

The Desert of Brass

Imagine a vast disc of land. At its center stands an immense mountain from which all rivers flow. About the mountain lies a desert the size of a continent, its dunes made of golden sand. The desert is surrounded on all sides by a ring-shaped ocean of crystal-clear blue water. Beyond the ocean there is only the bright blue sky.

During the day the sun scorches the sands with merciless heat. When the sun's face slips beneath the disc of the world it sheds its radiance, casting the stars into the sky like droplets of water. Transformed into the moon, it passes through every phase as it reverses its path across the night sky.

Humans thrive here, despite the world's harsh conditions. Upon the banks of the Desert's four rivers lie huge cities, bustling with people and bristling with wonders mechanical and magical. Towers float in the sky, siroccos sweep the streets, and even the poorest beggar is kept cool by magically summoned zephyrs. Rich women and men track time, not by the sun's journey, but through maddeningly intricate mechanical chronometers, and greedy sultans guard their treasures and harems with devious traps. Magi study long into the night while diplomats and courtesans plot and scheme in the courts of mighty Caliphs. Merchant caravans ply trade routes between the cities, braving the arid sands for the chance of generous profits. Corsairs and adventurers sail the Azure Sea, exploring its coves and islands for riches, adventure and glory.

The Desert of Brass is a land defined and mastered by knowledge, but this has not always been. There was a time before the wonders of the modern day, a time before humans walked the dunes. There was once a time of chaos and war, from whence the world was birthed.

The History of the Desert of Brass

The Unshaped Age

No man knows what came before the Unshaped Age. In this ancient time the Djinn, beings of supernal might, warred with one another without end. Day fought night, land fought sea, and the mountains fought the sky – the world was a chaotic mess. The greatest warriors amongst the Djinn, 33 beings of unimaginable power, grew weary of these struggles and conspired to end the war. Working together they defeated the countless hordes of their lesser siblings, setting the world in a more stable form in the process. To cement their rule the Three and Thirty Great Djinn combined their power to forge the Tablets of Destiny. The first tablet held laws that set Great Djinn above Lesser, establishing a supernatural hierarchy. The second tablet held laws that set the world in its current form, stabilizing its individual components into a coherent whole.

An uneasy peace settled amongst the Djinn. The Lesser Djinn resented their superiors for defeating and subjugating them and used loopholes in their edicts to fiddle with the world. Stones would move, islands would sink into the sea, and rivers would change their courses. The Great Djinn found themselves constantly shepherding the Lesser Djinn, much to their irritation.

The 33 Great Djinn once again combined their strength and conjured a third and final Tablet of Destiny, carving upon it the codex of humanity. From the sands arose the First Tribe of Humanity. The Great Djinn tasked mankind to learn, explore, and thrive. By knowing the world humanity would reinforce the hierarchy writ upon the Tablets of Destiny, keeping it stable and ensuring peace between Greater Djinn, Lesser Djinn, and Humanity.

The Age of Darkness

The Great Djinn departed for the heavens to rest from their labors, but not before bestowing a final gift upon humanity: they whispered deep and true secrets into the hearts of mankind, bestowing upon them the tiniest sliver of their divine power. The First Tribe ventured into the dunes, wresting sustenance from the barren desert sands. In time their numbers grew, and many tribes wandered the Desert.

But this was a time of great danger and hardship. Vicious beasts roamed the wastes, breathing fire and acidic venom upon unlucky nomads. Mountains spat brimstone and choking clouds. Plants bore poisonous and addictive fruits, killing or driving mad those who ate them. Disease slew young and old alike. And, always, there was never enough water to be found.

Superstition became the mechanism that allowed humanity to survive those early days. Illogical beliefs, prayers to ancestors, and offerings to the Djinn provided some protection and guidance, but the Desert continued to claim life after life. The future of humanity looked bleak.

All was not lost, however. One human listened to the whispers of the Djinn that still echoed within their heart, and began to study the world in order to understand its inner-workings. Antiquity has erased much about this pioneer – not even their gender is known – but the title she (or he) earned is known to all: Goldenheart, the First Magi. Goldenheart sought to codify the world; to name and thereby understand how the elements of the natural world interacted with one another. She gathered other like-minded individuals together, 12 women and men who dedicated themselves to unlocking the secrets of the world.

Goldenheart focused her research inward, upon the mysterious gift of the Djinn. Years of experimentation and effort yielded a revelation that would forever alter the course of history. The gift that dwelt within her, and within every human, was magic – the same power the Great

Djinn used to bring order to the world. Goldenheart developed a system of rules and practicum that, when properly studied, allowed others to access this power. This system was dubbed the Naming of Things.

The 13 Magi traveled among the tribes, spreading their wisdom, encouraging others to understand the world, and teaching others the Naming of Things. Knowledge became the thing toward which all humans aspired.

The Age of Great Men

Thanks to the Naming of Things, and a collective thirst for knowledge, humanity ceased their endless wandering. The tribes banded together and settled along the banks of the Desert's four life-giving rivers. Merchants blazed trails between the fledgling settlements, peddling vital supplies and goods. The first sea-worthy ships, crewed by brave sailors, mapped the coasts and islands of the sea. This was a time of heroes and adventurers, and their stories are well-known.

The Tale of Arquim the Smith

The first magi to plumb the secrets of metal was Arquim, a smith of legendary skill. No metal could withstand her forge, save a mysterious lump of blue metal that fell from the sky one night. She turned to the Djinn for answers, but to win their wisdom she had to best 1,001 of them in a contest of stories. Night after night she spun her tales and in the end the Djinn declared her the victor.

The substance she was trying to master was Sky Metal, and it fell whenever the Great Djinn clashed their celestial weapons during their nightly battles. Arquim learned how to blend sky metal with steel and specific occult components. The alloy from this procedure exhibited many unique properties, especially its ability to defy gravity. She drafted plans for a building that incorporated sky metal alloy in its structural members, and after considerable effort she succeeded in creating the first flying tower.

Arquim's legacy are her towers – every city in the Desert of Brass sports at least one. She is hailed as a personification of ingenuity and lasting wisdom. She was buried with her tools, but grave robbers looted them long ago. Were they to be recovered, her tools would be a powerful source of inspiration for aspiring engineers.

The Tale of Malihad the Explorer

Malihad was well known in his own lifetime – no man had charted more islands than he. But he is best known for sailing over the edge of the world. When he was alive there was considerable debate as to what the Desert of Brass rested on. Some believed an immense beast carried the Desert upon its back; a bull, an elephant, or perhaps even a turtle. Malihad believed the Desert rested upon nothing, and sought to prove his theory.

Malihad had befriended numerous Djinn in his travels who scoffed at humanity's superstitious ways. The explorer learned from the Djinn and wove a rope of magical strength that could grow as long as was needed. He tied his rope to the largest rock he could find near the edge of the world and leaped into the void. After getting a good look at what lay beneath the world (nothing) he climbed the rope over the course of ten days, returning to explain what he had seen. Malihad is still celebrated as a symbol of adventure and critical thought, and strands of his rope are sometimes sold as good luck charms.

The Tale of Tamroen the Lover

Tamroen is another figure of legend, celebrated not for his grand contributions to the pursuit of knowledge but instead for his life of passion. As a merchant he traveled to every

city and seduced every beautiful woman he met. When Tamroen visited a city, fathers locked up their daughters and husbands followed their wives to market. So attractive and witty was he, that even those Djinn who possessed mortal lovers hid them when he visited their manses.

The Great Djinn Ossithim, He Who Rules the Great Mountain, once invited Tamroen to play a game of chess with him. When Ossithim dozed off during the game Tamroen took the opportunity to seduce the Great Djinn's wife. However, so charmed was Ossithim at the courage of the merchant, that he gave him a chest full of jewels and sent him on his way. These gemstones are worn today by Tamroen's numerous descendants, believed to ward against evil and angry spouses.

The Tale of Farzan the Inventor

Towards the end of the Age of Great Men there lived Farzan, the son of a great magi. He respected and honored his mother's skill, but lacked aptitude for the mystic arts. His head danced with forces that pushed and pulled and shapes that spun. He became a carpenter, but at night he would light his lamps to design strange contraptions. Simple machines had existed for some time, but the Naming of Things had always been seen as superior. Farzan was determined to prove the world wrong.

After years of research, Farzan and a small group of his closest friends stole out to the city square under the cover of darkness. They worked furiously, assembling a great machine by feel and memory alone, for light of any sort would have given them away. Finally, as the moon swallowed the stars and once again became the sun, Farzan sat on a bench marveling at his creation. A great chronometer, its face as tall as a man, clacked and ticked serenely in the heart of the city. Pilgrims soon came from all across the Desert to see the mechanical wonder, taking with them dreams of spinning gears and coiled springs.

From Farzan's labors was born a league of inventors who worked their wonders with brass. Today there exists a friendly rivalry between mechanics and magi to see who can solve a given problem first. As in all aspects of Desert society, there is considerable overlap between these two groups, and anyone who would forsake one method entirely for the other is seen as fringe, at best.

The Age of Clear Skies

For all its glory the time of great heroes is long over. The Desert of Brass has been almost entirely explored. No major innovation in any field of knowledge has been made in centuries. The world is quite stable – the beasts of legend no longer stalk the dunes and humans no longer wallow in ignorance. Indeed, stories and artifacts from that dark time are actively shunned, recorded and cataloged only for the sake of historical accuracy.

Those who would become legends in their own lifetime, generations of would-be explorers, scholars, and inventors, have lived and died without leaving their mark on history. A disquiet has begun to grow, an unspoken fear – if the world has been mastered, what is there left for mankind to do?

Four years ago the answer to that question appeared. Mysterious doors began appearing at random – strange portals that took the curious, the unlucky, or the foolish to a world vastly different from the Desert of Brass. It was a lush forest with cool breezes and deep shadows. Those who sought fame, fortune, and knowledge braved this bizarre new world, returning on occasion to spread word of the Forest of Doors, as it was called, and the wonders that dwelt within it.

The appearance of the doors is seen by some as the dawn of a new Age, but the magi are undecided about what it will bring. Some have returned enriched and empowered by their experiences in the Forest. One man in particular, Caliph Hosni, has enjoyed a meteoric rise in political power and influence since coming back from the Forest. Upon his return he seized governance of the city Golden Chalice. Rumors and whispers leak from his tower high above the merchant city. They say no working of magic can harm him, and attempts to auger his future reveal nothing.

For good or for ill, the opening of the doors has brought significant change to the Desert of Brass, and for the first time in Ages the people of the Desert are unsure of the future.

The Desert Today

Society

Classes

Within Desert society there are 4 rough divisions of class. The labor class, farmers, bricklayers, and doers of other menial tasks, are the poorest of Desert society. Honest, hard labor wins them their daily bread, and even the poorest thatcher can feed her husband and children. Though they cannot always afford the luxuries of the higher classes, laborers still enjoy a good life.

The bulk of society within the Desert is comprised of the middle class, artisans and bureaucrats that live and work within the Desert's cities. They provide upkeep to the magical and mechanical infrastructure. They manage the affairs of businesses, both as shopkeepers and accountants. They live in roomy apartments and modest villas, and enjoy all the amenities of modern Desert life.

The magi are at the top of the Desert social ladder. To master the Naming of Things is to master knowledge itself, and none are considered more suited to governance than the magi. Some magi obtain their sorcerous knowledge specifically to enter politics, while others shun the political world in favor of academia. No matter their position, one who practices the Naming of Things receives impressive monetary compensation. Their apartments are spacious, lavishly decorated, and kept comfortably cool at all times through magic.

The merchant class are somewhat unique – they occupy a space neither above nor beneath any of the others. Consider them to exist beside the other three classes. The life of the merchant class can be difficult, but more than a few traders have retired young and wealthy. Merchants travel where political and mercantile winds blow, always on the lookout for profitable enterprise. They ply the trade lanes, either by camel or boat, carrying spices, cloth, wood, metal, fruit, and a thousand-thousand other goods to sell. In a way, the life of the merchant resembles that of the First Tribe – nomadic, though vastly improved through enlightenment.

These are hardly fixed castes, however. Social mobility is common and far from difficult. Even a poor farmer can raise the capital needed to join a merchant caravan, and numerous tales abound of poor children attending school, learning the Naming of Things, and becoming powerful political figures.

Politics

Every city within the Desert of Brass is ruled by a Caliph, who is always a powerful practitioner of the Naming of Things. Caliphs are not necessarily the mightiest magi of their city, but that has often been the case. Every Caliph is assisted and advised by a Cabal of 12 magi. The Cabal is composed of the wisest members of the 12 fields of learning: the Arts, Astrology, the Djinn, Geography, History, Mathematics, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine, the Naming of Things, the Natural Sciences, Philosophy, and Warfare. Traditionally, these same 12 women and men head their respective departments at their city's university.

To become either a Caliph or a member of the Cabal, one must challenge the current holder of the office. In the case of death, impeachment, or resignation, hopefuls compete between one another to determine who will claim the vacant seat. A proper challenge is always one of knowledge. Opponents take turns asking their adversary questions. Whoever asks a question that is answered incorrectly ascends to the challenged's position. As a matter of conduct, challenging a sitting magi is considered extremely bad form, unless there is a perceived problem with the current politico.

The power to draft new laws lies with the Cabal, but it is the Caliph who must enact

them. Additionally, the Caliph has the power to veto any law they deem inappropriate. If a Caliph is powerful enough, she can strong-arm or ignore the Cabal almost entirely--though no city today has so weak a Cabal.

Within the highest floating tower of the City of Brass, greatest of cities, lies the Throne of Eleven Metals. It stands empty – it has had no occupant since the days of Goldenheart when it was first forged. By ancient writ, whoever can claim the Throne and keep it will become the Sultan of Eleven Metals, undisputed ruler of the Desert of Brass. The four Caliphs would swear fealty, obeying their Sultan to the utmost, and the Desert would be a very different place.

Warfare

Large-scale warfare is rare in the Desert, but not unheard of. All Caliphs read their destinies in the stars, and on occasion these readings foretell of glory in battle. These divinations are used as *causus belli*. Augury is a difficult art, and accuracy regarding the future is harder still – many Caliphs have fielded armies and clashed with one another over erroneous predictions. Conflicts between one army loyal to the Caliph and another loyal to the Cabal are another form of armed conflict. Rather than driven by prophecy, these tend to be motivated by more practical matters relating to political power.

Theoretically, anyone wishing to seize the Throne of Eleven Metals would first have to claim victory over the combined forces of her rival Caliphs. Simple numbers make such a task virtually insurmountable, but magi everywhere know how dangerous such assumptions can be. Needless to say, any conflict over the Throne would dwarf any battle ever fought in the history of the Desert.

Mass combat is fought with spells as often as it is with scimitars. Every unit of soldiers, from massive legions to tiny squads, is led by a magi. Ranks of sorcerers summon terrible desert illnesses and razor-sharp crystal shards to slay their enemies. Magi will often battle one another in duels, proxy for a larger battle, using nothing but their magic. These clashes demonstrate just how deadly the Naming of Things can be when a caster bends his will towards destruction, rather than civic duty.

Laws & Crime

Crime is harshly punished within the Desert – criminal acts are looked upon as throwbacks to the Age of Darkness, a time of barbarism and ignorance. Murder is universally punished by the execution of the offender. Theft is punished by the amputation of one hand. Perjury and libel are punished by the removal of the tongue.

Magistrates are appointed by the Caliph to enforce the law, usually (but not always) from the higher ranks of a city's magi. Paid a stipend from the city's coffers, magistrates can deputize citizens to gather evidence or patrol the city streets. Amongst their duties are the prosecution, judgment, and passing of sentence upon those suspected of committing a crime.

Aided by the Naming of Things, magistrates publicly try and sentence criminals. Though rare, some people have been proven innocent after being punished by a magistrate. Such events are immediately followed by the shameful resignation of the magistrate who passed judgment. Some even go so far as to accept as their own the punishment meted out.

Culture

People

If one were forced to select only a single word to describe the denizens of the Desert of Brass, it would have to be “educated”. All men and women in the Desert know how to read and write, regardless of their station in life. The pursuit of knowledge is seen as humanity's

birthright – it is literally the task given to them by their creators. To lack the most fundamental skill of literacy is beyond unacceptable. Knowledge tamed the Desert's countless dangers. Knowledge grants the magi their sorcerous power. Knowledge empowers metal and glass to know the hour without the sun. Knowledge is the foundation of civilization.

Similarly, the people of the Desert are entirely comfortable with magic. Many citizens of the Desert practice the Naming of Things, and those who don't have enjoyed hundreds of comforts, goods, and services thanks to the magi who do. Magical aptitude is lauded, never shunned. The fruits of magic, the manifold wonders that enrich lives and provide comfort, are not seen as miraculous or astounding – most citizens take them for granted. No citizen of the Desert has lived without sorcerous infrastructure in their lives, and what some worlds would consider beyond comprehension those of the Desert take as fact.

Names

All people hailing from the Desert have at least two names, a personal and a family name. Depending on local culture, children will take the personal name (usually with an honorific prefix such as 'el' or 'al') of their father or mother as their family name. Often times people will eschew this structure in favor of a name that reflects where they were born. A man named Omar born in the city of Victory Ewer may call himself “Omar of Victory Ewer”. On rare occasions a Caliph may rename a citizen, usually in recognition of a great or daring deed. A woman named Rihanna who slew a mighty Roc may be renamed “Rihanna, Roc-Slayer”.

Merchants often choose to name their children after one of the Thirty-Three Great Djinn. Though the Djinn have genders, their names may be given to either boys or girls without shame to either party.

Common male names include: Abbas, Abdul, Abu, Altair, Aziz, Dawud, Fahim, Farouk, Gofar, Haji, Hakim, Hassan, Hosni, Hussein, Jabar, Jamal, Kamal, Khan, Nasser, Nizzam, Omar, Rasheid, Saeed, Sharik, Usman, or Zulfakar.

Common female names include: Adara, Aya, Badra, Farah, Ghydah, Hannah, Intisar, Jallah, Kalilah, Lama, Maha, Mariam, Munirah, Nadia, Naja, Nasira, Numa, Rana, Rihanna, Ruwaydah, Sammah, Talibah, Umaydah, or Yasira.

Food

Food in the Desert of Brass varies between cities, but certain staples are constant. Everyone, from the highest Caliph to the lowest street sweeper, eats beans and unleavened bread. Every meal includes one or both of these staples. Bread is usually cooked with garlic and olive oil, and beans are served with sauces or stews, or mashed to create fine-grained dishes or pastes. Spicy soups are common, as are well spiced sauces. Meats are usually roasted over a fire on a small spit. These kebabs are commonly made with beef, goat, or chicken and usually include whole garlic cloves, nuts, mushrooms, peppers, or onions. They are usually marinated in a mixture of vinegar and spices. Dried fruits are a common snack. Dates, almonds, mint, cashews, and pineapple are served by the bowlful at gatherings.

Coffee and tea are the most common drinks, aside from water. Almost everyone in the Desert of Brass enjoys strong coffee. It is typically served black, but women tend to prefer sugar and milk. Black and green teas are served at most meals, with chai being a favorite dessert beverage. Cold water is considered a luxury, and ice is an unthinkable frivolity. Only the richest magi can afford ice, for the only place cold enough to produce the stuff is the Great Mountain. Huge blocks must be quarried and hauled, and the punishing heat melts the bulk of the ice well before it arrives at its destination.

Merchants are generally used to eating travel rations, such as dried meat, dried fruit,

and salty bread. Because their normal fare is so bland, merchants are notorious for their love of strong spices. Caravan cooks are always on the lookout for new dishes, and will often pay well for old family recipes.

Clothing

Clothing from the Desert of Brass is loose and flowing, an essential feature to protect the body from the merciless heat of the Desert sun. The poorest citizens wear simple robes of cotton and typically shun any sort of jewelry or adornment, believing it to be a false pretense of fortune. City-dwellers wear linen robes and wear modest jewelry, usually in the form of necklaces and rings. Merchants and magi wear garments of silk and adorn themselves with as much jewelry as possible, openly displaying their wealth.

Men will often wear turbans, especially if they are married. A man's hair can be any length, but long hair is almost universally tied back. Men rarely wear jewelry outside of earrings or nose rings. An un-sculpted beard is seen as a sign of experience and wisdom.

Women will occasionally wear veils, especially if they are married. Women's hair styles vary widely, but most wear headdresses affixed with coins or jewels. Women also tend to sport more jewelry than men, especially in the form of bracelets, necklaces, and torques.

Members of both sexes often wear henna tattoos as a form of temporary body decoration. Some magi find henna an excellent meditative focus, while many a dancer has found her beauty enhanced by tantalizing, full-body henna patterns.

Art & Architecture

Buildings in the Desert are made of various qualities of brick. Low-income housing is made of sun-dried bricks of mud. Wealthier citizens build their homes out of stone bricks. Many of the magical properties of buildings are woven into the bricks that compose them. Houses are cooled by bricks quarried from the bottom of the Azure Sea. Hospitals are built with bricks that prevent diseases and promote healthful recovery. Taverns are made, in part, of bricks that soothe tempers.

Buildings almost never have doors, as they trap heat and prevent the movement of refreshing breezes. The Desert's cities are walled, and at their gates one can find massive doors that swing soundlessly on brass hinges taller than a man. Most buildings sport vaulted ceilings, tall arches, and fluted columns. Domed buildings are uncommon and speak of considerable wealth.

The most memorable buildings within the Desert, however, are the Sky Towers. Heavily enchanted concentrations of sky-metal defy gravity, lifting these tall towers high into the bright blue sky. Only magi can pay the funds necessary to build and maintain these fantastic structures. Routine sorcerous maintenance is required to keep a Sky Tower aloft, including ritualistic sacrifices and periodic replacement of key structural components. Most Sky Towers can only be reached through the Naming of Things, though some architects design their Sky Towers with mechanical elevators to accommodate guests who lack magical knowledge. Truly crafty designers implement altitude controls, allowing their Sky Towers to slowly rise and fall.

Art in the Desert of Brass features no images of people – any piece sporting such a subject is considered crude at best. As a flat reflection of the human form no image, no matter how talented its artist may be, can truly capture the diversity and beauty of a person. Given the power they command, and their notoriously mercurial emotions, Djinn are never drawn or painted, either, for fear of poor reception.

Calligraphy and poetry have taken the place of painting and sculpture. Elaborate calligraphic symbols are often given as gifts, depicting either the name of the recipient or

something significant to them like an emotion or a specific date. Poetry often focuses on love and romance, and is almost always bittersweet.

Music

Vocal music, accompanied by flutes or drums, is the most common form of music in the Desert. Popular songs recount the adventures and triumphs, along with their tragic romances and deaths, of legendary heroes. Chanting is another popular form of musical expression, enjoyed both for their rhythmic styling and their ease of memorization. Merchants hire dancers and drummers to accompany their caravans. Entertainment is more precious than gold, the merchants say, and they will pay handsomely for good performances.

Every city sports a crier who calls out every hour with a far-reaching rhyme. These mnemonics are unique to every crier and are often lost when they die or retire, but some survive if they are popular enough to merit memorization.

Death & the Afterlife

There are three commonly accepted ideas of what happens after someone dies. Most non-magi believe a person's soul travels to Paradise, a lush oasis filled with sweet fruit and cool water. Here they live forever in comfort and peace, eternally young and healthy.

Magi, lacking any evidence of this view of this perfect afterlife, have a hard time accepting its validity. Though magi acknowledge the existence of the soul, they believe it perishes when the body does. Only under rare circumstances will a soul linger after death in the form of a ghost.

A small number of citizens, calling themselves the Followers of the Void, hold a vastly different belief. They believe Zamani, the Great Djinn who rules the Nothingness Beyond, has the power to transform a mortal soul into a Djinn upon death. This creates a new being that retains memories of its mortal life, but enjoys immortality and phenomenal cosmic power. Most citizens of the Desert of Brass see the Followers as ignorant pagans, practicing ancient and fruitless rituals. Those not of the faith have given it a far more sinister label – the Cult of Zamani.

Family, Gender, Marriage & Sex

Family is incredibly important to citizens of the Desert of Brass, a cultural belief stretching back to the Age of Darkness. The Tribes of Humanity were, essentially, massive families. Only by working together, trusting one another and pooling energies, could the members of a Tribe survive. Today this practice continues in the form of implicit trust between blood relatives. To break that bond, to lie, cheat, or steal from a family member, is considered a heinous act. A person who has no love for their family is believed to have no honor.

The sexes are considered equal in potential and skill within the Desert, though some tasks are still traditionally delineated to one gender or the other. Weaving, for example, is traditionally considered a woman's job. The touch of a woman is believed to bring out the best qualities of a woven work's components. Animal husbandry is traditionally considered a man's job. For a woman to expose herself to stinking animals is considered shameful.

The overwhelming majority of marriages in the Desert are arranged, usually for political or business reasons. Engagement is a lengthy process and the arrangement is subject to veto by any family elder (parents, grand parents or even great-grandparents) at any point in time before the wedding itself. Despite this strict approach to marriage, however, passionate love affairs are quite common. Lengthy poems written in exquisite calligraphy tell bittersweet tales of ill-fated lovers. Theatrical productions tend to be comedies, farces where everyone finds love and happiness in the end. Most magi enjoy more tragic depictions of romance,

lovers who leap off the Great Mountain rather than be separated by unwanted marriages. Today, more than a few couples have fled through the Doors to escape an arranged marriage, either alone or with their true love.

Extramarital affairs are common in the Desert, as are relations between members of the same gender. Both are accepted, but all parties involved are expected to remain discreet. Flagrant display of an extramarital or same-sex relationship can damage reputations, business prospects, and political careers. Neither act is explicitly illegal, so while there is no legal punishment leveled against them, the outed often find themselves publicly shamed. Like young lovers who wish to elope, many people have fled to the Forest of Doors to escape the ramifications of their indiscretions.

Travel

By land most people walk or ride camels. One's camels are a priceless asset in the deep Desert, and most would give up their right arm rather than lose a camel. Merchants travel along ancient trade-routes, roads of mortar and stone that have existed since the dawn of the Age of Great Men. More opulent merchants, or those who deal in perishable goods, travel by river and sea. Most water-going vessels can convert between river and sea travel and always sport large cargo holds. Water is the fastest method of travel, but it is also the most expensive, leading many merchants to forgo sailing to preserve their profit margins.

Locations in the Desert

Cities

Civilization in the Desert of Brass is centered in four massive cities, each built upon the banks of one of the world's four life-giving rivers. Upon the Old River rests the City of Brass, largest and greatest city of the Desert. True to its name, every building sports a roof of brass, causing the city to shine like a beacon of burning gold every day at noon. The City is the seat of knowledge in the Desert, housing the Great Library. The keepers of the Library work night and day, copying texts from all over the Desert for rich patrons in search of rare or unique volumes. Proceeds from these transactions go to expanding the Library, for there is an ever-growing need for shelf space. The university of the City specializes in alchemy, architecture, literature, philosophy, and other matters of scholarship. Citizens from the City of Brass are considered more learned than those who hail from any other city in the Desert.

To the east, upon the River of Reeds, lies the city of Serpent's Eye, fabled birthplace of Goldenheart and the first city to accept her teachings. Dominating the airspace above Serpent's Eye are three massive, domed buildings held aloft by sky-metal. These domes, and their satellite towers, are home to the Academy of Names, the heart of magical thought, and the only location in the Desert where the Naming of Things can be learned. Thanks to the university's inventive faculty, Serpent's Eye features more magical amenities than the other cities of the Desert. Its streets are swept clean by zeyphers, heatless orbs of crystal light the streets at night, and waste water is carried away by a network of brass pipes. At the city's heart stands a featureless statue of crystal, impossibly ancient, that glows with an eerie inner light. Said to once depict Goldenheart, the light within, and how to access it, is believed to be the last true mystery of the Desert of Brass. Those born in Serpent's Eye are considered hard-headed and willful, always sure of their correctness.

To the south, upon the River of Stars, stands the city of Golden Chalice, the heart of the Desert's economy. The city itself is massive, but larger still are the open fields and walled quarters that house mercantile caravans. The city's heart is a gigantic paved square known as the Celestial Bazaar, a marketplace like no other. The rarest goods, the most intricate clockwork, and the finest foods can be found here, for the right price. The citizens of Golden

Chalice are known for their charm and wit, and most merchants consider the city their home while not traveling.

To the west, upon the Bitter River, stands the city of Victory Ewer, the city of excellence and exploration. Let the other cities have their books or their gold, the city of Victory Ewer is the heart of adventure and daring-do. Warriors, athletes, and explorers travel here to swear solemn vows to slay monsters, win tournaments, and discover ancient riches. The Bitter River is the broadest, and the city's riverside docks swell with sailing ships preparing to embark upon high adventure on the open seas, and corsairs dock here to offload plunder. The city is also host to a biannual athletic competition – every two years each city nominates a band of athletes who compete in various tests of skill and strength. Citizens of Victory Ewer tend to place first in these competitions, giving them their reputation of being lithe, agile, strong, and humble.

Villages, Towns and Settlements

Surrounding the four great cities and scattered throughout the dunes lie countless hamlets, villages and towns. Most tend to exist on or near the vital rivers, but some deep-Desert settlements have thrived thanks to magical and mechanical genius. Deep wells bring ice-cold water to the surface, allowing life to flourish amidst the burning sands. Every town falls under the influence of one of the major cities, paying modest taxes in return for the talent needed to upkeep the mechanisms needed for survival.

The Great Mountain

At the heart of the Desert stands the High Mount, the only mountain in the entire world. Countless Djinn make their homes in its caves and crags, but the mountain is for the most part barren. Those seeking to speak with the Great Djinn may climb to the top, known as the Sun Peak, and shout out to the heavens, but even this display of skill and dedication rarely receives an answer. The path to the summit is extraordinarily difficult, not only due to natural hazards such as exposure, dehydration, and the complete lack of edible plants or animals, but also because the Mountain Djinn still remember the shame Tamroen the Lover brought upon their master, Ossithim. Any Djinn who encounters a human upon the slopes of High Mount will do their best to impede their ascent outside of blatant injury. Every few years expeditions attempt to conquer the Great Mountain, and every decade or so one manages to return.

The Ten Thousand Oases

Not all the Desert is burning sand. Numerous oases dot the dunes, offering shelter and succor to wanderers in need. Each oasis is overseen by a Lesser Djinn, and most of these caretakers are fond of humans. They are empowered, however, to deny water and shade to anyone who has lied or cheated another. Merchants, who rely on oases to survive their long desert treks, strive to keep their reputations spotless as a result. Consequently, to question a merchant's integrity is a grave insult.

The Sea & The Edge of the World

The Desert is girded by the Azure Sea, an expanse of crystal-clear tropical water that stretches hundreds of miles from shore to edge. Islands great and small dot the ocean, untamed places filled with savage monsters and hordes of treasure. Corsairs and adventurers brave these wild places, hoping to find fame and fortune. Massive beasts claim these islands as theirs: crabs ten times the height of a man, eagles that snatch up elephants, and serpents that fly and eat lightning are commonly sighted. Every so often, however, an

explorer will return to civilization with a ruby the size of his fist.

The Azure Sea stops abruptly, easily seen by the great spumes of mist coughed up as the sea's waters tumble over the edge of the world. Below this, as Malihad discovered, lies nothing, though few people have witnessed it for themselves. Sailors wisely avoid the edge of the world, for few forces can keep a ship from going over the edge once the currents seize it.

The Sea and the Edge are considered by many the last frontier of the unknown in the Desert, and countless men and women seek their fortunes, and often find their deaths, in this savage place.

Creatures of the Desert

The Djinn

The Djinn are beings of spirit that embody physical objects and locations. They are not particularly abstract in any manner, nor can they become insubstantial, fly, or change their form. For all this though, they are creatures of magical origin. They are a holdover from a previous age, where they represented primal forces of the world that wished to dominate existence.

During the Unshaped Age armies of Djinn clashed, each fighting to have their element or feature dominate the world. The Thirty Three Great Djinn distinguished themselves amongst their peers as the most powerful warriors among their kind. They conquered vast swaths of the world, forging the Emerald Tablets to secure their dominance and set the world in a form that pleased them most. In time, they settled into their spheres of influence, but found their works despoiled by the Lesser Djinn. They still struggled amongst one another for the scraps of the world that the Great Djinn had not claimed. To settle these wasteful skirmishes the Great Djinn forged the Emerald Tablets, creating humanity to explore and refine the Desert. The hierarchy the Tablets described would be reinforced by human activity, binding the Lesser Djinn to their proscribed locations and purviews.

From that point onward the Djinn were defined by their relationship to humanity. The Emerald Tablets not only created the Tribe of Man, but also delineated how the Djinn were to behave toward mankind. Djinn are not allowed to slay mortals without undue cause, and must first parlay with their offender before harming them.

Many Djinn resent the Tablets and long to make war against one another without restraint. Such Djinn deal cordially with mankind, but will make no pretense at being anything other than their superior. Clever Djinn realize that they are not prevented from intimidating, tricking, or otherwise harming a person through means other than violence, a loophole employed by many Djinn to great effect.

Not all Djinn despise humanity, however. Many have come to admire mankind's spirit and find their short lives amusing. Oasis Djinn in particular are fond of humans. Many Djinn take mortal lovers and allow them to dwell within their palaces. Such people are fortunate, for they will want for nothing, though they are treated by their supernatural lovers like pets--well loved and cared for pets, but pets nonetheless.

Common Knowledge

Aphorisms and Colloquialisms

"May your camels wither and die!"

This is a dire insult, reserved only for when people declare themselves enemies. This curse ends friendships, ceases negotiations, and begins preparations for battle.

"Better than the ten thousand fruits of paradise."

A glowing description of something. Reserved for the most succulent foods, mellowest tobacco, the most dedicated student, or the most refreshing oasis.

"Stupidity sinks to the bottom."

An admonishment against ignorance. Used to urge people to higher levels of education. It also reveals the fear of underachievement inherent in Desert culture.

"Never trust those who beat their own camels."

Common wisdom holds that if a person is capable of doing violence to a dumb beast they are much more likely to do the same to a person.

"...more than all the sands in the Desert."

Used to describe a large number of things, such as enemies bested, women wooed, or jewels pilfered.

"Nothing is complete until it is complete."

An admonishment against making predictions before something has reached a conclusion.

"It is better to know than not to know."

Secrets are to be unraveled – nothing should remain unknown. The people of the Desert endlessly seek new knowledge, new magic and new technologies.

"By the Sultan's golden sword!"

An exclamation of surprise or shock.

"I swear upon the stars of the Great Djinn..."

No stronger oath can be sworn by the people of the Desert. It is tacitly understood that the Great Djinn enforce such oaths, and considerable face is lost by breaking one.

The Chant of the Thirty-Three Great Djinn

The Chant of the Thirty-Three Great Djinn is the oldest known piece of literature in the Desert. These are the same words graven upon the First Emerald Tablet. It is recited and chanted during special occasions and occult ceremonies. Many citizens, magi or otherwise, commit it to memory. Any who learn the Naming of Things must first learn this chant.

“The Great Djinn are allotted what they shall rule over and are numbered thusly:
The First Great Djinn is Hummulad, Who Rules the Sands
The Second Great Djinn is Alussein, Who Rules the Sun
The Third Great Djinn is Damasu, Who Rules the Flowering Plants
The Fourth Great Djinn is Suun, Who Rules the Salt Water
The Fifth Great Djinn is Malik, Who Rules the Night Sky
The Sixth Great Djinn is Sebtet, Who Rules the Storms
The Seventh Great Djinn is Orotek, Who Rules the North Wind
The Eighth Great Djinn is Bazziq, Who Rules All Fire
The Ninth Great Djinn is Zulyad, Who Rules the Rivers
The Tenth Great Djinn is Sakinahar, Who Rules Useful Metals
The Eleventh Great Djinn is Talibrehim, Who Rules the East Wind
The Twelfth Great Djinn is Nuriq, Who Rules the Beasts
The Thirteenth Great Djinn is Tetraphar, Who Rules All Salt
The Fourteenth Great Djinn is Lahazem, Who Rules the Moon
The Fifteenth Great Djinn is Qa, Who Rules the Grains
The Sixteenth Great Djinn is Ossithim, Who Rules the Great Mountain
The Seventeenth Great Djinn is Tehellon, Who Rules the Day Sky
The Eighteenth Great Djinn is Fikrimahad, Who Rules Monsters of the Deep
The Nineteenth Great Djinn is Asef, Who Rules South Wind
The Twentieth Great Djinn is Umanjil, Who Rules Gemstones
The Twenty-First Great Djinn is Kalimtet, Who Rules the Clouds
The Twenty-Second Great Djinn is Warinit, Who Rules the Plants that Do Not Flower
The Twenty-Third Great Djinn is Pharomma, Who Rules the Oasis
The Twenty-Fourth Great Djinn is Naysoloth, Who Rules the Dust
The Twenty-Fifth Great Djinn is Rajanu, Who Rules the Things that Crawl
The Twenty-Sixth Great Djinn is Tifero, Who Rules the Monsters of the Waste
The Twenty-Seventh Great Djinn is Alanihad, Who Rules All Gardens
The Twenty-Eighth Great Djinn is Daudim, Who Rules the West Wind
The Twenty-Ninth Great Djinn is Shamathi, Who Rules the Rain
The Thirtieth Great Djinn is Omniar, Who Rules the Caves
The Thirty-First Great Djinn is Ixonek, Who Rules Precious Metals
The Thirty-Second Great Djinn is Hakir, Who Rules the Stones
The Thirty-Third Great Djinn is Zamani, Who Rules the Nothingness
And thus, the Great Djinn have been named.”

Five Things Every Citizen Knows

Knowledge is essentially good.

Every citizen understands that knowing is better than ignorance. The Desert owes its greatness due to the knowledge possessed by its inhabitants. No secret should remain so – the tiniest fact could lead to a profound breakthrough, revolution, or paradigm shift.

The subject that most engages them.

Every citizen has a favorite topic, subject, or area of research. This could be one of the twelve great wisdoms (the Arts, Astrology, the Djinn, Geography, History, Mathematics, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine, the Naming of Things, the Natural Sciences, Philosophy, or Warfare) or something less esoteric such as fishing, food, or travel. Any citizen can, and will, talk for hours about their favorite subject.

The virtues of magical power.

Everyone in the Desert owes their comfort to the magical potency of their superiors. It is an unquestioned truism that magi are more powerful than the average person. They can read the future in the stars, compel others to tell only the truth, transform into wind, or summon plagues through sheer force of will. Magi command fundamental aspects of the Desert itself – magic is the gift of the Djinn that raises humans toward their unimaginable power.

The coming of the Doors heralds a new age for the worlds they connect.

The presence of the gates will fundamentally alter the fate of any world connected to it. It is a celestial event of colossal importance, but the overall impact has yet to be understood. No magi will yet declare these arcane portals good or bad, but all of them agree that significant change has come to the Desert. Life in the Desert of Brass, as well as every other world connected to it, will never be the same.

Reputation and honor are the foundations of a good life.

Every citizen respects their family and friends. They are careful not to besmirch the reputations of others without just cause. To do so would be dishonorable and pointlessly cruel. Likewise, citizens guard their own reputation highly and are deeply hurt by attacks against their character.

Recent Events

The Doors

Since humanity's birth, mankind has sought to know all that is knowable in the Desert. Before the Doors appeared it was commonly held that this theoretically impossible goal had been reached. The Desert was a known thing – every oasis and savage island had been mapped. The Naming of Things, along with other scholarly disciplines, brought comfort, sustenance, and happiness to every man, woman, and child in the Desert. Life did not merely exist, it thrived despite the harsh conditions of the Desert of Brass.

For nearly a generation magi had seen signs of an impending event of cosmic significance. Divinations from the stars were vague, even for augury, speaking only that new age was approaching. It didn't take long once the Doors began to appear for magi and merchant alike to realize they were the heralds of this new age. The Doors were greeted with a sense of burning curiosity and cautious optimism. Would this new age be one of prosperity and wisdom, or would it test the people of the Desert as the Age of Darkness did so long ago?

Today, some five years since the Doors first began appearing, most people of the Desert have a basic grasp of the Forest of Doors. The Desert is but one of many worlds, all connected to a central world known as the Forest of Doors. The Forest is a mysterious place, home to strange magics and danger, but also to ancient knowledge and adventure. Many young explorers have sought out the Doors, hoping to find fame and fortune in the Forest.

Visitors from Other Worlds

About a year ago every city in the Desert was alive with rumors and stories of visitors from another world. A man calling himself the Merchant Prince stepped through a Door into the City of Brass, flanked by two men. One, Hassan Ibn Al'Zemani, was a native son of the Desert and a diplomat of some renown. The other, Luelenvati, came from a vastly different world – the Undersea. The Caliph of that city greeted them as honored guests and bade them welcome.

The trio visited every city in the Desert, drawing crowds wherever they went. Symposiums and debates were held, and many citizens saw with their own eyes evidence of other worlds and civilizations. Their stay was not long, but many people were inspired by their visit to travel to the Forest of Doors. Some say it even prompted the new expedition known as the Three and Thirty Tents.

Caliph Hosni

Another citizen of the Desert to return from the Forest is Hosni, Caliph of Golden Chalice. Sent by his predecessor to lead an expedition to the Forest, Hosni returned rich in both knowledge and power. Since his return he has climbed the political ladder quickly – faster than any man or woman before him. His mastery of the Naming of Things is said to be without equal, and he has never lost a sorcerous duel. Every politically-minded citizen of the Desert knows Hosni's ultimate goal is the Throne of Eleven Metals, and if half the rumors of his knowledge and cunning are true, it will be his, sooner rather than later.

Inspiration

A Thousand and One Arabian Nights (Literature)

This collection of Near-Eastern stories, legends, and fables is the best resource for would-be citizens of the Desert of Brass. This work of fiction has inspired generations of readers with fantastic tales of djinn and the clever mortals that outwit them. This book was the primary source of inspiration for the setting, but don't expect to see any of the characters or events show up in game – we've taken our own spin on the idea.

The Koran and the Old Testament (Literature)

These holy texts are both filled with feats of great magic, visitations by magical beings, and celestial prophecy. The characters climb holy mountains, bring wisdom to the ignorant, and occasionally face divine wrath.

The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen (Movie)

Aside from being an inspiration for Forest of Doors in general, this movie is well-suited for imagining the Desert of Brass. The Sultan is the perfect image of a Magi: erudite, well-educated, somewhat whimsical, and above all frivolous.

Aladdin (Movie)

Despite being a Disney movie, Aladdin very much captures the more fantastic essence of the Desert of Brass. The presence of fantastic magics, deadly traps, and the aesthetics of Agrabah are good cognates for the Desert. Jafar is an excellent depiction of a Magi, albeit a fallen and wicked one.

What Life Was Like In the Lands of the Prophet (Literature)

This is an excellent and highly visual record of medieval Arabia. An excellent resource on ancient Arab culture, including dress, traditions, art, mathematics, and diet.

The Thirteenth Warrior (Movie)

This film's depiction of the Arab world as the seat of rational civilization and learning is spot-on. The main character, Ahmad ibn Fadlan – played by Antonio Banderas – is literate, rejects superstition, is well-traveled, and prizes knowledge over all things. He is the perfect image of the average Desert citizen.