
SIGIL-BEASTS

By Karalynn Lee

**An Entry in the 2012 Windhammer Prize for
Short Gamebook Fiction**

Introduction

In a land where wars are fought by sigil-beasts representing each realm, you are a dragon-mage, someone who can command one of the most powerful of sigil-beasts. You've built your homeland into the greatest empire in the western reaches, and your brother rules it all with a fair hand.

After your part in countless conquests, you've settled into a quiet existence in a distant corner of your brother's realm. But peace is such a fragile thing...

How to play this adventure

You have a chance to customize your character before beginning this story. Your character's abilities will determine your success in meeting challenges throughout your adventure.

You must keep track of three numeric attributes:

Skill is your combat ability and physical prowess, reflecting the time you've spent training with your weapon of choice—a blade fashioned from a dragon's tooth—and your general fitness. Most fights and feats of strength will be determined by this attribute.

Perception is a measure of your observation skills and your knowledge, gained from hours of study both before and after your self-imposed exile. You're more likely to have learned relevant lore or notice additional details if this attribute is higher.

Health tracks your vitality. If it ever reaches 0, you have died.

Initial attributes

Both your Skill and Knowledge have a minimum of 6 points each. You may divide 6 additional points between your Skill and Perception however you choose.

Your initial Health is 12 points plus your Skill. Your current Health will go down as you are injured in battle, and may increase again as you receive healing, but can never exceed your initial Health.

If you find yourself without a weapon, your fists inflict 1 point of damage.

Testing your Skill/Perception

Occasionally you may be called upon to test one of your attributes. This can be done by rolling two dice and comparing the total against the current attribute. If you have rolled lower than your attribute, you have succeeded. If the dice total higher than your current attribute, you have failed.

Battle

When called to battle, play a round of combat as follows:

1. Roll two dice and add the number to your Skill.
2. Roll two dice again and this time add this number to your opponent's Skill.
3. Whoever's total is higher wins that round; a tie indicates that you both miss.
4. The amount of damage is set depending on the weapon used. Deduct this from the loser's Health. Death occurs when someone's Health level reaches zero or below.
5. If both parties are still alive, begin a new round.

Sigil-beast

If you acquire a sigil-beast, you will be told its attributes. Record these separately from your own attributes. If your sigil-beast engages in battle, use its attributes.

Possessions

You begin your adventure with a dragonstooth dagger which deals 2 points of damage, a waterskin, and 6 pieces of gold—all that's left from the jewels and finery you sold after you departed from court. You haven't had need for any more until now...

Character Sheet

Skill –

Perception –

Weapon damage –

Health [Initial:] –

Gold –

Possessions and markings –

Sigil-beast Skill –

Sigil-beast weapon damage –

Sigil-beast Health [Initial:] –

1

You live in the desert inside a petrified dragon's bones: the gaping jaws your front door, the arches of the ribcage your living room, the empty left eye socket your window. Cloth wrapped over the skeleton shields you from sun and sandstorms, while scorpions and rattlesnakes know better than to venture near. A desert nomad tribe sometimes wander onto your lands, and you trade food and stories.

It is a proper home for a dragon-mage, when there are no more dragons.

After you rode your last wind, you forsook the Janari court and its lord—your twin brother—to seek the peace of the black sands and desolate sky. Oddly, the bones are a comfort as well: a reminder that there truly once were dragons, that you did not weave them from the threads of your imagination and vanity as the creature you could command. You helped your brother carve out an empire with your powers; surely there's no more he can ask of you.

So it is a surprise when the messenger comes to your home to evict you.

You wake that morning to the thunder of many hooves. You rouse and stand between two of the dragon's teeth to see a phalanx of donkeys. Their handlers are already arranging them into a rig, intending to carry away something large and heavy.

The messenger rides at their forefront, a solemn-faced woman. Her horse refuses to come closer, so she dismounts and approaches to hail you. The sigil of Janari—a dragon, of course—is embroidered over her shoulder. It ripples as she closes her palm over her fist and bows to you. "Great mage, the lord of the Janari and ruler of the western reaches has a request of you."

"I can help him no more with his conquests of other lands." Your tone is sharp; she should know better. Your brother should know better.

"Not conquest. Defense."

"Janari has been invaded?"

She nods.

You had subjugated the mages of all the neighboring realms, or so you had thought. "Who dares?"

"The basilisk-mage of Karo."

There is no creature greater than a dragon, but a basilisk would be a worthy opponent indeed. You remember Karo as a distant isle, better-known for its pearl-divers than any magic or military domination. But a basilisk-mage could have easily changed that, challenging the sigil-beasts of other courts and forcing them to surrender.

"What is my brother's request?" you ask.

"He wants the dragon's bones to represent his sigil. His engineers think there are ways to assemble them and give them movement, and of course the basilisk's gaze would pose no harm—"

You narrow your eyes. "A dragon is not a marionette."

"What else can we do?"

The despair in her voice must be shared by everyone in the Janari court. How helpless your brother must have felt, faced with a sigil-challenge and no sigil-beast to answer it with.

"There may be a way," you say slowly, remembering how one of the nomads once spoke of how a dragon might one day fly again. "I will bring the dragon to the Janari court myself."

Her expression holds a fragile hope. It changes her face and makes her seem almost familiar—but she is too young for you to have known her from before. She must be related to someone at court. You had both friends and foes there, but they are distant memories now.

Test your Perception. If you succeed, turn to 14. If you fail, you can either offer her food and water in traditional guest-welcome (turn to 30) or tell her you need to make preparations, as time is of the essence (turn to 51).

2

Out of the corner of your eye, you keep noticing the same person—a bristle-jawed man with the musculature of a fighter. Once you've caught sight of him, you notice another. You're being followed by a small group of thugs, it appears. You begin to wend your way through more crowded streets, where it will be harder to follow you. A stroke of luck causes a cart to overturn just after you pass an intersection, and the resulting chaos helps pull your pursuers off your trail.

When you reach the docks, you call the dragon down to you. The sight quickly convinces a captain to let you purchase passage for a mere pittance of 3 gold pieces.

Turn to 48.

3

Something twists painfully in your ankle as you try to scale the wall, and you fall back. Lose 2 Health points.

You'll have to bribe the guard. If you have enough gold pieces, turn to 53. If you need gold, you may turn to 92 to visit the city's market and try to sell your possessions.

4

Djeban gestures, and the guardsman raises his halberd to attack:

GUARD

skill	10
health	10
weapon	halberd (3 points of damage)

If you win this battle, turn to 43.

5

You also see smoke curling upward from between the dragon's ribs. Someone must have found your domicile abandoned and taken it for their own.

You approach to see what manner of being has taken up residence in your home. The high-pitched laugh warns you: hyena. But it is no normal clan of such beasts; a man emerges behind the hyena, and you realize he must be a mage.

You must fight the hyena-mage and his beast. The hyena attacks first:

HYENA

skill	6
health	6
Weapon	teeth and claws (2 points of damage)

HYENA-MAGE

skill	5
health	10
weapon	staff (1 point of damage)

If you defeat them both, you may claim the staff and your home. There is no reason to delay preparing the phoenix egg; turn to 58.

6

You understand. The fire isn't enough. A sacrifice is also required: a life for a life.

You walk into the flames.

Rebirth is painful. Your scream is lost in the crackle of the fire as your skin crisps; hot air rushes into your lungs. Oblivion is a blessed relief.

When you awaken, your senses are alight: the soft whisper of the ash as you stir, the hot, arid wind that sweeps past you, the unrelenting sun. You flex your wings without thinking, then realize what you have done.

You've succeeded in resurrecting the dragon by infusing it with your own spirit.

As a dragon, your Skill is now 11, and your Initial Health is 22. You deal 3 points of damage.

If you added any of the following items to the fire, find out the effects:

Petrified dragon's eye	Turn to 49
Dragonstooth dagger	Turn to 65
Dragonscale boot	Turn to 21

Once you're satisfied you're familiar with your abilities as a dragon, turn to 40 to fly to the Janari court.

7

You turn your head just as the Basilisk swoops toward you from that direction. Your gazes meet.

A strange lassitude creeps along your limbs. Your wings feel heavy. Then your heart is overcome.

Turned into stone by the Basilisk's gaze, you plummet from the sky. Your body may crush some of the soldiers from Karo, but the rest of the army will trample you into broken pieces on its way to claim the capitol of your homeland.

END

8

Victorious, the basilisk lands and spreads its wings. Everyone turns away except for the basilisk-mage, who throws a hood over her beast and stalks forward to confront you. "You insult me with this charade? Are you even a mage?"

"I am a dragon-mage," you say evenly, "without a dragon."

She looks away, but not before you catch the pity in her eyes. She strokes the basilisk's neck, as though to reassure herself of its presence. "If the Janari court has no sigil-beast, you've lost claim to all the other courts you've conquered. There was no need for this."

But there was, you realize as you see your brother gesture. One of the Janari guardsmen raises a knife.

Will you keep the basilisk-mage distracted (turn to 50) or try to stop the assassination attempt (turn to 76)?

9

Every story you begin, Nabil finishes for you. He sits patiently while you dredge through your memory for any untold tale. Eventually your words trickle into silence.

"I'm sorry," he says, and you that though he means it, he will not bend his tribe's rules for you.

As hollow as you feel, you are not emptied of all honor. If your brother wants the dragon's skeleton, then the skeleton he shall have. Turn to 87.

10

You reach Qabbat with a mixture of relief and dismay; the thriving trading hub is full of unfamiliar people and noises that jangle against your nerves. You haven't been in a city for years.

Gossip is the wind that blows through the streets of Qabbat. Everyone in the city knows where Djeban lives: his residence is the grandest in the city, a walled compound that rivals the governor's palace in size. It's rumored that the governor is deep in Djeban's pockets; such a dangerous collection of animals would never be tolerated otherwise.

For all their knowledge of Djeban's affairs, however, none of Qabbat's citizens has ever seen his fabled menagerie.

You make your way to the gates of Djeban's compound. A guard holding a halberd stands alertly before them, and eyes you as you approach. He clears his throat. "What business do you have with Master Djeban?"

If you have a ring, you may choose to show it to the guard (turn to 89). Otherwise, you can tell him that you wish to view the menagerie (turn to 24).

11

There: a pawprint pressed into the muck on the ground. You set off that way, grimly determined to recover the bone.

It leads you on a merry chase, but despite its quickness you manage to find signs of its passage: a tuft of fur caught upon a rough wall, the sudden baying of other dogs alerting you to a nearby intruder on their territory. Finally you run it aground in a cul-de-sac. It drops the bone to raise its hackles and growl at you.

You must fight the dog:

DOG

skill	7
health	10
weapon	fangs and claws (2 points of damage)

If you win, it perishes with a last whimper. You can reclaim the dragon's vertebra and return to the docks, where the messenger is anxiously awaiting you so she can usher you on board (turn to 37).

12

Nabil holds up a hand. "As one of the Almuid, you must know more."

You sink back down.

"The wandering tribes have long been watched over by the karkadann, the guardians of the desert. They have a single horn which they use to purify the water of any oasis they come across, and they are sacred to us. Djeban has captured one of these guardians, and it is your duty to free it."

"I will do what I can."

He nods and this time allows you to leave. Turn to 81.

13

The karkadann gives a hopeful nicker as you approach its cage. Test your Skill to force open the door. If you succeed, the karkadann gives you a grateful nuzzle before racing off. The brush of its horn purifies you of any infections—restore 2 Health points. It also turns the tattoo on your hand a silvery color. (Make note of this on your character sheet.)

If you fail, you're forced to leave the karkadann where it is, as your ultimate mission here is to acquire the phoenix egg.

Return to 36 and make another choice.

14

Her features suddenly seem to snap into a familiar arrangement: her brows and cheekbones are the same as your brother's. This must be your niece, although she's likely illegitimate if she has been relegated to a messenger's role.

Knowing this, you can either welcome her (turn to 30) or bid her farewell so you can get ready (turn to 51).

15

You take a look around the menagerie, a little overwhelmed by the variety of creatures and their habitats. Each animal is a wonder: a spotted creature with a neck long enough to graze from trees, a quick-stepped lizard that changes color, and even the more familiar beasts like the griffin and the manticore surprise you, as they're rarely captured except by mages.

If you are unaccompanied, turn to 75. Otherwise, turn to 68.

16

"The karkadann let us know that you freed it," Nabil says, clasping your forearms warmly. "You are a true child of the Almuid. Come, you must be weary from your journey. Eat with us and rest."

Their hospitality restores 2 Health points, although the joy with which each of the tribesmen greets you is an even more powerful balm to your spirit. Refreshed, you decide you are ready to take the next steps with the phoenix egg.

Turn to 58.

17

The world blurs into view through a haze of pain. Your shoulder is afire, but when you reach for it, someone's cool, slender fingers press your arm back down. "Lie still," the basilisk-mage says, her face hovering over yours. "A healer is coming to tend to you. She's more used to patching my basilisk's broken feathers, but she'll get that arrow out of you."

You make a questioning sound.

Somehow she understands. "The Janari lord and his archer are dead." A pause. "I unhooded my beast."

Turned to stone, then. Janari has been well and truly vanquished. Your heart feels as heavy as though the basilisk gazed upon it as well.

"I owe you my thanks. From your actions, I know you were no part of this scheme. There is a place for you in the Karo court, should you wish it."

"And if not?"

"Then I would ask you to return to your desert exile."

Will you accept her offer of a position in the Karo court (turn to 73) or choose exile (turn to 61)?

18

Something catches your eye. All your digging has uncovered something from the sand, a pearlescent gleam. You brush away more of the sand to discover a slightly rounded surface, then begin digging in earnest.

It is an egg, dark and speckled, longer than your forearm. It is too large to spawn any bird.

A dragon's egg.

You don't know if it's still viable. You cautiously smooth your hands over the shell, and although it feels warm, that could easily be from the heated sands that cradled it. Then a certainty comes over you as you feel the gentle internal tug that you last felt years ago, in the presence of a live dragon. It was how you discovered that you were a dragon-mage.

As though triggered by your questioning touch, the egg begins to rock back and forth. Then there is a sharp crack, and the shell splits apart.

A dragonet spreads its wings for the first time and utters a plaintive cry as it looks toward you.

Within your home is a faded banner. You folded your memories of court into it and left it tucked away where you would never see it again, but couldn't bear to toss it away. If you fetch it now, you can use it in a ritual that will bind the dragon to you.

Do you press your banner upon its scales (turn to 34) or leave it be (turn to 84)?

19

"Too risky," you decide. "Just remember not to look directly at its head. It's smaller, so it'll maneuver better than you, but you're stronger and faster and you hold all my hope."

The dragon rests its snout on your shoulder for a moment before going to stand alone in the center of the courtyard. The sight of it impresses the Karo delegation, who pause before joining you and your brother.

It is the sight of the basilisk, hooded and perched upon the gauntleted fist of a slight woman, that in turn gives you a sense of foreboding. Beneath that hood lies a deadly gaze.

Once the two lords swear to abide by the result of the duel, a screen is unfolded to ward away the basilisk's accidental gaze. The basilisk-mage unhoods her beast, then joins the rest of you. Although she commands the creature, she isn't immune to its power.

Your beasts are well-matched. However, should the basilisk ever roll double sixes or if the dragon rolls double ones, the basilisk manages to catch the dragon's gaze and the battle is automatically lost.

BASILISK

skill	10
health	20
weapon	claws and teeth (3 points of damage) and petrifying gaze

If the dragon wins, turn to 91. Otherwise, turn to 29.

20

You agree to her price. Before you can even hand over the golds, the dog-mage says impatiently, "Come on!" and darts off. You hastily follow and catch up in time to see her bending down in an archway to caress the neck of a different dog, this one with the sleeker lines that indicate a hound's blood. The hound scents the ground, then springs off, now in pursuit of the first dog.

A twisty route through the slums of the city eventually brings you to a dead end, where the mongrel stands stiff-legged with a low growl building in its throat. The hound crouches, ready to pounce, but the mage lets her hand drop to its back, and it subsides.

Then she walks slowly toward the dog who still stands bristling guard over its ill-gotten bone. She is murmuring something low and soothing that you can't overhear. It makes no difference; the mongrel leaps toward her. She twists to one side, as agile as a flicker of flame, and instead of fangs meeting her flesh, she manages to tangle an arm around the dog's body.

You can tell as soon as the bond is formed. The dog's snarl becomes a whine, and it hangs limply in the girl's grasp as she sets it down on the ground. It trots over to the vertebra tucked into the corner, gently picks it up, then comes over to you and sets it down at your feet.

The dog-mage hunkers down to scratch the mongrel's ears, then stands. The dog suddenly shakes itself, as though to dry itself after a soaking, although it isn't wet at all. Then it sneezes and gives her a long look before slinking away, released from its magical bond. You marvel at how easily she switched beasts.

She gives you a triumphant grin and holds out her palm expectantly. (Deduct 2 gold pieces from your character sheet.) She tucks the coins away and saunters off.

You return to the docks. The messenger looks relieved to see you return. "Did you find it?" she asks—the donkey-handler must have told her what happened—and you show her the bone.

They've already loaded the rest of the skeleton on board the boat. You put the bone in the cargo hold, this time securely wrapped.

Turn to 37.

21

Your scales offer greater protection. Add 2 points to your Initial Health (and raise your current Health to the same level).

Turn back to 6.

22

You find the display with the phoenix egg. Although its shell looks a dull gray in shadow, where the light lies across it, it shimmers with the vivid hues of fire.

Djeban's purpose in placing the phoenix egg in an enclosure becomes clear when you study the top of the cage. It features a one-way funnel that would admit entrance—say, to a mother phoenix—but prevent escape.

Apparently Djeban also expected thieves, judging by the solid lock on the door. *Test your Perception.* If you succeed, turn to 99.

If you fail, you may *Test your Skill* repeatedly to try to force it, but lose 1 Health point each time you fail.

Once you succeed, turn to 54.

23

Nabil rises and makes his way out of the tent, beckoning you to follow. He calls out, "There is one who seeks acceptance among the tribe, and will pay blood for it. Who among the Almuid would test this person?"

People begin to murmur and gather around. A man steps forward, lean and solemn-faced. "I would undertake this honor."

"To the first blood only," Nabil says as a circle is cleared in the sand and you step inside across from the warrior. You both raise your weapons. You must fight the Almuid warrior, but only until the first blow lands:

ALMUID WARRIOR

skill 8

weapon a curved dagger (2 points of damage)

If you hit him first, turn to 69. If the warrior strikes before you do, turn to 74.

24

His grip on the halberd shifts slightly. "The menagerie is not open to the public. However..." His expression turns sly. "A guard's salary doesn't stretch far, you know, and my wife is expecting yet another child..."

If you choose to pay him, turn to 53. If you'd rather not spend your money on a bribe or have no gold pieces left, you'll have to seek another way in (turn to 38).

25

As a final gesture, you press the Janari banner against the skeleton's skull. Normally this ritual is used when creating a bond with a sigil-beast; it's a mockery in this case, and as you lift the banner, the fabric catches in the wires. You ignore this omen and go to meet the Karo entourage.

The Karo lord has the burnished skin of the island folks, while his honor guard shows a variety of coloring that tells you he has conquered several realms long enough ago for their denizens to become loyal to him. But you're more interested in the basilisk-mage, who turns out to be a petite woman with a serious expression and short brown hair tucked behind her ears. She has hooded her beast and it perches on her heavily gauntleted fist, serpentine tail wrapped around her arm.

"Where is your sigil-beast?" she demands.

Your brother intercedes. "It will be called when you two are ready to begin."

"Very well," the Karo lord says. "Karo agrees to abide by the outcome of this duel, held between the two sigils of our realms, basilisk and dragon."

Your brother echoes the ritual words for Janari. Everyone retreats to a safe observation site where a layer of gauzy cloth will protect against accidental glares by the basilisk, but which allows a hazy view of the courtyard. Outside, the basilisk-mage unhoods her beast, then ducks behind the cloth the join the rest of you.

Your wire triggers have already been prepared here. You adjust them while the entourage from Karo looks on curiously. Then you make the skeleton stand.

The basilisk-mage gasps in anger. "You—"

Again, your brother steps between you two. You're grateful; you're too busy controlling the skeletal construct. "It's recognizably a dragon, the sigil of Janari, is it not?" you hear him say.

"You chose this grotesque thing to fight as your sigil because, without eyes, a basilisk can't petrify it!"

The Karo lord finally speaks, his tone dark. "We agreed to this duel. Focus on winning it."

Still fuming, she turns back to face the courtyard. Her basilisk darts toward your sigil-beast. Although its most potent attack is neutralized, it still has a sharp beak and talons with which to wrench at the skeleton, and its quick wings let it dodge your attacks:

BASILISK

skill	10
health	20
weapon	beak and talons (2 points of damage)

If you win, turn to 67. Otherwise, once the skeletal dragon has been torn apart into a shower of bones, turn to 8.

26

You witness the rebirth of the phoenix. The colors of its feathers are even more vivid in its younger form, and its blazing beauty astounds you. Later, sometimes when you close your eyes, you can see the wonder of the phoenix rising all over again, as though the afterimage was etched upon the insides of your eyelids.

But you spend the remainder of your days under charred bones in the desert. Word of Janari's fall comes to you. It is an odd thing, to live with such shame and glory.

END

27

Your sense of direction is askew in this claustrophobic place, and you make the mistake of stepping into a narrow alley. It grows darker almost immediately as armed men file in behind you. When you turn, two are in front of you as well.

They wear rough leathers rather than any uniform: thugs or mercenaries, if there's any difference. Either seems likely to take advantage of the situation to attack you.

Seeing the danger, the dragon dives down to curve its body about you protectively. It hisses a warning.

One of the men who had been hanging back now approaches. "So it's true," he whispers. "There is still a live dragon."

"Bound to me," you say pointedly.

His gaze flickers to you and he smiles. This is no mercenary; his clothes are too fine. The man who hired them, then. "So that's how we'll control it," he purrs. "You'll have to come with us as well."

"Where?"

"To my home. It's where I keep my collection of beasts."

"We're bound elsewhere."

"Are you?" He smiles and the mercenaries press forward.

The dragon strikes one man in the head, killing him instantly, then begins fighting another one. The mercenary seems to be avoiding hitting the dragon—doubtlessly more valuable alive and well—which allays your concerns about its safety. Yours, of course, is another matter.

Engage one of the mercenaries:

MERCENARY

skill	9
health	12
weapon	sword (3 points of damage)

If you survive, turn to 88.

28

He strokes his chin. "It must be something about you, then. Perhaps you've a gift with animals. Would you be willing to try to coax it into eating?"

Will you agree (turn to 77) or refuse (turn to 4)?

29

The basilisk screams triumphantly as the dragon tumbles to the ground, lifeless.

Heedless of the danger, you try to rush out into the courtyard. It is the basilisk-mage who seizes your shoulder with a surprisingly strong grip. "I must hood my beast first," she says, and there is too much compassion in her eyes for you to bear. But, turning, you confront another hard gaze.

"There's no beast greater than a dragon," your brother says in accusatory tones. "How—" He breaks off.

"Fairly, as you witnessed," the basilisk-mage says frostily. "Although I wonder at you, to have a hatchling as your sigil-beast and to send it to battle. Do you put children in armor for your guard?"

The Karo lord quiets her with a glance. "Your lands," he says to your brother.

Your brother clenches his jaw, but there is nothing else he can do. He recites the formal surrender, then stalks off without another glance at you.

"I could find use for another mage," the Karo lord tells you.

"My beast is dead."

The basilisk-mage, busy securing the hood over the basilisk's head, looks up sharply. "Surely there were others in the clutch. Or did you truly lose the last known dragon in a duel?"

A clutch. The idea sinks its claws into you. Perhaps there are other eggs, if only you dig deeper or elsewhere. "I must go," you say abruptly, and as you stride away, you're already planning the quickest route back to the desert.

The Almuid tribe soon collects a new tale, one of a mage whose madness comes in the form of endless digging in the desert sands...

END

30

She enters the dragon's mouth at your invitation after only a slight hesitation, and sits upon the rug that you indicate. You bring her a waterskin, and she takes a careful sip. "Tastier than the finest Janari wine," she says.

"The desert heat helps the flavor," you say, amused.

When she bites into one of the dates you give her, her eyes close at the unexpected sweetness. The stiffness melts from her shoulders. "My thanks," she says. "I wasn't sure whether I—or any messenger of the court—would be welcome here. They still speak of how abruptly you left."

You can only imagine what rumors swirl around you. "I didn't leave due to any grievance at the court."

She lowers her gaze, wise enough despite her youth not to press you on your reasons. The two of you speak instead of how the court has changed, of life in the desert.

When she finally rises to leave, she says, "I am shamed to say that I didn't expect guest-welcome, and so prepared no proper gift to show my gratitude. But this might be useful to you." She twists a ring off her finger.

It is a signet ring, depicting a dragon. Its bearer wields the authority of the lord of Janari. You slip it onto your own hand with a nod. (Mark this on your character sheet.)

It is time to go. Turn to 51.

31

Djeban sneers. "The Janari court is too far away for its shadow to loom here. You are trespassing, and you'll never take one of my beasts."

Turn to 4.

32

You hold out the gold piece. "Surely you can overlook such a small matter."

He deftly plucks it from your palm and secrets it away. "Surely."

You exchange slight smiles as you stride inside the gates. Deduct a gold piece from your character sheet and turn to 15.

33

Your life bleeds away from you while your enemy cradles your head, her tears dampening your face. She ensures that at your funeral, you're given full honors as a court mage, and your bones lie in a peace that the dragon's skeleton did not know.

END

34

You drape the banner over one wing while you stroke its neck and seek a light hold over its mind.

It's like becoming complete again. The emptiness that has haunted you all these years—filled again, although with a very different presence than the one you once were used to.

And your other half is hungry, it lets you know with an impatient nudge.

The dragon eats everything you give it and grows rapidly. Although it's not near the size of your last sigil-beast, the time comes when you feel it has the stamina to fly a considerable distance. It learns to hunt, although on hapless creatures like grouse and rabbits.

Note its Skill as 8 and its Health as 15 on your character sheet. The dragon deals 2 points of damage with its claws and teeth.

Before you take it to answer the basilisk's challenge, perhaps it's best to test its fighting skills against another beast.

Will you seek out a suitable opponent for the dragon (turn to 57) or head directly for the Janari court (turn to 44).

35

Nabil stares at you accusingly. "The karkadann has not returned. You failed to free it."

You're not sure how he knows. You start to speak, but he interrupts you.

"We cannot allow one of the Almuid to stain the tribe's honor thus." For a moment, the steel in his eyes softens. "I am sorry."

He turns away, and the rest of the tribe follows him. Their intention to leave and never return is clear enough. Only two men stay behind: Almuid warriors. They will fight you one at a time in an attempt to restore their honor:

FIRST ALMUID WARRIOR

skill 7
health 12
weapon sword (3 points of damage)

SECOND ALMUID WARRIOR

skill 8
health 10
weapon sword (3 points of damage)

If you win, you may collect their swords and wearily begin your preparations with the phoenix egg. Turn to 58.

36

You are alone in Djeban's menagerie.

If you have an injury on your palm and you have read this reference before, turn to 75.

Otherwise, you can enter Djeban's house (turn to 66) or take the phoenix egg (turn to 22). If you have a tattoo, you may also take this opportunity to go to the karkadann's cage (turn to 13). Note that you may not undertake any action more than once.

37

The journey down the river is uneventful, but your stomach winds tighter the farther you go. You've spent years away from the Janari court, and you don't expect your return to be easy. But the boat docks with little fanfare, and the messenger commandeers several wagons to take the bones to

the Dragon's Keep—your old home, where you once dwelt with your sigil-beast.

The bones are carefully laid out in the courtyard. A swarm of engineers begins to arrange them, mimicking the structure of the beast when it was living, but it's impossible to recreate the skeleton on the ground. You direct them to find sand so they can wedge the bones upright. You look away when they start to bore holes through which to thread wires.

That's when you see your brother. He's speaking with a man next to him, but he looks up when you approach and embraces you. "I'm glad you've returned," he says, unsmiling as he pulls back. "I only wish it wasn't under these circumstances."

His face shows sign of age which you know you must share. His grip on your shoulders is as firm as ever, though.

He gestures to the man beside him. "This is Paumid, puppet-master of the court. I'll leave you with him."

You look askance at the puppet-master, a balding fellow with long fingers. He's to welcome you back to the Janari court? But your brother has already turned and left.

Paumid bows to you. "Our lord has commanded me to teach you the skills you'll need to manipulate this construct." He gestures toward the bone-work, which is already proceeding to the attachment of joints.

If you are receptive to the puppet-master's instruction, turn to 71. If you'd rather trust your own instincts for managing the skeleton, turn to 59.

38

You circle the compound. Although a high wall surrounds the place, there are chips in the stone where a heavy cart must have lurched into it, and you might be able to use that and a running start to make your way over and inside.

Test your Skill. If you succeed, turn to 64. Otherwise, turn to 3.

39

Nabil waits expectantly for you to begin your story. *Test your Perception.* If you succeed, turn to 60. If you fail, turn to 9.

40

As you fly overhead, you see the army camped outside the city walls, waiting patiently to claim Janari's seat of power.

You head for Dragon's Keep, your old home when you served as Janari court mage. As you land in the courtyard, the guards gape at you. *Bring me the Janari lord,* you tell them, and they flee in a clatter.

Your brother has aged, but his back is still straight and his gaze clear as he enters the courtyard. *Brother,* you say, and his eyes widen.

"Is it truly you?"

Yes. I have come to answer the challenge from Karo.

"Raise the banner!" he calls, and guards come running with the length of embroidered fabric. They raise it so the wind can unfurl its threads.

Below, there is a deep drumming sound: the soldiers of Karo stomping their feet as they see their challenge answered. It doesn't take long for the Karo lord and the basilisk-mage—bearing her hooded beast—to arrive.

The two of you are given the expanse of the courtyard; the others—the humans, you realize—will watch from a safe vantage point.

It hisses and stretches its neck upward to scream a challenge. You roar back. You must fight the Basilisk:

BASILISK

strength	10
health	20
weapon	teeth and claws (3 points damage) and petrifying gaze

If the Basilisk ever rolls double sixes during battle, turn to 7. If you added a petrified eye to the fire, having both eyes means that you have an increased chance of being caught by the Basilisk's gaze; rolling double ones for yourself in a combat round also means you should turn to 7.

If you win, turn to 86.

41

As before, the messenger arrives with her army of donkeys. The bones are carefully trussed and divided into loads among the beasts of burden. She says little, only the necessary customary phrases, but you can sense her disappointment.

The strange procession stops in the city of Qabbat to resupply and make arrangements for river-passage to the Janari court. The donkeys are forced into a single rank so as not to impede traffic along the busy streets to the docks: beggars crooning for charity, curtained litters leaving behind a trail of perfume, children laughing and running, mounted horsemen charging past, ravens circling overhead, peddlers calling out the price of their wares, creaking carts overburdened with goods...

The river offers a similar cacophany of boats. The messenger weaves through the crowd to reach your side. "I'll go find our vessel," she says. "Wait here."

You settle your back against one of the wooden posts on the pier, letting your gaze sweep over the line of donkeys and their precious burden. Slight movement catches your eye: one of the bones is slipping free from its wrappings. Even as you watch, the donkey shifts its weight and one of the dragon's vertebrae falls off its back.

The donkey's handler hears and turns. Even as he bends down, a scrawny mongrel darts in and snatches up the bone. It lopes off just as the rest of the donkey's burden begins to slide down.

The handler hastily grabs for the pack. His hands are full. Will you pursue the dog (turn to 93) or remain where you are until the messenger returns to show you where to board (turn to 37)?

42

"So," Nabil begins. "Let me tell you of Djeban. He was born a normal man, but for all his life he has wished to be a mage. He was convinced that he only needed to find the right beast for which he bore an affinity, and he would realize his powers. So along with wealth and power, he began amassing animals of all types. His menagerie is said to hold a member of every species—including the phoenix, of which there is only one."

"The phoenix?"

"It is an eastern bird that is said to die in fire and rise again every hundred years. This cycle has lately been broken. Our tribe met a man, a trader who hailed from the east, who said he had stolen this bird's egg before the flames could reach it."

"How can I turn this power to my own use?" you ask.

"If you lay the egg in a fire, the same flames will offer renewed life to any other remains in its path. Claim the egg and bring it here, and if your dragon's bones are in the pyre, they shall rise together."

"And where can I find this egg?"

"The trader sold it to a rich man in the city of Qabbat. His name is Djeban."

You murmur your thanks and rise to leave.

If you have tattoos, turn to 12. Otherwise, turn to 81.

43

As you pull your blade out of the guard's chest, Djeban hisses in annoyance and draws his own short sword. "So much for competent help these days."

You must fight Djeban:

DJEBAN

skill	8
health	14
weapon	short sword (2 points of damage)

If you defeat Djeban, turn to 79.

44

The journey to the Janari court takes you to the city of Qabbat, where you hope to take passage down the river to the Janari court. But it is a settlement full of noise and color and people, and after the whispers and stares become too much, you warily send the dragon aloft.

You continue on foot toward the docks.

Test your Perception. If you succeed, go to 2. If you fail, go to 27.

45

The nomad tribe has camped in a ring around the skeleton. As you come closer, their sentries spot you and Nabil comes out to meet you.

Is your tattoo silver? If so, turn to 16. Otherwise, turn to 35.

46

In the next cage is a sleek-muzzled equine with a single horn upon its brow: a karkadann. When it catches sight of you, its ears prick up alertly. It must somehow recognize you as one of the Almuid tribesmen, even adopted.

"A recent addition," Djeban says, noting the direction of your attention. "It's been listless and refusing to eat, however. I may need to acquire another to provide companionship, but they're among the most difficult beasts to find. This one was pure luck."

The tribesmen would never tolerate two of their sacred beasts as captives.

As the karkadann pushes its nuzzle against the bars, Djeban studies you thoughtfully. "It seems to be interested in you," he says. "Did you touch any animals before you came here? Anything that might have left its scent upon you?"

You can honestly tell him no (turn to 28) or fabricate an encounter (turn to 55).

47

The caravan-master is reluctant to take on yet another person, but the unwritten law of the desert mandates hospitality. He does demand that you pay him a piece of gold for your passage across the desert under his protection.

After you settle with him (note this on your character sheet), you take your place in the caravan.

Most of the members of the caravan are merchants, eager to buy and sell goods. Few of their wares interest you, except for one man who has a single dragonscale boot, which you may purchase for five gold pieces. The price would be far higher if only he had a matched pair, but he tells you ruefully that he and his brother split their inheritance so evenly that such resulted.

At long last, the caravan-master announces that you will reach Qabbat on the morrow.

Turn to 10.

48

The dragon is endlessly curious about the boat and the river; desert-born, you suppose so much water would be a curiosity. At first the amount of attention given the dragon—and thus you, as its mage—makes you uncomfortable, but people’s faces are hopeful as they watch the beast, and they keep a respectful distance that lets you relax. Only one older woman stumps up to you at one of the ports of call, jerking her chin toward the dragon and asking brusquely, “Janari’s sigil-beast, that?”

You nod.

“Younger than I remember.”

“It’s a different one.”

She cocks her head. “Not common for court mages, is that?”

“No,” you agree.

“I like this one,” she says. “Don’t let it die.”

The dragon sidles closer when she turns and leaves as abruptly as she began talking to you. *I like her too. Does she think the basilisk will kill me?*

“They’re formidable opponents,” you murmur. “But there is no beast greater than a dragon.”

In fact, the entire Karo army is a formidable sight, camped outside the city where the Janari court lies. Territory is won or lost by duels between sigil-beasts, but the denizens often require strict rule before they settle under their new lord. These soldiers are here to claim the city should the dragon fall.

You have it walk beside you as you approach Dragon’s Keep, your old home. It has a courtyard where your old sigil-beast could stay comfortably; it’ll make for spacious lodgings for your smaller dragon. You’re not surprised to see your brother waiting for you.

He embraces you tightly. “It’s been too long,” he says. Then he glances at the dragon. “Although if you left so you could bring this, the new sigil-beast of Janari, I can’t complain.”

The dragon studies him, but does not come closer or offer any words. But dragon manners are unlike those of humans.

“When is the duel?” you ask.

“Word reached us of your approach, so I arranged it for the morrow. The sooner the Karo army’s gone from our doorstep, the easier we’ll all rest.”

You bite back words about how you and the dragon could use rest as well. But he’s right; there’s no reason to drag this on longer than it needs to.

The next morning, you rise with a tension in the pit of your stomach that you haven’t felt for years. The dragon seems as carefree as ever, even as you do one last check over its wings and claws.

“Don’t meet the basilisk’s gaze,” you warn it unnecessarily, anxiety making you fuss.

It gives you a thoughtful look. *Should I fight with my eyes closed?*

“You’ll need to see,” you say, surprised.

Can’t I use your eyes?

It’s true that the bond between mage and beast allows the sharing of sensation—it’s how you learned the joy of flight. And fighting blind would ensure that the dragon would be in no danger of petrification. But you’ll be off to one side of the courtyard, and judging movement from another perspective will be a tricky maneuver. You only wish you had time to practice it.

A guard calls warning: the Karo lord and the basilisk-mage are nearing.

Will you tell the dragon to see through your eyes (turn to 78) or to fight normally, though with caution (turn to 19)?

49

Thanks to the petrified eye, your vision is clear in both eyes. Full sight makes you a more deadly opponent. Add 1 point to your Skill.

Turn back to 6.

50

"It's done. You can relish your victory over a heap of bones," you say.

"Karo will relish its victory over Janari," she retorts. "However ignoble your court, at least we fought with honor." Then she stiffens, mouth widening in a cry she never quite makes. The basilisk leaps into the air with a squawk, no longer bound, but thankfully still hooded.

"Treachery!" the Karo lord roars as the basilisk-mage slumps to the ground, the knife buried in her back. His honor guard fights bravely, but your brother has ensured Janari reinforcements, and together they subdue the other lord.

Your brother stares down at him as he's forced to his knees. "Without a mage, your court has no sigil-beast," your brother states. "There's no point in Karo holding any lands, is there? You can turn them over to me."

"I'll never surrender to you, you lying bastard."

With an air of regret, your brother nods to one of the guards, who unceremoniously drives his sword into the Karo lord's heart.

The smell of blood is everywhere. And there's no hiding the deed; the Karo army is shocked, then enraged by the death of their court's highest members. Instead of turning away, they attack. Countless deaths follow, especially as other courts disregard the old forms and hungrily seek to take lands through the force of arms. You live to witness the era of war waged through sigil-beasts comes to an end, and to hear your name reviled for it.

END

51

After the messenger departs, you make your way to the nomads' camp. Because you allow them to stay here in peace, the people of the Almuid tribe welcome you as a friend, and neither the veiled sentries nor the long-legged hounds rouse at your approach.

You seek out the tent of the tribe elder, Nabil, with whom you've traded tales both true and fantastical over long fire-lit evenings. You only hope that his story about dragons still in the world is true.

He welcomes you with pleasure and treats you to fragrant tea and flatbread. You learn the names of his latest grandchild and his mare's new foal, while he asks you about your latest discoveries in the sand. You tell him about the curious fossils you've uncovered, and turn the conversation toward the subject of the skeleton you live in.

"You once told me that dragons may not have come to an end," you say, and cannot hide the avidness in your voice.

He takes a long, deliberate swallow of his tea before he meets your gaze. "We cannot give this knowledge to anyone who asks." He raises a hand to forestall your objection. "However, we have known you many years, and thus we will give you a chance to win the knowledge you seek. Defeat one of our warriors, and we will consider you worthy to share all the knowledge of the Almuid. Or you can offer us a story of your own, one as valuable as that which you ask us to tell."

Will you choose to challenge a tribesman warrior (turn to 23) or trade tales (turn to 39)?

52

You dig for hours. At last, back aching, you straighten and look at the bones, all lying askew in the sand.

Nabil comes up to you and surveys your work. "You mean to take these with you? How will you carry these?"

You shake your head, not knowing yourself.

"There is a falcon-mage in the tribe," he says. "We can send word to the messenger who visited you. She and all her donkeys will have stopped in the nearest town."

You look at him sharply. Mages do not tolerate each other easily, and he should have told you about the presence of one in his tribe. But falcons are minor beasts, and he is offering you a favor, so you let it pass.

Turn to 41.

53

The guard pockets the gold (note this on your character sheet), but continues to stand solidly in your way. "You must remove any weapons under my master's roof."

If you have any gold pieces left, you may try bribing the guard again (turn to 32). If you have a sword, you may give it up without the guard noticing any other weapons. Otherwise, surrender your dagger if you still possess it—remember to strike it off your character sheet—and enter (turn to 15).

54

You dare not leave the egg behind now that you've acquired it, and it is too fragile to carry about any more than necessary. You quickly make your way out of the menagerie, then out of Qabbat entirely to journey back to the desert. If you've lost your waterskin, lose 3 Health points to thirst.

On your trek, you're overtaken by the sense that you're being followed. But you can never catch sight of anyone behind you. It's relief that you finally crest a sand dune and see the dragon's bones that make your home.

If you have a tattoo, turn to 45. Otherwise, turn to 5.

55

You describe a entirely fictional horse in the market. Djeban listens intently. "It must have been another karkadann, one with its horn removed," he says. "Atrocious to spoil such beauty. Where was it again?"

"Its owner was bargaining its price with a traveler headed out of the city—"

He utters a strangled cry, no doubt imagining it escaping his grasp. "To the gates!" he snaps at the guard, and they hurry away. In his haste, he neglects to see you off.

Turn to 36.

56

The dragon grows in size and strength over the passing years, and it never stops seeking your approval. It is a far cry from the lofty ways of your first sigil-beast, and although you're fond of this dragon's eagerness to please, you can't help feeling that you're abusing its trust every time you send it into battle.

Your brother gives you high honors, holding feasts after each victory, but he cares less for the dragon than its likeness on the Janari banner. Your service as court mage grows hollow even as you're given more rewards, but you remain steadfast at your brother's side, with all the attendant too-smooth silks and cloying banquets. Only at night do you dream of the desert and the gritty taste of freedom.

END

57

You consider suitable opponents. The few mages in the desert tend not to be too formidable, but considering your dragon's smaller size and inexperience, this may be for the best.

Through the nomad tribe, you catch wind of a lion-mage who lives a quiet life along the edge of the desert. Once you know of him, he isn't hard to find, especially as the dragon can survey the area from

the air.

The mage is caught by surprise, but the lion braces itself for battle:

LION

skill	8
health	9
weapon	claws and teeth (dealing 2 points of damage)

If you win, turn to 94.

58

You nestle the egg into a pile of tinder under the arches of the ribs. You may add any of your possessions to the kindling. Then you start the fire, and back away.

You wait anxiously for the first cracks to appear in the egg's shell. But it only glows in the light of the flames. Then you hear a keening cry and spin around. In the skies you see a bird winging toward you, resplendent in long, trailing feathers of many colors. Every beat of its wings bespeaks fatigue, yet it flies toward you with unabated determination.

No—not toward you. Toward its egg. This was the presence following you, you realize—or rather, following its egg.

The phoenix swoops low and a rogue spark leaps up to meet it. Its feathers catch fire, and it blossoms into even more colors. You have to shield your eyes from the brightness.

You hear a sharp crack as the egg splits open, but when you peer at the fire the bones remain still. What have you done wrong?

Test your Perception. If you succeed, turn to 6. If you fail, turn to 26.

59

The puppet-master's face reddens as you dismiss any need for his services. He starts to say something, then pressed his lips together. "Very well, I won't impose my presence upon you further."

You're not unhappy to see his back as he retreats. You oversee the skeleton's construction yourself, using your memory of your sigil-beast's movements to ensure the bones are pieced together correctly. The finished work is surprisingly pleasing, evoking the sweeping lines of a recognizable dragon when still, and able to twist its head and flap its wings just like any living beast.

The cunning series of wires which elicit these motions—designed, you learn, by Paumid the puppet-master—are tricky to master, however. Some of your attempted maneuvers end up twisting the wires out of commission, and a handful of engineers take up residence in the Dragon's Keep for maintenance and repairs. You also find a way to hide the skeleton, as you can hardly let the Karo delegation catch sight of it and realize it is your sigil-beast.

The construct has a Skill of 7 and a Health of 10. It deals 2 points of damage through sheer blunt force.

If the skeleton is missing a vertebra, turn to 95. Otherwise, turn to 25.

60

There is one tale the Almuid have always been too polite to ask for, but which you know they've wondered about: your own story. You've kept the reasons behind your exile private, but you have no choice now but to reveal them.

You explain how you were born with an affinity for dragons, and caught one in the net of your will to serve as the sigil of Janari. How, together, you made nations bow before you. One day, you had the dragon fly to the highest mountain in Janari lands, and through its eyes, every place you saw lay

under the rule of your brother.

The dragon was tired. It dreamed of sleep. But it readied itself to soar past the horizon, to the next realm to conquer.

Instead you called it to where you stood. You told it what you held in your hands: the Janari court banner, the gift of which would release the sigil-beast from its bonds. You hadn't realized how dull the dragon's eyes were until it brought its newly fiery gaze upon you.

And you would give this to me? the dragon asked.

Wordlessly, you held out the banner. It picked it up delicately with its claws and gave a long sigh. You felt its presence unravel from your thoughts, as though torn free by an exultant gale. Then it dropped the banner and tensed for flight.

"Where will you go?" you asked.

It paused to look back at you. Its memories blazed through your mind. The dragon had hatched on a beach of white sand, bright with sun and cooled by the sea breezes. So long had it lived that its birthplace was now a desert. *Now I will return there to rest.* There was a finality to its words that made you understand.

The dragon deserved a witness to its death. A mourner.

And so you traveled to the desert it showed you, and beneath its bones you made your home, finding your own peace after years of challenges against other sigil-beasts.

Nabil is silent for a while, absorbing your words. He sips his tea and grimaces; it has cooled during the telling of your tale, and he was too distracted to notice. It's a good sign, and indeed he nods. "That is a fine story indeed. In return, I offer you a choice of two tales. One will tell you how to restore life to that skeleton you reside in. The other speaks of how the dragon race is not yet ended. Which would you hear?"

If you wish to resurrect the skeleton, turn to 42. If you would rather seek out a new dragon, turn to 80.

61

And so you return to the desert.

Your days and nights are hollow, not even sheltered by your sigil-beast's bones. The winds and sand scour you; the heat sears you. You would not survive if not for the nomads' solicitous care. You are an outcast of a broken court, and already the tales of Janari glory are fading, eclipsed by the rise of Karo. Word spreads even to the desert of the basilisk's conquests.

One day, after the nomads have left you to follow their wandering ways, you scratch idly at the sand, only to feel something hard and unyielding. A rock, surely, but its surface is uncommonly smooth. You uncover more of it, until at last its ovoid shape is revealed.

It is an egg. Larger than any bird or serpent could lay. And something stirs within you, a long-forgotten feeling, an odd affinity for this thing...

The egg shudders and begins to crack. It rocks again, and this time a tiny dragonet's head emerges from the shell.

END

62

You look for signs of the dog's passage. *Test your Perception.* If you succeed, turn to 11. Otherwise, you're unable to find any trace of where the mongrel fled with the bone and you're forced to return to the docks empty-handed. The messenger soon shows up to lead you to the boat that will take you to the Janari court. Turn to 37.

63

One of the bandits catches sight of the tattoo on the back of your hand. "Almuid scum!" he spits as he draws his sword.

The other bandits draw back, leaving the two of you to a fair match. Fight the bandit:

BANDIT

strength	9
health	20
weapon	crescent sword (3 points of damage)

If you win, the other bandits mutter among themselves but make no move against you. You may claim the fallen man's crescent-shaped if you wish, as well as recover a gold piece--his share of what was taken from you--then continue on your way by turning to 10.

64

You manage to catch the top edge of the wall, and pull yourself over with some effort. You only scrape your palms a bit (note this on your character sheet). When you land on the other side, you dust yourself off and look around.

Turn to 15.

65

Your fangs allow you to rend your foes apart. You now inflict 4 points of damage.

Turn back to 6.

66

Test your Skill to see if you can force the door. If you fail, you must return to the menagerie; turn to 36. If you succeed, turn to 85.

67

Clumsy though your construct is, its forceful blows and immunity to the basilisk's gaze give it an advantage over any living beast. You manage to batter the basilisk out of the air, and its shriek is abruptly silenced as its body hits the ground.

The basilisk-mage cries out and crumples, weeping.

"I would not have thought it possible," your brother breathes, his eyes shining.

The Karo lord approaches and nods stiffly. "You and that abomination have proven yourselves. Our forces will retreat and we will let Janari lands be."

Your brother dismisses him with a wave of his hand. The Karo lord bends by the basilisk-mage and helps her to rise with gentle hands before they depart.

"Welcome back to the Janari court," your brother tells you with a hard hug. "No one can naysay your position now!"

And what is your position, you wonder. Puppet-master? And for how long? You know that the skeleton cannot survive many more battles, and it is no proper sigil-beast for a court as great as Janari. The nobles give you sidelong looks even as they drink to your victory at your celebration feast. Your wine tastes sour. But your brother smiles at you proudly, and you raise your goblet to him before draining it down to the dregs.

END

68

You come to a cage that looks empty, but a closer look reveals an egg resting atop a small mound. To your surprise, it's pleasantly aromatic.

Djeban nods toward the cage. "A phoenix egg. I put it in the spices that stories say it uses in its birth: myrrh, cinnamon, and spikenard. Yet it hasn't shown any signs of hatching. Still, it's truly one of a kind, save for the adult bird, of course. I'm hoping that the egg may lure it close, if it won't hatch."

You're careful not to show your avid interest, turning to survey the rest of the menagerie. "Your entire collection is impressive, but you're missing one," you observe mildly.

Djeban's eyes narrow. "There are only two animals that I've failed to collect, if you don't count this egg. The phoenix and a dragon—but they're extinct. The closest I've come to the latter is a petrified dragon's eye and a rumor of more remains somewhere in the direst sands of the desert."

It had been too much to hope that he might have saved one. "An eye?" you ask.

"I keep it in my study. Obviously there's no need to keep it in a cage out here. But let's continue on your tour."

If you have a tattoo, turn to 97. Otherwise, turn to 82.

69

At the sight of blood, a shout goes up and the warrior lowers his weapon. He is smiling, even as he presses his hand over his wound. "Welcome, cousin," he says, and the other tribesfolk gather around you to echo the greeting. Winning this challenge has won you the right to be adopted into the tribe—and thus learn all its secrets.

After a ceremony where you accept both the ties of Almuid kinship and tattoos on the backs of your hands (note this on your character sheet) and a celebratory feast, you are brought to Nabil's tent to hear the promised story. He is considered your adoptive father now—and thus, slantwise, related to the lord of Janari himself, although such a thought seems as out of place as his tent would be in court.

Turn to 42 to hear the tale.

70

Djeban's jaw drops when he catches sight of the karkadann's empty cage. The guard checks the door and reports, "It was forced open."

Immediately both their gazes swing over to you. There is no protestation of innocence they would believe.

Turn to 4.

71

Paumid turns out to be a patient teacher. He collaborated with the engineers to design a system that lets you attach a series of wires to your own body and control the skeleton's movements. You practice on his smaller models first to master the controls.

"I'm only sorry I couldn't devise a way to make it fly again," the puppet-master says wistfully as he watches you train. "But there's no way to attach a skin for wind resistance and still allow the wires to run where they need to."

You assure him that he's already managed an incredible feat. He draws a breath and replies, "If you defeat this basilisk, the greatest achievement will be yours."

Getting the fight to even occur will be a challenge, given that you can't proudly display your sigil-beast beforehand, as is custom. You and Paumid devise a way to hide the construct until after the duel has begun and the basilisk must accept its opponent: a large swath of fabric colored to look like sand. Placed on the far side of the courtyard, it serves as adequate camouflage.

The day of the formal challenge finally dawns, and the Karo lord and his escort arrive at Dragon's

Keep.

Your sigil-beast, as it were, has a Skill of 8 and a Health of 10 to represent the soundness of its construction. It deals 2 points of damage through sheer blunt force.

If the skeleton is missing a vertebra, turn to 95. Otherwise, turn to 25.

72

Your brother treats you as well as any other valued animal, and the time comes when you are called to battle against another sigil-beast. Your days of conquest are not over. Janari's holdings stretch farther than any empire known before—but you can derive little pleasure from that fact while held captive to your brother's will.

END

73

Although at first the nobles of the Karo court are wary of you, the basilisk-mage unfailingly demonstrates her trust in you, and slowly you are accepted among them. Even the Karo lord comes to ask your advice on governing what were once Janari lands, and although you have been away for so long, your knowledge of the local customs still seems to be helpful. Slowly, you also come to learn the ways of the Karo court.

One night, after a quiet dinner with the basilisk-mage that leaves you both replete with rich food and laughter, she presses your hand with her own and smiles at something you've said. You realize: being a friend is in its own way greater than being a court mage. The thought is more satisfying than the meal, and you smile back at her.

END

74

Your blood splatters on the desert sands. You lower your dagger in surrender. The tribe is quiet, and even the warrior who wounded you only gives you a sorrowful look before he turns away.

"We cannot tell you what you wish to know," Nabil says, regret shading his voice. "But our healer will see to your injury before you try to find your own way."

The healer is an elderly man who talks incessantly as soon as you step into his tent. Even as he washes your wound and binds it (restore 1 point of Health), he chatters on. You drift away into your own thoughts until he's done with his ministrations.

You must now see about providing at least the dragon's skeleton for your brother's use. Turn to 87.

75

"What are you doing here?"

You turn to see a thin man glaring at you. His opulent dress and the guard flanking him tell you his identity: this must be Djeban, owner of this fantastical collection.

Will you tell him that you are a mage seeking a sigil-beast (turn to 90) or that you are an emissary of the Janari lord, who demands one of his animals (turn to 31)?

76

You shove the basilisk-mage out of the path of the knife. Your body jerks as something slams into your shoulder. Voices rise: the mage's demand to know how you dare such disrespect, the horrified cry of the archer, your brother's ringing remonstrations of "You fool!"

Then there is silence and darkness as the shock of your injury overcomes you. Lose 6 Health points. If you are still alive, turn to 17. Otherwise, turn to 33.

77

Djeban unlocks the door to the cage. The karkadann backs away, clearly wary of him. When he picks up a piece of fruit from the floor the cage and holds it out, the karkadann mutely refuses to budge from its corner.

"See?" he says to you. "Perhaps you can do better, however."

You come in and take the fruit from him. The karkadann's gaze flickers between you and Djeban. "Perhaps if you stood back," you suggest.

He frowns, then steps out. He watches closely as the karkadann dares a step forward, then another, then finally bends its head so that you can feel its muzzle against your palm as it feeds.

The cage door shuts with a clang and Djeban locks it with a satisfied smile. "It seems you're all the companionship it needs."

Nothing you say or do persuades him to release you. After apparently enjoying the sight of the only human in his collection for some time, he heads back into his house. You slide down to the cage floor, unable to believe how you were tricked.

Not understanding your anger, the karkadann nuzzles your cheek. For whatever consolation you can glean, it will remain a faithful companion to you for the remainder of your shared captivity.

END

78

You take a deep breath. "Let's try it," you say.

You are distant during the ritual introductions, your thoughts swimming with worry for the dragon.

Finally, the basilisk-mage—a surprisingly small woman to bond with such a dread creature—unhoods her beast while everyone retreats behind a latticed screen. Small holes allow for a view of the battle, while hopefully protecting the witnesses from stray glares.

The dragon leaps into the air and lunges for the basilisk—and misses. It's still adjusting to this new way of seeing. Reduce the dragon's Skill by 2 points for the duration of the battle, and its Health by 1 point as the basilisk takes advantage of the disorientation to strike a minor wound.

BASILISK

skill	10
health	20
weapon	claws and teeth (3 points of damage)

If the dragon wins, turn to 91. If it loses, turn to 29.

79

Djeban stumbles back, coughing, and stares incredulously at the blood that sprays from his mouth.

You find a set of keys on his belt. Add these to your character sheet with a note that, whenever you're asked to *Test your Skill* against a door, you can simply use a key and succeed in the test.

Turn to 36.

80

"There are fish who live in the desert," he says. "Their lives are brief, to be sure; they hatch and grow and mate in a frenzy whenever rain pours from the skies, then bury their eggs in the sand and die with the return of the sun and its heat. Those eggs last years—however long it takes for the next storm to come."

You know better than to interrupt. The nomads' stories follow the shape of spirals, curling into the central point.

"This cycle of life and death is known to other creatures as well. Although dragons may outlive other's generations, they remember where they hatch. And often, when their passing comes at a time of their choosing, they will return to that place for their final rest." He meets your eye. "You live on a dragon's death-site, but also on an ancient hatching ground. Somewhere in the sands beneath where you sleep, seek a fledgling who has yet to awaken."

You impatiently rush through farewells so you can return to your home. You begin digging, first with more enthusiasm than order, until you realize that such carelessness will only cost you more time. You try a more methodological approach.

Turn to 18.

81

Caravans occasionally stop at a nearby oasis, and you might be able to join one headed for Qabbat. But perhaps company doesn't appeal.

Will you join a caravan (turn to 47) or make your own way to Qabbat (turn to 98)?

82

Djeban continues telling you about each animal and how it would make a magnificent beast to bond with. But the cheer with which he speaks becomes forced, and as he struggles to find words describing the advantages of a bat, wings curled around itself as it hangs upside down from the top of the cage, you find yourself unexpectedly moved to sympathy. You know how priceless the bond between mage and beast is, and you've lived without it as well. Can you blame this man for longing for it?

At the same time, understanding his position makes him vulnerable to you.

In careful pieces, you unravel your story for him—at least the fragments that you think he will hear as an echo of his own experience.

"It's even possible," you add, stretching probabilities, "that the beast you have an affinity for is the dragon. If you haven't felt anything for all these other animals, then they weren't meant to be yours. Even the egg would have given you an indication."

His face grays. "So it's all for naught," he murmurs.

"Not so," you swiftly say. You tell him of your need for the phoenix egg, managing to imply that your long search for a sigil-beast will culminate with the phoenix's hatching. And that this event may bring about the return of dragons. There is enough truth that your genuine belief is apparent to him.

"I'll give you the egg," he says abruptly. "But if you truly believe there will be dragons, let me come with you to find them!"

You describe the bleak portion of the desert you call home, wagering that this richly dressed man is not one to abandon his luxuries, and your guess proves true. He unlocks the cage to the phoenix egg, and only passes it over to you after making you swear a series of promises you readily agree to without bothering to remember.

Turn to 54.

83

You take up the faded banner and press it to the dragon, still touching its scales with your other hand. You release the bond, and something yawns empty inside of you, but the dragon's astonished, *Free? Truly?* makes you smile through that sudden loss.

"Yes," you say. "Truly."

"What did you do?" your brother demands.

"I let it go."

He rears back. "How dare you? You would leave Janari without a sigil-beast?"

"It was without one before," you point out.

He's struck speechless. But not motionless—he draws his arm back, perhaps to strike sense into you.

The dragon strikes so quickly you don't quite see what happens, only a spray of blood and then your brother's body on the ground.

He would have hurt you, the dragon says, distressed as you kneel by your brother's side and close his shocked eyes.

It takes you a moment to gather the composure to speak. You and your brother had drifted apart, but some bonds can never be broken. That's not true of sigil-beasts. "You didn't have to protect me," you say to the dragon. "I freed you. You could have left."

And I freely choose to stay with you.

You swallow. You know lesser mages—those who don't represent a court in war—who live in such companionable arrangements with their bonded beasts. But although you and your first dragon had the greatest respect for each other, it left you at its first chance.

The guards are slowly recovering from their shock. One of them looks to you. "Lord?" he asks tentatively.

Your brother is dead. Janari is yours if you wish. And it may be the first court to have a free sigil-beast. Your brother always did want Janari to have a unique place in history.

END

84

You do not have it in your heart to enslave another dragon. You make no move toward it, and after sending a tendril of questioning thought toward you, it ambles away.

You must now see about taking the skeleton to Janari, as it is all you have to offer your brother. Turn to 52 to resume digging, this time to excavate the bones of your home.

85

Housebreaking is not your wont, and you only make a quick pass to see if you can find anything useful.

Test your Perception. If you succeed, you notice that a strange gray orb is actually a petrified dragon's eye.

You may select one of the following items to take:

- a purse of 4 gold pieces
- a healing potion (will restore 4 Health points)
- a selkie-skin waterskin
- petrified dragon's eye (if you were perceptive)

Once you've made your selection, turn back to 36.

86

You descend in triumph. Your brother is smiling—a rare expression. “You’ve done well,” he says. Then he presses the banner to your scales and his will slams down on you.

It feels as though chains tighten over your mind. You try to scream your anger. But something holds you still...and obedient.

“Are we not twins?” your brother says. “I, too, am a dragon-mage.”

You rage at him. *Why did you not take up your power before? Why make me challenge the sigil-beasts of other realms?*

“Because I entered the world twelve minutes before you, and so it was my birthright to rule, and yours to serve me.”

He makes you bow your head. There are tears in his eyes, but his expression is steely. You have always known that he would do anything for Janari. But you never thought it would include sacrificing you.

If you added a ring to the fire, turn to 100. Otherwise, turn to 72.

87

As much as it pains you to disturb the dragon’s skeleton, they are only still bones; your promise to your brother is a taut thread that pulls you, however reluctantly, back to the Janari court.

You begin to dig the bones out of the ground, using half of a dried, hardened gourd. It takes less time than you would have thought before one of the great ribs begins to lean outward, then finally topples over and crashes into the sand on its side. You drag it out of the way and begin working on the next rib until it, too, falls.

Test your Perception. If you succeed, turn to 18. Otherwise, turn to 52.

88

The last mercenary, who was too leery to engage in battle in the first place, flees altogether. The merchant curses him, then follows suit.

The dragon noses you to make sure you’re not too badly hurt. You’re hale enough to make your way to the docks and find passage on a boat to the Janari court for a token fee of 3 gold pieces. The captain seems reluctant to bargain too hard for some reason.

Turn to 48.

89

The guard pales as you show him the signet. “Of course, a messenger from the Janari lord himself is most welcome. I’m sure the master will wish to meet you.” Despite your demurrals, he insists on sending for Djeban.

He turns out to be a man of slight build, almost overwhelmed by his embroidered robes and the jewelry adorning nearly every part of his body: rings on his fingers, bracelets jangling on his wrists, a heavy chain of gold about his neck, a gem winking from his earlobe, and a stud in his nose. It is almost easy to miss that his narrow face is an intelligent one, although his gaze measures you keenly.

“So how might I serve the emissary of the Janari lord?” he asks.

You tell him that you wish to view his collection of beasts, and he cannot hide his pride. “But of course,” he says. “Come this way.”

Turn to 15.

90

He waves for the guard to lower his halberd, interest lighting his face. "A fellow mage? Which beast do you claim—or are you hoping to discover it here? I've been trying to find out more about how we can come to know our affinity, but other mages are a close-mouthed group."

Clearly eager to glean whatever knowledge you have, he even volunteers to show you around his menagerie. You suspect he wants to see you bond with one of his creatures, and through observation learn about the process. You hide your disgust at how desperately he clings to his delusion of being a mage.

Turn to 68.

91

The Karo lord bends his head and speaks the words of surrender to your brother. He then wraps an arm around the weeping basilisk-mage and leads her away.

The dragon lands in front of you and butts its head against your chest. You run your hands over its scales and praise it, caught up in the shock of victory. Only a few weeks ago you had seen it hatch, and now it is the sigil-beast of the greatest court in the land.

There could still be many duels ahead. If you plan to remain as the court mage for Janari, turn to 56. If you think the dragon has done all you've asked it to, you may choose to free it from its bond with you by turning to 83.

92

Qabbat boasts a market where you can buy nearly anything you want. Your concern, however, is not spending gold pieces but gaining them.

You may either try your hand at storytelling, hoping that listeners will be moved to throw you a few coins (turn to 96), or sell any of your possessions at the following prices:

waterskin	1 gold piece
dagger	4 gold pieces
sword	8 gold pieces
ring	10 gold pieces

Once you're done, return to Djeban's compound and pay the guard a gold piece to enter by turning to 53.

93

You sprint toward the alley where the cur disappeared, only to find that it crosses another sidestreet. You peer about, seeing only narrow dark spaces empty of any canine presence.

Someone tugs at your sleeve: a grubby urchin with her short braided hair sticking in all directions. "I saw. I can get it back for you. Two golds." At your skeptical look, she lifts her chin and says, "I'm a dog-mage."

Are you willing to pay her (turn to 20) or track down the dog on your own (turn to 62)?

94

Increase the Skill of your sigil-beast by 1 point.

The lion has uttered its last roar. The lion-mage sinks to his knees and shows you his palms in a sign of surrender.

"Take what you will," he says hoarsely. "You've already shattered the sanctity of my home and

taken my truest friend. What else do you want?"

If you wish, you may claim the lion's skin over the mage's muffled protests.

Turn to 44 to head to court and the forthcoming challenge.

95

Although a ceramic replacement was hastily crafted once you reported the missing vertebra, it doesn't quite fit in with the other bones in the spine, and any hard blow will shatter it. Due to this vulnerability, reduce your sigil-beast's Initial Health by 2 points.

Now turn to 25.

96

You claim a rare unoccupied spot in the market and choose a tale to tell. A few people pause to listen to your opening words.

Test your Perception. If you succeed, you judge well the type of tale that would appeal to these people, and a rapt crowd gathers around you by the end of your story. Roll one die to determine how many gold pieces they throw you, then turn to 53 to pay the guard a gold piece. If you fail, you must return to the market and try to sell something; turn to 92.

97

Is your tattoo silver? If so, turn to 70. Otherwise, turn to 46.

98

You travel by night, when the wind does not scald your skin and the stars guide your way with a gentler light than the sun's. The Almuid tribe has told you of water sources along the way, so you manage to keep your thirst manageable. However, others also know of these springs.

You are resting at one, refilling your supply of water, when you look up and see that you have been surrounded. The bandits outnumber you by a dozen men; fighting is hopeless. You stand in powerless rage as they take all of your gold pieces (mark this on your character sheet). They respect your right to life, however, and do not touch your waterskin or your dagger.

If you have a tattoo, turn to 63. Otherwise, turn to 10.

99

Obviously Djeban didn't think the egg would try to escape on its own. You notice that the lock requires a key only from the outside. With this knowledge, you feel secure clambering onto the top of the cage and falling through the funnel.

Turn to 54.

100

An unexpected visitor comes to you that night. Under the woolen cloak you recognize the young woman as the messenger who came to you in the desert. Her eyes are wide with wonder; she merely wanted to see the dragon up close, and had the courage to follow through on her wishes.

It's a full moon, and the ring embedded into the tip of one of your claws gleams. Her eyes widen as she catches sight of it. "I gave that to someone..."

It is I.

Her breath catches as she realizes the implications of your statement. "I'm sorry he did this to you,"

she says in a low voice. She looks at the ring again and her mouth firms. "How do I free you?"

The banner.

She turns and runs off on light feet. You can only wait and brood over your choices about whom to trust.

You can hear her return: voices are raised. You recognize one as hers, the other as your brother's.

"What are you doing with that banner?"

"I'm of your blood; have I no right to it?"

"No daughter of mine should be so foolish as to do this!"

There's a sound of a struggle. You raise your head and watch your niece race toward you, banner fluttering in her hands, with your brother close behind. In the moonlight you can see the bruise on her face where he struck her. The anger that fills you is again given no voice, as your brother keeps it locked within you—but then your niece lunges forward, and cloth brushes your scales.

Freedom.

You snap into motion, tearing your niece's cloak away. She cries out in surprise as she's thrown to her knees, but you have no time to reassure her. You wrap it around your brother so that he can't touch you directly, then enclose him within a cage of your claws. His protests are muffled under the wool.

Your niece rises to her feet and looks at you gravely.

Janari is yours, you tell her. Rule it well.

You launch yourself into the air. Among the highest gales, his shouts are even more blurred.

You take him to a distant desert and let him fall onto the sand. You know how harsh life will be for him here. You will spare little thought for him in the years ahead, for all the skies are open to you, and your spirit is your own.

END