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ATHAS AND THE WORLD SERPENT INN

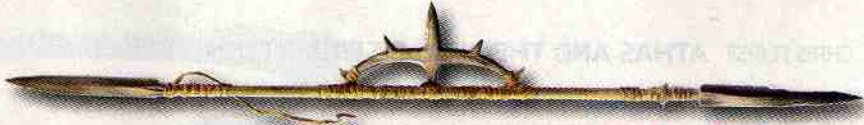
Deep in the back hallways of the World Serpent Inn stands a door kept under lock and key for as long as anyone can remember. Sand seeps in around the edges of the door, for the desert world—Athas—burns on the other side, ever under the searing heat of its darkened sun.

Ancient wars left Athas a dying wasteland with few regions capable of supporting human life. Athasians cluster around a handful of cities ruled by despotic wizards and psions called sorcerer-kings. With no deities to pray to and few ways to travel off the world, the people of Athas are truly isolated.

What little civilization remains centers on a region called the Tablelands—a desolate area other worlds would consider an uninhabitable desert dominated by sand dunes, barren stonescapes, and salt flats. For the people of Athas, however, the Tablelands offer respite from the true horrors of the rest of the world. Harsh conditions, even for the wealthy of the Tablelands, place survival at a premium, and strange beasts stalk the deserts.

In this godless world, Athasian clerics gain their powers through pacts with the elements. Psionics are commonplace: psions, psychic warriors, and wild talents predominate. Arcane spellcasters draw their magical energy from plant life. Careless or greedy wizards called defilers turn the ground around them into sterile ash wherever they cast spells. Failing to distinguish defilers from other wizards, known as preservers, most Athasians hate them all equally, blaming them for Athas' condition.

Athas used up most of its resources long ago, and little metal remains. Athasians make most of their weapons from bone, stone, and wood, and have developed numerous resins and treatments for hardening such materials. They sharpen obsidian, animal teeth, and bones to razor edges. Offworld visitors likely find their metal equipment of great interest to the locals. Such travelers must take care to retain their metal goods or find them suddenly missing when needed most.



INTO THE WASTES

The door to Athas opens in the depths of a set of ruins, half buried beneath a sand dune. The wind blows and shifts sand regularly, and careless travelers might easily lose track of the ruins. Someone new to Athas likely first notices its extreme heat: temperatures approach 140 degrees during the day. It is a dry heat as well, and the ill-prepared quickly find themselves dehydrated and dying of thirst (see pages 303 and 304 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*).

A narrow, unpaved trade road winds through rocky terrain several miles northwest of the ruins. The path to the road runs through large shifting sand dunes that make footing treacherous. The straightest route to the road from the door to the World Serpent Inn takes the better part of half a day.

The Village

A distant, nameless village becomes visible at the intersection where the path meets the road. The village contains fewer than a dozen poorly crafted huts made from dried mud and tattered animal hides. Most of the villagers—a dirty, scraggly group of ex-slaves—look famished. While fortunate enough to survive a mad escape into the desert, the villagers have begun to slowly starve to death. Like many other ex-slave communities, they have no idea how to care for themselves in the desert and likely face extinction within the year.

Near the village, a small oasis serves as a water supply for the villagers and as a provisioning point for caravans. Surrounding the oasis, a loose pile of scavenged rocks approximates an unstable wall about 6 feet tall, with mud taking the place of mortar. A pool of muddy, brackish water, 12 feet in diameter, feeds a modest area where plant life grows thick and green.

This small, nameless oasis lies about 20 miles southeast of the city-state of

Draj. If travelers can find a reliable guide, the journey there only takes two days. If they take up with a caravan (usually slow-moving but heavily defended) instead, the journey can last anywhere from four to eight days, but they have a much better chance of surviving all of the dangers of Athas.

By virtue of strength, a man named Vhreen (CN male human barbarian 8) assumed command of the village. Vhreen came up with the idea to wall off the oasis to control the resource and secure trade from passing caravans. Most traders accept this as the cost of doing business, because Vhreen's "water fees" remain low. Vhreen's handful of loyal guards take most of the benefit of this trade, while the rest of the ex-slaves starve. For all his bravado, Vhreen is careful not to anger the trade caravans that pass through. Some carry as many guards as there are villagers, and in the wastelands, the merchant houses that control the caravans are a law unto themselves. Nobody would miss a village of ex-slaves.

Several small animals come and go at the oasis, most darting quickly between rocks or hiding in small shrubs around the pool. One of the regularly seen animals—an herbivorous raslinn (see *DUNGEON* #111)—is actually a halfling druid named Derlan (LN male halfling druid 10). Derlan guards this desert oasis, observing all comers carefully, watching for abuses: excessive hunting, overdraining of the water supply, and the worst sin of all—defiling.

In Derlan's true form, he has deep red, unkempt hair that appears to not have met a brush in years. His teeth are filed down to sharp points, he wears a simple cloth robe, and he seems unbothered by the heat. Derlan distrusts everyone and remains in animal form unless it becomes absolutely necessary to converse with someone. The halfling avoids contact with the village that recently appeared, and since he feels the desert will soon reclaim it, he feels no need to introduce himself.

The Elves

The Skydancer tribe of elves claim the sands around the oasis. They and all other Athasian elves distrust those not of their tribe, and they are not likely to engage in small talk with travelers—even those from other worlds—except to create a distraction while robbing them. General gossip in the ex-slave village holds that the elves are plotting something. While the two groups have never been friendly, some of the elves came by the village a few times each week to drink at the oasis. None of the Skydancers have visited in more than a week, however, and the villagers claim the desert has taken on a foreboding stillness.

Travelers not native to Athas likely don't recognize the Skydancers as elves. Standing nearly 7-feet tall, Athasian elves are consummate desert dwellers: their clothing blends in with the desert sands and their leathery skin appears sun-baked and gaunt. Quick thinking and nimble, Athasian elves make natural runners, and their long strides swiftly eat up miles. They rarely care about those outside their tribe and are renown across the Tablelands as thieves, raiders, smugglers, and liars. Although known as the most reliable sources for contraband material, such as spell components, elves just as often cheat their "business partners" as make fair deals.

The Caravan

Trade caravans frequently cross the Tablelands, stopping at oases and villages along the way. The following sample caravan might stop by the village of ex-slaves during the PCs' visit.

The wagons of this caravan fly a black banner with two bestial yellow eyes. The ex-slave villagers identify the caravan as belonging to House Tsalaxa, a major merchant house. The small caravan, built for speed, boasts a dozen outriders on *crodlu*—two-legged animals resembling scaled ostriches. Another six traders ride on *inix*—large, slow-moving lizards—which are also laden with saddle-

The World of Athas

Do you want to know more about DARK SUN? DRAGON #315 presents in-depth rules for defiler magic, DRAGON #319 updates DARK SUN to third edition with roughly thirty pages of rules and background information, while DRAGON #339 presents the dragon king epic prestige class. Also, make sure to visit the DARK SUN website at athas.org, or take part in the fan community discussions over at wizards.com/boards.

bags and tightly wrapped bundles. Two wagons, one open and the other completely enclosed, round out the caravan, each pulled by a team of two unburdened inix.

The trade goods the caravan carries offer little of interest to most adventurers, consisting of salt, wheat, and bolts of silk and linen. Hidden among its mundane trade goods, the caravan carries large bones suitable for use as weapons, massive scales usable for shields and armor, and ancient stone statues meant for a templar's temple. The caravan traders are extremely interested in any metal gear travelers might carry, however, and are willing to trade services, some personal possessions, and large quantities of ceramic coins (the currency of the metal-poor Tablelands) for them. The caravan's guards and traders consider the cargo in the enclosed wagon to be quite valuable, as they let no one approach.

Two defilers serve among the caravan guards, as well as a telepath and a seer. The defilers happily train any wizards they meet in their particular, destructive way of spellcasting.

The caravan traders usually require about a day to gather enough water from the oasis to carry themselves to their next destination. In that time, they willingly trade with all comers.

DARING THE WASTES

The primary goal of every living creature on Athas is survival, making the accumulation of wealth or glory secondary concerns. From lost desert wanderers to desperate slaves seeking aid for their village a variety of desolate souls might wander into the World Serpent Inn seeking respite and salvation.

Blighted Well: Shortly after the caravan arrives, the oasis dries to a trickle. The caravan guards and traders take up position inside the oasis walls and refuse to leave until they accumulate enough water to continue on. The threat of death by dehydration soon begins to loom over the villagers.

Some mutter angrily about the "Spirit of the Well" and point to circles of ash that have appeared since the caravan's arrival. The villagers claim the caravan brought a blight, dooming the village by drying up the oasis. No one in the village can truly challenge the caravan, and no one is sure why the oasis has run dry.

All of these events are the machinations of defiler wizards attached to the caravan, who seek to usurp control of the caravan from the current leaders. The circles of ash are created when the defilers cast their spells to lower the water level of the oasis.

Desert Justice: A half-starving villager calling himself Nine-Fingers approaches the PCs, perhaps within the World Serpent Inn (where his ceramic pieces lack any value). Nine-Fingers begs of the PCs to help him confront the village leader. He claims that Vhreen rules through fear and oppression. Nine-Fingers says he fears for his life and believes Vhreen plans to turn him over to the next group of slavers to come through the village—a grave accusation in a community of ex-slaves.

If the party refuses to assist Nine-Fingers, he disappears and cannot be found again. If the party ends up in the village at the same time as the caravan, successful DC 15 Spot checks reveal a mixed group of villagers and caravan guards leading Nine-Fingers into the caravan's encampment late at night.

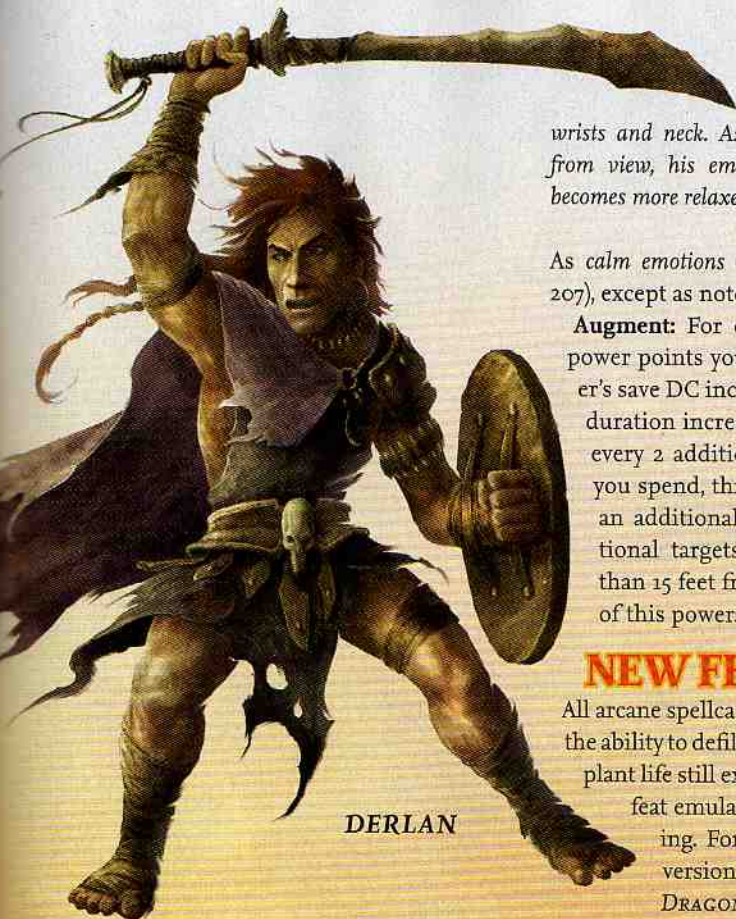
Enslaved: The caravan travels with a great treasure in cargo, which it protects and conceals very carefully. The lone enclosed wagon stays under a strict watch, and the guards turn back anyone who approaches the wagon—with force, if necessary. Wood and cured leather form the wagon's sides, but it seems strangely quiet, traveling without a sound—not even a wheel creaking.

The wagon holds a half-dozen slaves, including a few captured Skydancer elves caught by wandering slavers who later traded them to the caravan. House Tsalaxa uses the *acceptance* power to make the slaves docile, while keeping the entire wagon under a *silence* spell at all times. Nobody in the village knows what the wagon contents are, although most assume it carries something of great value.

Missing: Several hardy ex-slaves who do all the hunting for the village failed to return from a hunting expedition several days ago. The villagers fear a sandstorm or some desert predator caught the hunters. Without these hunters, many villagers face starvation.

A band of Skydancers ambushed the hunters, capturing two and leaving three for dead. One of the three came to and wandered blindly in the desert for a day before stumbling upon some ruins partially covered by a massive sand dune. Seeking solace from the oppressive heat within the ruins, the surviving hunter inadvertently opened the door to the World Serpent Inn and fell unconscious. The PCs might stumble across the hunter in the back halls of the inn, leading them back to Athas (once they rouse and question the survivor).

Upon crossing into Athas, the party finds signs of the battle site, including the slain hunters' remains. Tracking the elves and their prisoners requires a DC 20 Survival check. At the end of the trail, the party finds two of the prisoners staked out under the sun, waiting for heatstroke or desert predators to take them. The hunters are delirious, but they speak of angry



DERLAN

wrists and neck. As the manacles fade from view, his emotions dim and he becomes more relaxed.

As calm emotions (*Player's Handbook*, 207), except as noted here.

Augment: For every 2 additional power points you spend, this power's save DC increases by 1 and the duration increases by 1 hour. For every 2 additional power points you spend, this power can affect an additional target. Any additional targets cannot be more than 15 feet from another target of this power.

NEW FEATS

All arcane spellcasters on Athas have the ability to defile, killing what little plant life still exists. The following feat emulates the act of defiling. For a more extensive version of defiling, see *DRAGON* #315.

Defiler

You can power your spells using energy stolen from plants around you

Prerequisite: Ability to cast 1st-level arcane spells.

Benefit: You may draw the life force of plants around you in an act known as defiling. Casting a spell with defiling magic increases the caster level of the spell by +1. A spell cast with defiling magic takes longer to cast. If the spell's casting time is a standard action or less, its casting time increases to 1 round. If the spell's casting time is measured in rounds, its casting time increases by 1 round. If the spell's casting time is measured in minutes, its casting time increases by 1 minute. If the spell's casting time is measured in hours, its casting time increases by 1 hour.

You may only use defiling magic to enhance arcane spells cast with an arcane spellcasting class. You cannot, for example, use defiling magic to cast a cleric's domain spell that also appears on an arcane spellcasting class's spell list.

When you defile, you instantly destroy all plant life (but not plant creatures) in a radius of 5 feet per level of the spell. A 0-level spell defiles a single 5-foot square. The defiled area becomes completely sterile and can never again support plant life. Only a carefully worded *miracle* can reverse this permanent sterility.

In an area without plant life (such as an area in which you already used defiler magic once before), any spell you cast with defiling magic fails and you lose the spell.

Special: You cannot cast arcane spells on Athas unless you possess this feat, even if you intend on never defiling. Wizards native to Athas gain this feat as a bonus feat when they gain their first level of wizard.

NEW WEAPON

Over the years, the elves of Athas have developed a new type of weapon that allows them to use their various strengths to greatest advantage.

Elven Longblade

The elven longblade is fashioned from a long shank of animal bone and sharpened along one edge. The length and the curve of the bone make it resemble a longer version of a scimitar or rapier. You may use the Weapon Finesse feat with the elven longblade to apply your Dexterity modifier, rather than your Strength modifier, on attack rolls. ☐

elves. The elves believe the villagers captured some of their tribesmen (it was actually a group of wandering slavers who traded them to the caravan) and interrogated the hunters for hours before leaving them to die.

NEW PSIONIC POWER

Psionics are even more prevalent on Athas than magic is on normal worlds. As such, the people of Athas continue to develop new ways of adapting magic to psionics.

Acceptance

Telepathy (Charm) [Mind-Affecting]

Level: Telepath 2

Display: Material and mental

Manifesting Time: 1 round

Range: Close (25 ft. + 5 ft./2 levels)

Target: One creature

Duration: 1 hour/level

Saving Throw: Will negates

Power Resistance: Yes

Power Points: 3

Your subject twitches slightly as a set of ectoplasmic manacles forms around his

New Weapon

Exotic Weapon	Cost	Dmg (S)	Dmg (M)	Critical	Weight	Type
One-Handed Melee Weapon						
Elven						
longblade	60 cp*	1d6	1d8	18-20/x2	4	Slashing

* Ceramic pieces, the equivalent of gold pieces (gp) in most worlds.