

## CHAPTER 1 - REPUBLIC OF SHUN

To wander unprepared into the Jinsar Desert, the great Sea of Sand, is to court death. The shifting dunes, devoid of landmarks for hundreds of miles at a time, defy the understanding of visitors and leave them thirsting and disoriented until they collapse. In this harsh landscape, though, friendly faces can be found—or they can be bought, at least. The saruch (sa-ROOCH), the sharp-eyed cat-folk that call these dunes their home, will welcome anyone that will pay their way.

### PRAGMATIC WANDERERS

The desert and their dangerous neighbors both breed a cultural pragmatism into the saruch. Historically, this led to the formation of many disparate clans focused solely on their own survival, fighting tooth and claw against other saruch to maintain control of the sparse resources of the desert. But when animariums began to flood out of Selovast, a few visionaries saw an opportunity for the entire people to come together and prosper.

These revolutionaries saw the demand for animariums in distant lands and persuaded the clans to set aside their differences to facilitate the safe transport of goods across the desert. These early accords grew in scale until the Republic of Shun (SHOON) took on the shape of a true nation-state. This commercial origin is reflected in their practices, as there is no power held by bloodline or martial strength here. The position of Cherbi (CHERR-bee), the leader who has the authority to resolve inter-clan conflicts and coordinate the efforts of the entire Republic, is won instead by traveling from clan to clan and buying each one's approval with donations and deals.

### PINPOINTS ON A BROAD CANVAS

There is little point in building fixed settlements in the land of Shun, as they will inevitably deplete the scarce water that they depend on. The rains that replenish the oases and aquifers may not come for years at a time, and so these sources must be left untouched for long stretches if they are to last. The clans wander their routes with hardy pack-beasts, guided by navigational expertise passed down from generation to generation. When they come across a useful site, they do not stay for long, but do stop to build a few foundational structures to return to.

They build V-shaped dune walls around oases and springs. These redirect oncoming sand away from the precious water, and the broad sails built atop them gather the morning dew. Ancient tunnels

#### ANIMARIUMS

The intelligent races of Elanor learned how to harness spirits to their advantage. By trapping spirits in a specially made object, a mage can craft a magic item powered by them. Animariums that hold small spirits are relatively easy to make, but they are limited in function and cease to work after several years.

In the great cities of Elanor, animariums are a common if expensive commodity. Farther out in the outskirts of civilization, they are a lot rarer. Still, animariums serve a role even in rural societies. These items can keep people warm during winter, cleanse tainted water sources, and help plants grow where they naturally wouldn't.

burrowed deep into the sides of hills access aquifers deep underground that a conventional well could never reach, and cisterns store it all to keep it from evaporating off. These sites become the stopping points on the circuit of each clan, known sanctuaries where exhausted supplies can be replenished. They may not be cities, but any built structure in the realm of Shun is a sure sign of a much-needed reprieve from the desert.

### STRENGTH IN THE PRIDE

The rights to a water source were once the cause of many conflicts between clans, but under the Republic, these conflicts have largely been replaced by negotiation and purchases. The clans are so thinly scattered across the desert that the authority of the





Republic is only ever a distant thing, but the wealth and security it has brought are enough to ensure that even the most fiercely individualist clan leaders respect it enough to stay in line. As Shun, not just a motley assortment of clans, they can promise security to business partners and collaboration to one another.

## DANCE OF PASSION AND DOUBT

When night falls, the dry air and unpopulated landscape make for skies so clear that it seems like the stars might be touched by simply stretching out one's arm. The two moons in their slow waltz over Elanor are the objects of faith for Shunites, held to be the shells of the twin gods of fate. These two sisters of opposite personalities are Hezheg (heh-ZHEG) and Setgel (SET-gel), "doubt" and "passion" respectively, and the Shunites look to their faces for omens and signs.

Setgel, the brighter of the two whose watch has passed for daytime since the disappearance of the sun, has a surface overturned relentlessly by volcanism. Shunites study the patterns on her face closely through finely-made telescopes, and when Setgel's blemishes reflect the long-still craters and scars set in Hezheg's stone surface it is an auspicious sign for any plans advanced on that day, as it is zeal and caution in accordance.

### THE ANIMAR

In the world of Elanor, animar are spirits born of emotion. A child imagining fiends in their closet might create a fear animar. A city guard that resolutely defends an innocent bystander against a cutthroat thug could conjure an animar of valor.

Animar exist in the Everlast, a fog-bound dimension that overlaps the Material Plane (similar to the Ethereal Plane as presented in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*). Thus, animar are normally invisible to other humanoids, but spells that allow creatures to gaze into the Ethereal Plane (like *see invisibility*) will reveal animar in the area.

Animar feed on the same emotion that created them. For example, an animar of hope might dwell in a temple where people find strength in prayer. A fear animar could occupy a prison where people are being interrogated or tortured.

Most animar have one emotional aspect associated with them. The primary emotions are: joy, sadness, fear, trust, anger, anticipation, disgust, and surprise.

When they first form, animar have the mental capacity of wild animals, but the more they feed, the more they reflect the creatures that fed them. They become more intelligent, and the specific experiences they feed upon dictate their personality.

Strong animar can learn to communicate, perform magic, and even cross the veil between the Material Plane and the Everlast. This passage is made easier when the area is relatively secluded, as big crowds make it harder for spirits to remain corporeal.

While this form of divination does guide Shunites in much of life, anyone that becomes too concerned with it would be cautioned not to forget the world around them. "You won't find the moons in the sand" is a common refrain, an advisory that those gods remain distant and detached. Most Shunites remain concerned instead with the happiness and material comfort of themselves and their clan. Nobody will search for divine signs to justify a bottle of good wine or the company of friends.

## APATHY TO ANIMAR

Animar figure much less into the philosophy of the Republic. With the desert so sparsely populated, animar can barely form at all, let alone gather the strength to achieve any measure of sapience. With both the Eminency and Mogoshar being far more reverential of animar, Shunites often display a level of respect when in their company. This is, however, entirely a gesture of courtesy extended towards their neighbors rather than an indication of any belief held by the Shunites themselves. Stories of animar that can hold a conversation are usually considered to be no more than fanciful embellishments.

## PACKING IT IN

There are few creatures hardy enough to survive in the depths of the Jinsar. Those that do are highly adapted for the environment, and the towering sulkakh (sool-KAKH) is no different. They are thought to be kin to camels, changed by some twist of the vanishing of the sun. They stand as much as 12 feet tall, covering great distances with ease and lasting a week at a time without a drop of water. Large ears pick up the echoes of heavy footsteps and a sensitive, curiously anvil-shaped nose compensates for relatively poor eyesight. Their coarse hair is decorated with a complex stripe pattern that seems to be layered at many different scales; this helps them appear to be simple desert rocks while sleeping, but also makes their hides popular and distinctive trophies for hunters. Sulkakh-hide cloaks are something of a status symbol among Shunite mergens in particular, whose shooting skills and massive weapons allow them to fell these mighty beasts.

Shun makes considerable use of sulkakhs whenever one can be tamed—no small feat, but one with a great reward if it can be achieved. A sulkakh can carry an enormous quantity of supplies without trouble, and if things become truly desperate, then slaughtering it will feed the entire clan for weeks. Some wealthier clans will even outfit their sulkakhs for war, dressing them in barding and fitting a ring-shaped



howdah around the hump for several riders. These howdahs are often equipped with one of the most fearsome weapons devised by the clever smiths of Shun, the dragontongue. This device has bellows and a nozzle that sprays a jet of sticky, burning naphtha from a large tank. Its use is devastating to organized lines of troops, opening spaces for darting zhadas and driving the enemy into panic.

### VARIANT: WAR SULKAKH

If a sulkakh is being used as a beast of war by Shun, it will be fitted with a howdah and ridden by two or three Shunites (not included in the challenge rating). One rider must use their action to command the sulkakh each turn or it will attempt to flee the battle. A second rider can use their action to operate the dragontongue mounted on the howdah. A war sulkakh has the following changes to its statblock:

- Armor Class is changed to 16 (chain mail)
- Challenge Rating is changed to 6 (2,300 XP)

It also gains the following feature:

**Dragontongue.** When a creature riding the sulkakh uses its action to fire the dragontongue, it sprays burning oil in a 30-foot line. Each creature in that area must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw, taking 21 (6d6) fire damage on a failed save.

## DEFENDERS OF SHUN

Shun's practices at war reflect the old way of the independent clans. Their warriors excel in fast-moving guerilla conflicts, striking where the enemy is weak and vanishing before strength can be marshaled against them. The formation of the Republic has led to rare occasions of massed Shunite armies marching forth, but the lack of any kind of established military organization has made persuading enough fighters to join such campaigns exceedingly costly.

### ZHADA

When war comes, the people of Shun would far rather vanish into the Sea of Sand than risk the lives of their clansfolk. What is valued by them must be carried from place to place anyway, and they are fleet of foot than most that would come seeking battle. They are not so foolish as to imagine that they can escape every fight, especially not when clans within the Republic come into conflict. When forced to fight, Shunite zhadas (ZHA-duhs) move with all the erratic winding of a dust devil, flowing in and out of contact to strike wherever the enemy is weakest.

Kamshig (KAM-shig) is a popular Shunite sport—a form of wrestling conducted on the steep side of a dune. The loose sand is treacherous and the slope is

## SULKAKH

Huge Beast

**Armor Class** 11 (natural armor)  
**Hit Points** 86 (9d12 + 27)  
**Speed** 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
22 (+6)	9 (-1)	17 (+3)	2 (-4)	10 (+0)	8 (-1)

**Senses** tremorsense 60 ft., passive Perception 10  
**Languages** —  
**Challenge** 4 (1,100 XP)

### ACTIONS

**Multiattack.** The sulkakh uses its Spit attack if available. It then makes one Kick attack.

**Kick.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft. *Hit:* 22 (3d10 + 6) bludgeoning damage. A Large or smaller creature that is hit with this attack must make a DC 12 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

**Spit (Recharge 5–6).** The sulkakh sprays irritating bile in a 15-foot cone. Each creature in that area must make a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or become blinded. A creature blinded by this effect can repeat the save at the end of each turn.

much too sheer for a steady footing. The two combatants will attempt to trip the other, with victory coming when the opponent is forced to touch the dune with anything other than their feet. Games like these are entertainment, certainly, but they also train warriors that are nimble and elusive, evading the blades of the enemy with ease.

### MERGEN

With little capacity to wage war on a grand scale, Shunites accomplish their more hostile goals by other means. Mergens (MERR-gen) are the master sharpshooters of the Republic, able to land shots from hundreds of feet and vanish into the desert before reprisals can come. The weapons they use are magnificent pieces of engineering, looking like massively oversized crossbows with steel prods and folding shooting saddles. They drive their bolts with the power of a lightning strike, and have even been described as sounding like thunder when fired. When an army gets too close to a Shunite clan or threatens to deny them a water source, the commander leading it will drop dead with a great crack sounding from afar, the culprit escaping without ever being spotted.

Most mergens take quite an interest in the crafting



of their weapons and apply this knowledge to other things. They become keen tinkerers, usually found fiddling with some tiny mechanism in their tents, and their weapons are decorated with fine handiwork or even tiny automata that spring to life when the trigger is pulled. Mergens are already widely feared and respected both among the clans and those outsiders who know of them, but their proficiency at solving more mundane problems with their little devices make them truly esteemed in their immediate circles.

## ZHADA

Medium Humanoid (Saruch)

**Armor Class** 13 (leather armor)  
**Hit Points** 28 (5d8 +5)  
**Speed** 35 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	14 (+2)	12 (+1)	13 (+2)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)

**Saving Throws** Dex +4  
**Skills** Acrobatics +6, Survival +2  
**Senses** darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10  
**Languages** Common, Saruchi  
**Challenge** 1 (200 XP)

**Lightning Reflexes.** When the zhada makes a roll as part of a reaction, they have advantage on the roll. When the zhada is knocked prone, they can use their reaction to immediately end the prone condition on themselves as long as their speed is greater than 0 ft.

### ACTIONS

**Glave.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d10 + 2) slashing damage.

**Claws.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) slashing damage.

**Slip Away.** The zhada takes the Disengage action and then the Dash action.

## MERGEN

Medium Humanoid (Saruch)

**Armor Class** 15 (leather armor)  
**Hit Points** 71 (11d8 +22)  
**Speed** 35 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	18 (+4)	15 (+3)	15 (+3)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)

**Saving Throws** Dex +6, Con +5  
**Skills** Acrobatics +6, Athletics +3, Perception +2, Stealth +8, Survival +2  
**Senses** darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10  
**Languages** Common, Saruchi  
**Challenge** 4 (1,100 XP)

**Lightning Reflexes.** When the mergen makes a roll as part of a reaction, they have advantage on the roll. When the mergen is knocked prone, they can use their reaction to immediately end the prone condition on themselves as long as their speed is greater than 0 ft.

**Deadly Aim.** The Heavy Arbalest weapon deals two extra dice of its damage when the mergen hits with it (included in the attack). If the mergen scores a critical hit with the Heavy Arbalest, the target must succeed on a DC 16 Constitution saving throw or be stunned until the start of the mergen's next turn.

### ACTIONS

**Multiaction.** The mergen makes three Shortsword or Claw attacks.

**Heavy Arbalest.** *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, range 100/400 ft., one target. *Hit:* 23 (3d12 + 4) piercing damage.

**Shortsword.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d6 + 4) slashing damage.

**Claws.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d4 + 4) slashing damage.

**Slip Away.** The mergen takes the Disengage action and then the Dash action.

### BONUS ACTIONS

**Shooting Sticks.** The mergen's arbalest has a pair of folding legs underneath it that can be used to steady the weapon for a better aim at the expense of making the weapon more cumbersome to move. If the mergen has not yet moved on their turn, then as a bonus action they can deploy or stow the shooting sticks. While deployed, the mergen's speed is reduced to 10 ft., but the range of the Heavy Arbalest is extended to 400/800 ft.







## STORY SEED: DELAYED DIPLOMACY

While sheltering at an oasis with the Shunite clan Buuladen (boo-LAH-den), the party witnesses a scout return with word of an approaching caravan. The caravan is that of the fabulously wealthy Sengiin of Atgerel (sen-GEEN, at-GEH-rel), who is known to be visiting the clans to win sufficient approval to become Cherbi.

The Buuladen chieftain Tsyben (TSY-ben) sees Sengiin's accession to Cherbi as inevitable, but the clan is currently in a poor position to negotiate a gift from him. They have suffered a string of defeats in skirmishes with the Eminency, and Sengiin could certainly afford to replace the clan's lost weapons with barely a second thought. This would be a gift that the clan could hardly refuse, but would do little for the clan in the long run. Tsyben says that if Sengiin can be delayed by just a day, the clan can depart and re-arm themselves before meeting Sengiin. This would allow them to demand much more for their approval.

It is currently morning, and Sengiin is on-pace to reach the oasis by evening. Tsyben offers the party 200 gp each and a case of excellent Eminency wine (six bottles worth 15 gp each) if they can stall him long enough to force the caravan to spend the night camped on the sands without reaching the oasis. If the players succeed, the Buuladen will pack up and leave before Sengiin reaches the oasis, sending riders out in all directions to barter with other clans.

## STORY SEED: SCIENCE OVER SENSE

Namgar (NAM-gar), a Shunite inventor of some repute, has been experimenting with animarium constructs to automate some of the more difficult and dangerous labor required by Shun clans. Perhaps the toughest task is the construction of foggaras, the miles-long, near-horizontal tunnels that burrow into the sides of hills to access deep aquifers. Taking inspiration from the Mogoshar's serpentine forms, she has built a snake-like animarium construct intended to dig foggaras much more safely and efficiently than traditional methods allow.

Unfortunately, Namgar is a little more ambitious than she is knowledgeable on the subject of animariums, and when her construct was first activated it immediately burrowed into the sand and vanished in the direction of an Eminency settlement on the edges of the dunes.

### MORE CONTENT BY BEYOND THE SCREEN?

Yes, there's more.

This is a sample from *Souls of Sand*, a regional supplement featuring three unique desert factions (just like the republic).

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Namgar comes to the party in something of a panic—if she goes to the Eminency settlement to stop the rogue construct herself, they will identify her as working with animariums and at a minimum bar her from entering their lands, but if the construct is not stopped, it will cause trouble and provoke a wider retaliation. She asks that the party go instead, track down the construct in secret, and recover the animarium that powers it before the Eminency can trace its origin to her. If the party succeeds in destroying the construct before it is found by the Eminency, she will upgrade any sets of tools that the party has to give a +1 to all rolls made to use that set of tools by someone with proficiency with them. If the party can also return the animarium to Namgar, she will improve the tools to +2 instead. Use a **blue dragon wyrmling** statblock with its fly speed removed for the construct.

