

The City of Scorpions

Somewhere in the ruined City of Scorpions, the Golden Scorpion awaits. It is an ancient artifact of fell power. Only desert winds now inhabit the once great city. Mercenaries and cultists have crossed the Great Desert to recover the artifact. Claiming it from the forsaken ruin should be easy...

Sword & Sorcery in the spirit of Conan for 3 – 5 players. D20 SRD.

The (Anti-) Heroes

The cult of the Old Serpent rules a distant kingdom through fear and violence. Theirs is a religion of blood sacrifice and vile sorcery. The characters are working for the cult. Their mission is to recover an ancient relic. The party consists of four mercenaries and three cultists. Asha and Bhaal are Children of the Serpent; their divine heritage grants them magical powers. They lead the party. Mkeri is their loyal bodyguard. The rest are mercenaries. The mercenaries are totally expendable and know it. They shall receive a great reward for bringing the Golden Scorpion to the priests.

Two characters (Bhaal and Ramona) were lost during a sandstorm while approaching the ruins. They will appear once two characters are dead; give them to the players who lost their characters. Each character rides a camel and has supplies and desert gear in addition to things in the inventory. Players should come up with short descriptions for their characters on their own. Inventory lists a few features for each character. Asha should go to a player with experience with D&D; as a cleric, she has wide repertoire of spells. Picking them will slow down the game too much for a newbie. Characters have no magic items, other than potions and scrolls, to keep the atmosphere low fantasy. Please note Asha has black onyx worth 75 gp; this is meant as a material component for Animate Dead. So be prepared for the possibility of a few undead minions.

The Background

The city is not as deserted as it should be. A group of bandits fighting against the cult of the Old Serpent have taken refuge in the ruins. They staged a daring raid against nomads of the Hawk Clan, kidnapping Priscilla, daughter of their chieftain. The bandits are now waiting for the Eagle Clan nomads in the ruin. Their chieftain desires Priscilla as his wife. The bandits will exchange Priscilla for a vow to help them in the fight against the Old Serpent. The Eagle Clan arrives in five days.

The City

The City of Scorpions is aptly named. It was the holy city of a vile scorpion cult. It was abandoned centuries ago, but unnatural scorpions still make it their home. Medium-sized scorpions are everywhere, but they are inactive during daytime. The characters approach the city from the north. The ruins have been scoured by desert winds. Only some walls stand here and there. The city is surrounded by inhospitable, deadly desert. Nearest oasis is one week to the north. Realm of the Old Serpent is three weeks to the north. Distances are much greater while travelling on foot.

If the characters move around the city during the night or camp anywhere but in the garden, they risk encountering medium and large scorpions. Monsters and traps etc mentioned in the scenario are from the d20 SRD. (<http://www.d20srd.org>) Look up the exact stats from there. The city has few points of interest; thus no exact map is provided. Most of the buildings have collapsed into little but rubble. The five points of interest are clearly visible from afar. If there is combat in the city, most of

the area is difficult terrain due to rubble and soft sand. Occasional obelisks, broken statues and still standing walls provide cover.

1) Riverbed

A dried river runs by the northern edge of the city. It is filled with loose sand and crossed by a crumbling bridge. Located in the riverbed are a dozen dead camels. They are still carrying their saddlebags and harnesses filled with cargo. Buried in the sand near the carcasses are one large monstrous scorpion and two medium monstrous scorpions. If the characters approach the carcasses, the scorpions ambush them. Spot check DC20 notices the scorpions buried in the sand. Moving in the riverbed is hard due to the sand; consider it difficult terrain.

The camels belonged to the desert bandits, who were ambushed by many scorpions. They are loaded with supplies; such as rope, tools, arrows and travel rations. Hidden among the supplies are some potions. Finding them takes a DC15 and DC20 search checks. The first success finds five murky potions (Cure Light Wounds), two smelly potions (Cure Serious Wounds) and one slimy potion (Neutralize Poison). The second check finds another slimy potion and a sticky potion (Barkskin). The characters have no way to identify the potions, they must drink them blindly.

2) Pyramid

A huge pyramid dominates the cityscape. It is worn by the desert winds, but still impressive. It is obviously a tomb of some sort. The entrance is blocked with huge stone blocks. Digging through them would take weeks. Faded inscriptions (DC15 Decipher Script or DC20 Knowledge [religion]) proclaim it is the Pyramid of Eternal Hunger. Should the characters somehow force entrance, they will be beset by hordes of starving ghouls and ghosts. Deep inside the pyramid is the tomb of an ancient priest-king, filled with untold treasures.

3) Sorcerous Garden

There is a large, walled garden on the outskirts of the city. Miraculously, it is lush and filled with green in the middle of the desert. The garden is eerily quiet; even insects avoid it. It is safe to camp here. Scorpions do not enter within the walls. A large fountain bubbles merrily middle of the garden. It is filled with cool, invigorating water. There is a permanent Purify Water in the fountain.

A huge statue stands at the western end of the garden. It is a very lifelike depiction of a serpentine female with six arms, all brandishing weapons. DC 15 Knowledge (Arcana) reveals it is not a statue, but a petrified creature. DC 20 Knowledge (Planes) identifies it as a marilith. Power of the bound devil keeps the garden lush and the water fresh. Should someone come and turn it back to flesh, the powerful devil might reward him...

There are many lush, proud trees in the garden. Some of them still sport juicy, peach-like fruits. Other trees were picked clean by the bandits. DC15 Spot check notices there has been recent activity in the garden; fruit being picked etc. DC20 Survival check identifies the fruit as the Death's Kisses. Abdul identifies them automatically; whether he tells the others is up to him. The fruit are terribly poisonous (DC20 2d6/2d6 Con ingested). Their juice works as injury poison on weapons (DC18 1d8/1d8 Con). There is enough fruit for six doses of poison.

4) Scorpion Pit

This pit looks much like a huge well. It is 60 feet wide and 120 feet deep. In the bottom of the pit is a huge fiendish scorpion. It has no apparent way to get up. Degenerate deserts nomads worship it as a god and feed it with sacrifices. Characters can snipe it to death without problems if they wish; but they will make enemies of the scorpion cults. This has no effect during the scenario, but is worth mentioning in the aftermath. Should characters climb down, they will find loads of bones (human and animal) and worthless trinkets.

5) Temple of the Scorpion

Located middle of the ruins, the temple is a tall, imposing structure. The walls are inscribed with scorpion-themed motifs. The bandits have made it their home, while they wait for the nomads. The bandits maintain two guards on the roof at all times. They are hiding and report movement they spot down below to their leaders.

The Temple

The desert bandits have taken over the temple as their base. They live in the upper floors. Once the temple was center of the scorpion cult. The Golden Scorpion is in the main altar room; exactly where the bandits have set up their headquarters. All rooms are dimly illuminated through narrow, long windows. Passing through one requires a DC 15 Escape Artist check. The tomb is naturally completely dark. Climbing up the walls takes DC 20 Climb check. The temple is 80 feet high. Map of the temple are in combat map format for your benefit. Every square is five feet.

1) Entry Hall

Wide, empty doorway leads into a large entrance hall. Unnaturally, the desert winds have not pushed sand inside. The walls and floor are engraved with magical symbols, scorpions and insectoid demons. Many engravings describe human sacrifice and women giving birth to half-insectoid horrors. The hall is filled with rubble. Large boulders offer cover and make the squares difficult terrain. The hall is 50 feet high; a double stairway leads to the upper floor from both sides of the room. A single hallway leads deeper into the temple, between the stairs. Climbing up the walls takes DC 20 Climb check. The windows in the hall are 40 feet up from the floor.

Nakara has arranged a silly alchemical/magical trap in the entry hall. Its purpose is to scare away intruders without having to hurt them. It is triggered remotely; the trap is used if/when guards up on the stairs notice the intruders. DC20 notices a glowing, translucent shape descending down from the ceiling; when it is halfway down, it starts emitting creepy wailing sound. Describe it as an incorporeal undead of some sort. When the “ghost” has descended, the entry hall fills with smoke. This effect is akin to obscuring mist and fills the whole hall for five minutes. The “ghost” wails that the temple is haunted and cursed. Characters should make DC15 Will save or they are demoralized while inside the hall. Inspecting the “ghost” up close reveals it to be a piece of cloth hanging from thin silk ropes and covered with glowing paint.

1.1) Hallway

This hallway leads into thick stone doors. The doors are stuck; forcing them open takes DC15 Strength check. The doors are inscribed with ancient symbols. Decipher Script DC15 or Knowledge

(Religion) DC20 translates them. They tell there is a tomb of scorpion priests behind the doors; horrible curses and hexes are threatened to befall upon those breaking in.

There are four rooms along the corridor. They were used for religious rites and have extremely high ceilings. Windows are located 20 feet from the ground. Each room is dedicated to one element. The walls are carved with fading engravings portraying scorpions as elemental powers. Two are empty, other than for random rubble. The room of fire is filled from floor to the ceiling with dead scorpions. They've been killed with arrows. Some are burnt to crisp. The room of earth has a large hole in the floor. It has been blocked with rubble. The tunnel leads into one of the many underground scorpion nests.

1.2) Tomb

Steep stairway leads down into the tomb. The inscriptions on the wall describe horrible deaths befalling upon tomb robbers. There is a Stone Blocks from Ceiling trap in the stairway. The stairs lead into the tomb proper. There are several doorways that are sealed shut with huge stone blocks. Only one doorway remains open; it was never closed. There are eight sarcophagi inside, placed along the corridor. Six of them are empty and unsealed, robbed ages ago.

Two sarcophagi, at the end of the corridor, are sealed and untouched. Sarcophagus #1 is trapped (DC20 search, DC18 Disable Device, repair reset) with a scorpion swarm. A swarm drops upon a character that tries to open the sarcophagus from the ceiling. Treat this as a spider swarm. Inside the sarcophagus is a mummy – a truly dead one – covered with riches. It is wearing a golden, priestly cap, a thick necklace studded with black pearls, another necklace studded with rubies and four thick gold rings. Sarcophagus #2 contains a very angry, undead mummy. It attacks immediately!

The mummy is the wild card of this scenario. It is murderously insane. The mummy will relentlessly pursue the characters until it loses their track. At that point it returns back to the stairway leading to the tomb. It shall hide there, waiting for a new foe to attack. The bandits will try to hide from it. However, the mummy will attack the bandits if it sees any of them. The player characters might lead the mummy to them and let it handle the fighting. Asha might even manage to command it and use it as a minion. If the players stay toe to toe with it, the mummy can kill them all... especially once the mummy rot sets in.

2) Stairs

Stairs climb up to the second floor on both sides of the hall. There are barricades made of rubble blocking them on the both sides, close to the balcony above. Passing the barricade takes a full-round action. Alternatively, it can be passed through as part of a move with DC 17 Escape Artist, Jump or Tumble check. It is possible to burst through the barricade with DC 20 Strength check. There are two bandits on guard behind both barricades at all times. They will retreat up to the balcony, firing arrows, if an enemy breaks through.

2.1) Balcony & Corridor

The stairs end up on to a balcony-like platform overseeing the hall below. There is no railing and the fall down is 50 feet. If the characters retreat after the alchemical/magical trap, but come back and try a frontal assault, the bandits use the balcony to pepper them with arrows. There is one empty doorway that leads into a wide corridor. There are two empty doorways on both sides. The corridor ends into a stairway leading up.

2.2) Rooms

The rooms along the corridor once belonged to high ranking priest. Nothing remains of their opulent furnishings. Walls are covered with mosaics that are still beautiful, but worn with age. They describe cities and villages overcome by swarming scorpions. The rooms are used as barracks by the rank and file warriors. They contain beddings, spare clothing, arrows and personal effects of little value. There are usually six bandits chatting and resting/sleeping in the rooms, unless ordered otherwise by their leaders. Note that the bandits have Endurance – they sleep with armor on and weapons at hand, just in case.

3) Altar Chamber

The altar chamber was used by the scorpion priests in degenerate rituals and fell magic. Thick pillars hold the roof. They are engraved with devils and insectoid horrors. The walls and floor are inscribed full of magical symbols, now faded with time. There are four large statues at one side of the chamber. They are very life-like depictions of aberrations mixing human and scorpion-like features. (Scorpionfolk.) Knowledge (Arcana) DC 15 reveals they are actually petrified creatures.

A large black altar stands middle of the room. It is unnaturally cold to the touch and still caked with dried blood. Pushing the altar makes it slide a little to the side. The Golden Scorpion lies underneath. It is, too, unnaturally cold to the touch. It always seems to be in a little different pose than the last time when inspected. Nakara spends most of the time here, inspecting the symbols. Knowledge (Arcana) DC 15 reveals they are connected to crossbreeding rituals and summoning devils. Stairs near the altar lead to the roof.

3.1) Backrooms

Doorways lead into the quarters that once belonged to the high priest. They are now shared by Nakara and Talqan. Priscilla is tied in one of the rooms. (See Aftermath for more on her.) Most of the water and food is stored there as well, where Talqan can keep an eye on them. Searching through the quarters reveals a small bag of gold coins (40) and a letter to Nakara. The letter orders him to go to the Red Oasis, kidnap Priscilla and bring her to the City of Scorpions. Nakara is then to stay put till the Eagle Clan arrives. The letter is simply signed “Master”.

4) Roof

The roof is baked by the merciless sun all day and hot as a stove. During the night, the stones still radiate heat almost to the dawn. There was once a roof garden, but it is long gone. There are always two bandits on the roof, keeping an eye on the city below. Distance down to the ground is 80 feet.

Running the Scenario

Remember, this is sword & sorcery! Keep it light, keep it fluid, keep it packed with adventure and action. Don't let players spend hours making crazy plans or arguing rules. Don't take the game too seriously. It is supposed to be fun above everything else.

The scenario has no timeline or plot as such. The characters arrive and start looking for the Golden Scorpion. They will eventually end up in the temple. What happens before, after and between – that

is all up to them. The Eagle Clan nomads arrive in five days, so should they tarry, the party might be forced to retreat, hide or negotiate.

The Bandits

The desert bandits are holed up in the temple and waiting for the Eagle Clan. They are lead by Nakara, Son of the Sun (Sorcerer 6), whose divine heritage gives him unearthly powers. His second in command is Talqan (Ranger 6), a scarred veteran of many desert wars. Nakara is a pacifist and abhors violence. His peaceful, passive nature is the worst impediment the bandits have against the player characters. For example, if the characters attack the temple and then retreat, Nakara makes his men just sit tight instead of attacking the characters while they rest. Talqan is a different man altogether. If Nakara dies, Talqan will pursue a very aggressive strategy instead.

Nakara uses his magic to mislead, confuse and disable the characters. If he, for example, disables characters with Deep Slumber, he insists on them being imprisoned instead of executed outright. This soft approach has Talqan furious, but he is a superstitious man and respects the divine blood. Still, despite Nakara's protests, Talqan arranged his men to pick many Death's Kisses, just in case. Each bandit has poisoned arrows, while Talqan has several poisoned weapons. They won't waste the arrows at random shots; only at guaranteed hits on point blank range.

There are a total of twelve ordinary bandits (Ranger 2) in the temple. Six are on the guard duty; six are resting under normal circumstances. Talqan spends the time making rounds around the guard posts and devouring Priscilla with his eyes. Nakara spends his days inspecting the magical symbols in the altar room. He has figured they are meant for bad things and would like to destroy them somehow. He has already sabotaged some critical runes with a hammer and chisel.

In the case of an attack, the bandits will stay on passive defence. Nakara insists that time is on their side, they just need to wait for the Eagle Clan to arrive. If possible, the bandits will try to repulse the characters at the barricades. If not, they will withdraw while firing arrows up to the altar room. Should the players withdraw, they will simply return to their old positions. Talqan wants to counterattack aggressively, but as long as Nakara is alive, he won't allow it. If Talqan end up in the lead, he won't show any mercy. If necessary, he will kill Priscilla rather than allow her to be liberated and slay any incapacitated characters.

If things get truly desperate – such as the mummy slaughters the bandits – Nakara will escape by drinking the potion of invisibility. He will make his way to the gardens, expecting that to be the players campsite. He will steal a camel and ride off. As a rule, Nakara hampers defence of the temple by insisting that some men stay in the altar room. The sensible thing, after all, would be to overwhelm the player characters with numbers (and poisoned arrows).

Other Dangers

There are scorpions everywhere in the city. The scorpions are passive during the day, mostly hiding in the ruins and only dangerous if bothered. During the night they become active. Wandering around the city during night is dangerous. Medium and large scorpions can and will attack the characters. They will gladly slaughter their camels, if they are left unguarded outside the garden.

If the characters open the pyramid, they release a horde of ghouls and ghosts. That can radically change the scenario. The undead do not enter the garden, but they will quickly overcome the

temple. There are over 50 ghouls and a dozen ghosts; killing them all is not a realistic option. Simply leaving the city alive will become challenging.

Improvise!

Unexpected things tend to happen in roleplaying games. Be prepared to roll with the blows. For example, the character might use the scorpions against the bandits somehow or try to negotiate with them. The characters might even cut down the orchard in the sorcerous garden, set up fire in the entrance hall of the temple and try to smoke their enemies out.

The Aftermath

Huzaah, the bad guys are dead, the Golden Scorpion has been found and the heroes have rescued the princess. What then? Please note that if all characters with Survival are dead, the rest have no hope finding their way back through the desert...

The Princess

Priscilla is princess of the Hawk Clan. She is exquisitely beautiful and very very scared. She will thank the characters for saving her and explain she was abducted. She has overheard the captors talking about the Eagle Clan. Priscilla will explain they are mortal enemies of the Hawk Clan. Their chief is old, lecherous man and likely has nasty plans for Priscilla. She promises her father will reward them handsomely for returning her to the Hawks. She will promise other kind of rewards for the most able-looking man in the group (this is Ahnuld, if he is alive).

The serpent cultists know the cult favors sacrifices of royal blood. The Old Serpent finds their taste especially pleasing. Thus taking Priscilla with them will bring them favor with the cult. Such favor is more worthwhile than any desert trinkets. The mercenaries don't naturally share this motivation. It would be in their best interest to either take Priscilla back or stay and sell her to the Eagles. Remind players of their motivations and loyalties. This might be a good spark for player versus player antagonism that will crown the scenario.

The Pursuit

If the characters have solved the scenario too easily and do not fall upon each other, you can throw in pursuit for extra action. There are three options. First, if they've chosen to go to the Hawks or to the serpent cities, they might be pursued by Eagle outriders. Reuse desert bandits; simply replace one feat with Mounted Combat. Second, if the mummy was not destroyed, it could follow the characters. It moves tirelessly, so it will reach them one night... Third, throw in guardian of the Golden Scorpion, a single scorpionfolk. It will distract the characters with illusions, then charge and try to snatch the artifact. Don't use pursuit unless the scenario has been solved far too quick. For example, if Asha managed to control the mummy, it can smash the opposition easily.

Happy Ending?

If the characters survive the City of Scorpions, it is time to wrap up the scenario. There are several possible endings. If they make their way back to the serpent cult, they'd better have the Golden Scorpion. The cult doesn't look kindly upon failure. Delivering the statue gets the cultists favor from the high priests; the mercenaries get paid promptly. The Golden Scorpion gives more sorcerous power to the cult. As a result, shadow of the Old Serpent grows longer. More neighbors

are enslaved and the black altars baked red with blood. If they bring Priscilla, she is sacrificed when the next full moon rises. Asha and Bhaal are allowed to partake in the ceremony and gain more fell powers as a reward.

Should the characters wait for the Eagle Clan, they must make a hard bargain with the chief. The chances are he will just take Priscilla from them by force; the ending scene of the movie is the last stand of the characters against a nomad horde. If they are diplomatic, they get a chest of gold.

If the characters take Priscilla back to the Hawks, they will be disappointed. The Hawks are a virtuous and unfortunately poor clan. Their chief makes a blood-oath to assist and protect the characters as his own clansmen for the rest of his days. There is little else he can give, other than fine camels and stories about other deserted cities, filled with treasure... Though he can give the hand of Priscilla in marriage, if the character agrees to stay with the clan.

If their camels have died, the characters have little hope to get anywhere. Walking through the desert is very hard. If they leave the city on foot, the ending scene is their desperate jog through the dry heat. Of course, the Eagle Clan can give them camels in exchange for Priscilla.

If the characters killed the giant scorpion in the pit, they've become enemies of the scorpion cult. They will eventually track the characters down by magic. Assassins will be sent, then monstrous scorpions... and should they survive... their only hope is to take the fight to the enemy. Somewhere deep in the desert is the dreaded stronghold of the scorpion cult...