands are no place for the weak of body or mind. So why would a band of heroes looking for glory and wealth bother to come here?

* Orders. Of all the organizations in Al-Shirkuh, only the cults of Qedeshet and Shamash have much reason to send agents into the hinterland. The former seek knowledge, for it is well known the ophidae possessed it in abundance, while Shamash's cult still holds that serpents are the minions of Iblis, and here they exist in great numbers. Individual patrons might require their minions to venture here, with reasons varying from recovering knowledge to bringing back works of ophidae art to adorn their homes.

* Knowledge. As mentioned above, knowledge exists here in abundance. While scrolls are few and far between, there is a wealth of inscriptions. Most of these are too heavy to transport, requiring any expedition to spend laborious weeks or months making detailed recordings.

* Treasure. While it is known the ophidae accumulated fabulous wealth, it is common knowledge that most of the ruins have been picked clean down the centuries. Still, the thought of uncovering a hidden cache of coins or even a true relic is enough to keep tomb robbers braving the many dangers.

FESTIVAL TO SHAMASH

BANISHING DAY

Last day of the year

A more potent version of Casting Out Day, this festival is intended to relieve worshippers of sins committed throughout the year.

During the preceding weeks, clergy construct a wicker snake. This represents Iblis, whom the cult almost always portrays as a serpent. The longer the snake the better. During the day before the festival, citizens whisper the evil deeds they have committed into the serpent's mouth, thus transferring their transgressions to Iblis.

At dawn on Banishing Day, the effigy is put to the torch. As the serpent burns, so the sins are destroyed and Iblis is weakened.

* Glory. That the ophidae have returned is unknown. Those looking for glory in the Snakelands may think to pit their wits against vengeful spirits, but more likely they will find naught but serpents on which to test their mettle. Few citizens consider snake killing a glorious pastime, and without evidence, tales of fighting actual snakemen would be met with howls of derision.

* Short-Cut. Though regular traffic has largely ceased, the Snake Road remains a short cut through the Great Northern Desert. It is possible to scout around the edges, but the hills are a vital source of water and food.

Adventure Seeds

Below are a few adventure seeds additional to those presented in the main text.

* Based on ancient records, a senior member of the Royal Observatory in Sirhan, City of Stars, believes the City of the Firmament may hold a lens suitable as a replacement for the one recently broken. An expedition would be an expensive mistake if he is wrong, so he is seeking to hire adventurers to scout the ruins first and, if necessary, clear out any monsters.

* Rumors are circulating the Great Northern Desert, Free Emirate States, and Kingdoms of the Sphinxes that a violent sandstorm recently unearthed a previously unknown snakeman city. Talk of gold and jewels are on everyone's lips, as are whispers of vengeful spirits and deadly traps.

* One of the heroes is mistaken for someone else. Unfortunately, the mistake could be more than just an inconvenience. The hero's double has been marked for death, and is currently being hunted by Ss'esslis-worshipping assassins. Can the hero live long enough to find out who hired the assassins and convince them they have he wrong man?

Gods & Monsters

This section details one inhuman deity, one new minor deity, and four new monsters.

SS'ESSLIS

Titles: Father of All Snakes, The Sibilant Lord, The Fanged One, He Whose Fangs Drip Venom, Father of the Race, The Eternal One.

Aspects: Snakes, knowledge, rebirth, wisdom, war, magic, ophidae, racial superiority (ophidae only), assassins (non-ophidae only).

Symbol: A snake's eye.

Priesthood: Tongues of Ss'esslis (priests); Fangs of Ss'esslis (paladins).

Herald: Use ajatar stats from the *Hellfrost Bestiary* and apply the common herald abilities.

Holy Days: Second new moon of each month.

Signature Power: *Quickness*.

Powers: *Altered senses, armor, barrier, beast friend* (snakes only), *bolt, champion of the faith, entangle, fear, hamper movement, healing, puppet, sentry, shape change* (snakes only), *speed, smite* (bite only), *summon beast* (snakes only), *summon herald, viper weapon*.

Trappings: All trappings must relate to snakes whenever possible. For instance, *armor* might grant or thicken scales, *beast friend* might be a loud hiss, and *puppet* could be a hypnotic swaying motion.

Disciple Edge: Ophidae priests' poison has a -2 modifier, and their scaly hides grant Armor +2. Non-ophidae clerics grow fangs (Bite: Str+d4) and inject lethal venom (no modifier).

Ss'esslis is a primordial deity whose faith predates those of the greater gods by untold ages. In the glittering eyes of the ophidae, he was the first being in the universe. His serpentine form is still visible in the heavens, for the stars are naught but light reflecting off his scales. Through studying the movements of Ss'esslis, ophidae priests divine the future, while the naga use his motions to work their magic.

Before the God War, the lesser gods would come to Ss'eelis in search of wisdom, for his age was such that he knew more than their host combined. He taught them many things, for they were like children unto him, but he never revealed all he knew. It was only after Iblis persuaded Ss'esslis to loan him his support (see Ningirama below) that the deity and his offspring became enemies of the other gods.

While Faithful scoff at the notion that Ss'esslis was ever benevolent (and brand those who promote the story as heretics), the myth holds more than a grain of truth. Snakes were once regarded as symbols of wisdom, and many Devoted still hold to such beliefs. The snakes' fall from grace may, in part, be attributed to the ophidae, for they were long known as conquerors and slavers.

Ophidae scorn the other races' view of their god and

his so-called betrayal. In their creed, the gods turned on Ss'eelis because they grew jealous of his power, which he would not share with them, and their mortal creations craved the advanced learning his chosen race, the ophidae, possessed.

Active temples of Ss'esslis are found primarily in the Snakelands. These hallowed halls are no place for those suffering ophidiophobia, for the flow is a writhing mass of venomous serpents and muscular constrictors. Although a deterrent to intruders, these creatures never attack ophidae nagas or priests, nor any ophidae present during a ceremony. The altar is always a statue of Ss'esslis. Typically he is shown with his head raised, though in smaller temples a coiled version suffices. The ceiling is decorated with astronomical signs, though the ophidae's view of the heavens does not entirely match that of the other sentient races.

Among ophidae, priests are advisors to the Scintillant Council. While they cannot enforce Ss'esslis' teachings or guidance on the nagas, their words are heeded. They are also healers, scholars, inventors, astrologers, and astronomers. Paladins serve the naga as military commanders, leading the warriors into battle. Like the priests, they have no authority over the Council, but are permitted to address it on matters of war and defense.

Though the ophidae are loathe to admit it, and do not consider them allies, worshippers of Ss'esslis exist among other races. Most commonly they are found in guilds of assassins, silent killers who have no understanding of the true wealth of the snake god's teachings, and who effectively worship him as an aspect of Iblis. Assassins who honor Ss'esslis also construct temples, but always in secret, for worship of him is a capital offense. Few of these sacred halls have a carpet of living snakes (though a few serpents may be present), instead favoring flooring with a serpentine design. Instead of statues of the god, the altar is often a huge constrictor. Live sacrifices are fed to the snake, as are those who have betrayed the cult.

Ceremonies are always held under the Veiled Moon. While assassins prefer the darkness to conduct their work, ophidae favor this time because moonlight does not obscure the heavens, and because it mirrors they long exile beneath the earth. Hypnotic swaying, entrancing hissing, and the use of snakes all form part of ceremonies.

NINGIRAMA

Titles: Enemy of Apep, He Who Shields Against Serpents, Slayer of Snakes.

Aspects: Protection against snakes.

Affiliations: Marqod, Shamash.

Symbol: A snake cut in twain.

Priesthood: Serpent Shields (priests); Serpent Slayers (paladins).

Herald: None.

Duties: To protect good creatures from snakes.

Sins: (Minor) fleeing from a snake, provoking a snake into attacking you or another creature; (Major) refusing to attack a snake that has made an unprovoked attack on

a good creature; (Mortal) allowing a snake to kill a good creature through your incompetency or inaction.

Holy Days: Snake Beating Day (see *Realm Guide #8: The Empty Zone*) is a high holy day.

Signature Power: *Armor**.

Powers: *Boost/lower trait** (Spirit, Vigor, Fighting, Notice, and Tracking only), *deflection**, *fear**, *healing**, *smite**, *warding**.

Trappings: Fire, heat, or light.

Special: Powers marked “*” only function against snakes. The power remains Maintained if employed against other creatures, though it provides no benefits. For the purpose of spells and sins only, snakes includes mundane serpents, ophidae, medusae, clerics of Apep (see *Realm Guide #6: Heart of Fire*), Shahmaran (p. 9), and clerics of any other evil snake-related deity.

Before the God War, snakes devoured only rodents and birds. For this the gods were grateful, for rodents gnawed at the granaries and spread disease, and birds ate the seeds scattered in the fields.

During the terrible conflict, Iblis sought to bring the snakes into his fold, for he knew their venom was as harmful to the gods as it was rodents. He approached Ss'esslis, lord of all serpents, and asked him to support his cause. Ancient and wise, Ss'esslis was not prepared to sell his services cheaply. He demanded Iblis make his lesser children immortal (Ss'esslis refused to allow his more intelligent servants to take sides in the war, and thus they were not granted the same gift).

Although renowned as the father of lies, Iblis was true to his word. Even today, snakes are believed to be immortal creatures, capable of renewing their youth by shedding their skins.

Ningirama began his career as a common soldier in Karmelos' employ, and served as part of Marqod's bodyguard detail. He earned his status as minor deity of protection against serpents after saving the goddess of mercy from a venomous serpent Iblis sent to kill her.

Shrines stand in temples to Marqod and Shamash, as well as in some temples to Ashtart and in crop fields, but are rarely found in areas where snakes are not a problem. The shrine's form varies. Sometimes they take the form of a carved eagle or mongoose, traditional enemies of serpents, while other times they are images of a snake being stepped on. In art, Ningirama is shown as a mongoose following at the heels or an eagle sat upon the shoulders of Marqod or Shamash.

While serpents are largely considered to be evil, many still serve a vital role in keeping pests down. Only serpents which have attacked a good creature must be exterminated, for they have revealed their true colors. The cult is split between realists, who understand this, and fanatics, who don't. The latter's zeal often puts them at odds with snake charmers, who make a perfectly legal living from entrancing serpents.

As such, the cult specializes in protecting citizens from snakes (like most animals, snakes will attack to defend themselves). Priests and paladins work alongside farmers in the fields, remove snakes from the homes

of citizens, and cooperate with the cult of Geb-Agni to eradicate the cult of Apep.

Not surprisingly, ceremonies involve the ritual sacrifice of snakes, especially ones that have attacked other creatures. The method of death is a personal choice, though whipping them against rocks by their tails and roasting them alive are favorites. Sacrifices are then cooked and eaten, for it is believed that if a cleric eats an evil snake, its soul is destroyed, rendering it impossible for Iblis to make use of it. Milking venomous serpents before releasing them into the wilds is also an acceptable sacrifice.

Character Guidelines: Vigor ranks close behind Spirit, for many serpents are venomous. Strength can be handy for escaping the crushing grasp of constrictors. Notice and Tracking aid in hunting snakes, while Fighting is essential for killing them.



SHAHMARAN

Shahmaran translates from the ancient Magorian tongue as “Queen of Serpents.” Always female, they take the form of an attractive human woman above the waist and a gigantic constrictor below the waist.

The origin of this unusual race is subject to much debate. Some sages claim they are a form of ophidus, filling the role of oracle and ranking below the naga. Others say they are the result of fell jinn magic in days long gone. A small few Faithful insist they are incarnate spawn of Iblis, though this seems unlikely as shahmarani (plural form) are widely regarded as benevolent and wise creatures.

They make their homes in caves or sheltered valleys, trading knowledge and advice for food and water with local nomads. Although shahmarani are potent sorcerers, they are only modest combatants. To protect themselves against the desert's many dangerous denizens they keep a host of snakes in their homes.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d10, Spirit d8, Strength d10, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d6, Knowledge (any three) d8, Intimidation d8, Notice d8, Spellcasting d10, Stealth d8, Streetwise d6

Pace: 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 10 (2)

Treasure: Worthwhile, in lair.

Special Abilities:

- **Armor +2:** Snake scales.
- **Queen of Snakes:** All serpents of animal intellect within 24” of a shahmaran automatically fall under her control. Any snake within 10” of a shahmarani has +1 to recover from being Shaken, +1 Fighting damage, and +1 Toughness.
- **Powers:** *Armor* (thicker scales), *blast* (swarm of snakes), *bolt* (flying snakes), *deflection* (snakes deflect blows), *entangle* (foes wrapped in coils of giant serpent), *summon beast* (snakes and snake swarms only).
- **Quick:** Redraws initiative cards of five or lower.
- **Size +2:** A shahmaran measures stands some 15’ long.



SIMURGH

Known as simoorghs to the Bedu and anghas to the cakali, simurghs are large creatures whose features are both avian and mammalian. They have an elephant-sized body similar to that of a bird, feathered wings and a long streaming tail the color of burnished copper, leonine claws, and a canine head with a human face.

Simurgh's are extremely intelligent, well-versed in many languages and lores. Some nomads claim they have the wisdom of all the ages. Although long-lived, the claim they know everything that has happened down the ages is an exaggeration. The oldest simurghs alive today were hatched shortly before the destruction of Hekata, while the youngest recalls the power of the jinn and their great empire. But simurghs are a dying breed, and none have been born since Suleiman ended the jinn's reign.

Devout followers of Shamash, simurghs detest all serpents, for snakes are the children of Iblis. Marqod bestowed simurghs with many blessings, for despite their enormous size they are renowned for their gentle nature, fighting only in self-defense or to kill serpents.

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

Skills: Fighting d8, Knowledge (Folklore) d10, Knowledge (History) d12, Knowledge (Religion) 10, Notice d10, Spellcasting d10, Stealth d8

Pace: —; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 10

Treasure: None

Special Abilities:

- * **Bite/Claws:** Str+d6.
- * **Death Throes:** When a simurgh dies, whether naturally or through injury, it is consumed in an intense column of flame. Any adjacent creature suffers 3d10 damage and has a chance of catching fire.
- * **Flight:** Pace 16.
- * **God Protected:** The gods curse those who kill a simurgh. For the rest of his natural life, the killer of a simurgh can never benefit from any healing magic or herbal remedies, all Healing rolls on him suffer a -2 penalty (in addition to any other penalties), and he can never take the Harder to Kill Edge. If he already has the Edge, he loses it.
- * **Healing Powers:** Simurgh's know *greater healing*, *healing*, *regeneration*, and *succor*.
- * **Large:** Attackers are +2 to attack rolls due to the creature's size.
- * **Size +4:** A simurgh's body is similar in size to an elephant.

SNAKE, SEWER

Four to five feet in length with dirty brown scales, sewer snakes lurk in the dank tunnels beneath the great cities. Scavengers and hunters, they feed predominately on rats and other small prey. Extremely aggressive, they attack any warm-blooded creature that comes in range of their fangs. Sewer workers rightly fear them.

They hunt by drifting on the gentle current, just their head visible above the surface. Amid all the other detritus, they are very hard to detect until they attack. Moving their body, the snake maneuvers into striking range. Given their prey is fleet of foot, they have developed potent venom.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d4(A), Spirit d6, Strength d5, Vigor d6

Skills: Fighting d6, Notice d8, Stealth d10

Pace: —; **Parry:** 4; **Toughness:** 3

Treasure: None

Special Abilities:

- * **Bite:** Str+d4.
- * **Poison:** Anyone Shaken or wounded by a sewer snake is injected with Deadly poison.
- * **Quick:** Sewer snakes are notoriously fast. They may discard action cards of 5 or lower and draw another. They must keep the replacement card, however.
- * **Size -2:** Sewer snakes measure 4-5' in length.
- * **Small:** Attackers are -2 to attack rolls due to the creature's size.



SWARM, MOON MOTE

Moon motes come out from their hiding places and take to the air in great clouds whenever the moon is visible in the sky. They are visible only as glistening pinpricks of light in the moon's pale rays, akin to dust motes in a beam of sunlight. Moon motes are attracted to mages, sensing in them their ability to manipulate the magic threads. They stick to wizards' flesh and clothing, appearing as fine, silvery dust. While attached, the moon motes dampen the mage's ability to work magic by absorbing any energy he tries to summon.

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

Skills: Notice d6

Pace: —; **Parry:** 4; **Toughness:** 7

Treasure: None

Special Abilities:

- * **Arcane Attraction:** Each round a mage is in the temple he must make an Agility roll as a free action. Modifiers apply based on the phase of the moon: quarter moon +1, half moon +0, three-quarter moon -1, and full moon -2. Each failed roll gives the mage a cumulative -1 penalty to arcane skill rolls. Removing the moon motes requires an Agility roll as an action to brush them off (any adjacent character can make this roll). Each success and raise removes one point of penalties.
- * **Detect Arcana:** Moon motes use *detect arcana* as a natural sense.
- * **Fly:** Pace 10.
- * **Mindless:** Unaffected by Tests of Will, Tricks, or arcane powers like *puppet*.
- * **Swarm:** Parry +2. Because the swarm is composed of thousands of creatures, cutting and piercing weapons do no real damage. Area-effect weapons work normally, and a character can use his hands or blunt weapons to swat at the swarm.