
Credits

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Dedicated to the memory of Vashti of the Flaming Tresses (Ruth Woodring) who dances in the light.

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What is QAGS?

QAGS (pronounced “kwags”) is the Quick Ass Game System, published by Hex Games. Unlike most role-playing games, QAGS doesn't attempt to simulate reality, but instead strives to capture the feel of fiction. It is a “cinematic” role-playing game that features the innovative candy-based mechanic called Yum Yums. You can purchase QAGS 2nd Edition and other fine Hex products or download the free Qik Start rules at www.hexgames.com.

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Introduction

It was the greatest city any of the crew had ever seen--larger than Basra, grander than Damascus, more exotic than African Mombasa or Calicut of the Malabar Coast.

"Baghdad!" Sindbad said, sweeping a hand to encompass the metropolis that lined both banks of the Tigris River, "Queen of All Cities, Jewel of the World! What marvels shall one not find in such a place?"

Most of the crew murmured their subdued assent, but Abu, Sindbad's friend and loyal sidekick, made a face and rubbed fingers and thumb together.

"What, you want money? You would sully this moment by bringing up crass silver and gold?"

Abu nodded and held out his hand.

"Patience, my mercenary little friend. You shall have your money--we all shall--as soon as I can find a buyer for the ivory and pearls we bring from the Zinj coast. And I know where to find such a man. Which of you will go with me now to the marketplace of Baghdad?"

When I first sat down to write this adventure, my goal was to weave a story that was pure Hollywood fantasy, with only a tip of the hat to history. To that end, I sat down for a week long orgy of *Sindbad, Thief of Baghdad*, and other Arabian Nights fantasy films. The film that spoke most loudly to me was Rock Hudson's *The Golden Blade*. It had everything: a fiery female lead, a dare-devil hero, wicked court politics, and an artifact of consummate power—a magic sword.

Despite my best intents, however, history had no intention of being left out of the fun.

The Sword of Kingship, around which this adventure revolves, is based on Dhu al-Fiqar, which is sometimes known by the Persian pronunciation of Zulfiqar. This sword originally belonged to the Prophet Muhammad, but eventually he gave it to his son-in-law, the Imam 'Ali.

Dhu al-Fiqar's origins are uncertain, and there are two stories for almost everything we do know about it. Given its powers, that is rather fitting. According to one legend, the sword was brought down from Heaven by the angel, Jibril, and put into Muhammad's hand. Hisham ibn al-Kalbi's *Book of Idols*, on the other hand, maintains that after 'Ali destroyed the Temple of Manat at al-Mushallal, he found two swords that had been sent there as tribute by the Ghassanid king of Syria, al-Harith ibn Abi Shamir. Muhammad gave both these swords to 'Ali, and one of these two, which bore the names Mikhdham and Rasub, was renamed Dhu al-Fiqar. Alternatively, Ibn al-Kalbi also records that the sword may have been discovered by 'Ali when he destroyed the Temple of Fals at al-Tayyi'.

'Ali used the sword either at the Battle of Uhud to strike down the Meccan champion, Talhah ibn Abi Talhah al-'Abdari, in a single blow, cleaving both his shield and his helmet, or else at the Battle of the Trench where he killed 'Amr ibn 'Abd Wudd in the same way. Muhammad, on seeing this, is said to have exclaimed "There is no hero but 'Ali and no sword except Dhu al-Fiqar."

Legends say that 'Ali's son, the Imam Husayn, had Dhu al-Fiqar with him when he was martyred at the Battle of Karbala, but after that its fate is not agreed upon. Some claim that it remained in the hands of the heirs of 'Ali and now resides with the Hidden Imam, and some maintain that it came into the hands of the Ottoman caliphs in Istanbul.

Speaking of caliphs, the best Arabian Nights stories (outside of Sindbad) have an appearance by the great caliph, Harun al-Rashid, who had several interesting challenges during his reign.

The first was that fact that he was reigning at all. Harun was only twenty-three in 786 C.E. when he came to the throne, and he was lucky to still be alive. His father, the Caliph al-Mahdi, had dictated the succession in his will. The crown would go first to his eldest son, Musa al-Hadi, and, after al-Hadi's death, to his second son, Harun al-Rashid. Talk about setting the stage for an earth-shattering case of sibling rivalry!

Sindbad and the Sword of Kingship

Al-Hadi had never been happy with this settlement and meant to disinherit Harun as quickly as possible in favor of Ja'far, his own son by his concubine Rahim. There were several obstacles to his plans, the most remarkable being his and Harun's mother, the powerful and subtle Khayruzan. Eventually al-Hadi began to consider extreme measures which, unfortunately for him, resulted in alienating Khayruzan. Just when it seemed that Harun (whom Khayruzan had always favored) was sure to be executed, al-Hadi conveniently (and suspiciously) died in the night. He had been caliph for a little over a year. As for the story that later circulated that Khayruzan had paid one of his slave girls to smother him with a pillow—well, what family doesn't have its ups and downs?

Ja'far could only have been a child when his father died (or was murdered, take your pick). That very night, slave-soldiers loyal to Harun came to the boy and, holding a sword to his throat, forced him to renounce any claim to the throne. It was only once this was accomplished that Harun was told of his brother's death. Harun was suspicious but was eventually persuaded to press his claim under the terms of al-Mahdi's will and assume the throne.

Harun later married Ja'far to his daughter, Hamudah. This young rival for the throne was last mentioned in al-Tabari's history in 787 C.E., and what ultimately happened to him is unknown.

Oddly this politically astute caliph turned right around and repeated the mistake his father had made. He specified that his son, Muhammad called al-Amin, should reign after him. After al-Amin's death, however, his brother, 'Abd Allah called al-Ma'mun, would reign, and finally, after both his brothers' deaths, the last brother, 'Abbas called al-Mu'tasim, would reign. The fratricidal civil war that followed Harun's death was as vicious as it was inevitable as al-Ma'mun raised an army in his province of Khorasan and marched on Baghdad.

But rebels marching out of Khorasan was nothing new. The first Abbasid caliph, al-Saffah, had led an army out of Khorasan to depose the Umayyad caliph, Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik. Nor was rebellion against those same Abbasids a new thing. After the murder of the renowned general, Abu Muslim al-Khurasani, by the caliph, al-Mansur, in 755 C.E., a Persian cleric, Sunpadh, rose up proclaiming a new religion that venerated Abu Muslim as the Mahdi and the pseudo-prophet, al-Muqanna' (who was martyred in 779 C.E.,) as his successor.

Initially, Sunpadh's adherents wore white to differentiate themselves from the Abbasids who wore black, but eventually they became "Wearers of Red". Under the leadership of Babak Khorramdin, from whom they got the name Khurramites, they rose in revolt against the Abbasid government several times.

The neo-Mazdakite Khurramites were dualists who believed in a principle of Light that opposed and was opposed by one of Darkness. They shed no blood except when in revolt, and they were very concerned with cleanliness and purification. Hospitality and kindness were highly regarded, and some of them practiced a form of free love.

The Abbasid caliphs were adamant about suppressing the Khurramites—not only because of their dualism and their belief in the appearance of a prophet after Muhammad but also because they had the gall to rise in rebellion against the Abbasids. The sword solved a host of issues, and brought me back to the concept of swords.

History, having given her sanction to all the necessary elements, then retired and let me get back to the fantasy of the game.

This game can be run as a one-shot, but actually it makes a much better campaign. If the GM runs a one-shot, then she should give Sindbad (one of the players has to be Sindbad) and his crew a minor magic item or two at the beginning of the game. The players will thank you for it, and it'll make the whole thing that much more fantastical.

The adventure consists of a series of encounters, scenes developing a story. I have never once had two parties play through the adventure the same way. Players always manage to sidestep what I thought was going to happen next in extremely (if not to say excessively) creative ways, so the GM must be just as flexible as she approaches these encounters. Bite the bullet and read through the entire adventure before letting players loose on the streets of Baghdad. Then when they stray, you will be prepared to support the story they are telling until they can be brought to the next scene. That is why the GM makes the big bucks, after all.

In the Marketplace

This section will introduce the party to the conflict.

Action begins with the party walking through the marketplace (the *sūq* if you want to give the game a more exotic air) of Baghdad. The streets, alleys, and squares are lined with shops, and carts and stalls jostle with the crowds for the remaining space. There is more than enough here to let the party get into their characters, or trouble. Probably trouble.

Suddenly, there is a great commotion at Crazy Abdul's Emporium of Curiosities and Wonders. Abdul, a hawk-nosed little man, comes rushing out into the streets waving his arms and screaming "Guards! Guards! I've been robbed! Where is that red-headed wench?! Guards! Find her! Arrest her!"

A woman can be seen running away from the shop. Even in the press and confusion of the crowd, her red cloak stands out like a sore thumb. A successful Brain roll lets players see that she has a rolled scroll in her left hand.

If this is not enough to interest the party, there is also an occasional glimpse of a well-turned ankle in a red boot.

With a blare of trumpets the guards, under the command of the dashing young Captain 'Amr, rush into the marketplace. Abdul screams and points in the direction the woman in the red cloak took. "She went that way, Captain! Stop her!" The guards take up the pursuit, and a madcap chase through the marketplace ensues.

Since the people of Baghdad, and especially the marketplace, have no love for the guards, as their carts are overturned and their stalls and shops disarrayed they join in the fray. Some attack the guards, some try to catch the woman in the red cloak, and some take advantage of the confusion to steal from one another.

The woman heads down an inconspicuous alley which proves to be a dead end. The party can catch her there, if they so choose. At some point in the capture, the hood of her cloak falls back revealing the unveiled face of an inhumanly beautiful red-headed woman.

"Oh, help me, good sirs!" she begs, pouring on the helpless charm. A resisted Nerve roll determines whether the party succumbs to her charms or not. If



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