

## Al-Qadim: Age of Serpents

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### Backgrounds and Station

This document contains a few unique backgrounds for use in a campaign set in Zakhara, the Land of Fate. They are meant to supplement the backgrounds in the PHB, and following the new backgrounds will be information on using the existing backgrounds in an Al-Qadim campaign as well. Every background listed here assumes that a character is from Zakhara and is familiar with the Law of the Loregiver, except for the *ajami*. An *ajami* is a person foreign to Zakhara and ignorant of her laws and faith. To create an *ajami* character, choose a normal background from the PHB and then follow the instructions listed under the *ajami* background at the beginning of this document.

This is a work in progress (WIP) document, meant to eventually be used in a campaign guide published for free on my website.

#### Age of Serpents

The *Age of Serpents* is my reimagining of the original Al-Qadim campaign setting (by Jeff Grubb and TSR). It changes major and minor elements of the Land of Fate and presents a new storyline. While this document was created with that in mind, the backgrounds here should easily fit into a normal 5th Edition Al-Qadim campaign.

#### Station

Each background listed below includes a **Station Ability Score**. This score acts just like a normal ability score, and thus is given a modifier. This score represents a character's place in the social structure of Zakhara.

Station is a very important element of Zakharan society, which is far more structured than the usual feudal systems found along the Sword Coast on Toril or the loose urban aristocratic structure of Greyhawk on Oerth. It represents your ultimate responsibility in society, and also your privileges. Everyone in Zakhara knows their station almost as an involuntary sense, and it motivates and drives many people. From the lowliest beggar to the highest Sultan, everyone is hyper aware of their place in society. The people of Zakhara also have a preternatural sensitivity when it comes to detecting someone's station.

**Usage** In play, the basic usage of your Station score is in social checks. When interacting with most NPCs, you include your Station modifier in the bonus or penalty of the roll. (*For example: If your station is 12, you would add +1 to any Charisma (persuasion) checks you make while interacting with a normal Zakharan NPC.*)

Normally, someone far above you in Station wouldn't give you the time of day unless they were uncommonly genial or particularly humble. This does not apply if they are attempting to hire you or engage in commerce. Conversely, if you interact with those far below your own station those that see it will think you at best extremely polite and humble or at worst as someone seeking to ignore the foundations of Zakharan society.

Those of lower stations are expected to present themselves to those of higher stations first, and are expected to give deference to them and their decisions. As is the case in Zakharan society, however, those of higher station who are interacting with those of lower station must show humility and politeness or risk seeming prideful and vain.

**Improving Station** Station is not static in Zakhara, and it drives many to attempt to gain power and glory to improve their standing in society. Only the upper echelons of Station are out of reach for those with enough drive, as people of those stations are nobles and rulers.

There are three basic ways for a Player Character to improve their station:

1. **Experience** - Your station can never be lower than your character level. If your character level should increase above your station, then your station is improved to match it. As you make your way in Zakhara and survive the dangers and intrigues, your skill and talent improve your standing in Zakharan society.
2. **Wealth** - Showing signs of disposable income is a way to improve your station rapidly, though gains of this sort can be temporary. If your character spends money on things that they do not need, either for

## Al-Qadim: Age of Serpents – Backgrounds and Station

themselves or others, then for every 1,000 gold pieces they spend they gain a point of temporary station. This can be on luxuries, trade goods, or in pure charity. Buying expensive silks to wear, engaging in large scale commerce, or presenting great gifts of incense or animals to Sultans and Sheiks are ways to do this as well. Points of station gained in this manner last for up to thirty days for each point gained at once. Thus if you spent 3,000 gold pieces, you would gain 3 points of station, and subtract 1 from your score every thirty days until you reach your normal station again.

- 3. Quest Awards** - The Dungeon Master can at any time grant points of station as they see fit. When you perform particularly daring feats or make an impression on important or key figures in Zakhara society, your station may rise above your background.

**Losing Station** Just as those with the drive to do so can increase their social stature in Zakhara, they might also risk losing it. Losing station can be deceptively easy in the Land of Fate, and those who seek too far above their own heads might find themselves spiraling down into the bottom of society.

There are four basic ways for a Player Character to lose station:

- 1. Crime** - Committing a crime (and getting caught) is the quickest way to lose station in Zakhara. Minor crimes, like petty theft or assault, might lose you 1-2 points of station. A major crime, however, like murder or arson could drop your station permanently to 1, though it cannot go lower than your level (and might get you sold into the

slave markets depending on where you were caught).

- 2. Honor** - Acts that are not illegal but still considered dishonorable might also lose you station. Disrespecting those of a higher station is a common way to lose station, as is abusing those of a lower station than you. Openly defying the gods can also lose you station, as the Zakharan people are very faithful. Other acts like adultery, excessive drunkenness, and the like are other examples.
- 3. Poverty** - In Zakhara, not being able to make your own way in the world is a great detriment. Being penniless, even temporarily, gives you a temporary station of 1, even if your level is higher than 1. As soon as you gain some means your station is repaired.
- 4. Other** - The Dungeon Master may at any time take away points of station in accordance with things that take place in the course of a campaign. A common one is intrigue -an antagonistic person or group spreading bad rumors about the PC or party. Another is breaking certain traditions, like inciting an anti-slavery movement in a place with a robust slave market.

**Masking your Station** It is possible to try and hide your station, though it can be difficult. Because station is such an integral part of society in Zakhara, unless you are actively trying to hide your station it is obvious to anyone that studies your body language and general behavior. You may attempt to hide your station in a social interaction situation with an opposed ability score roll; your Charisma (deception) against their Wisdom (insight). If using a disguise kit or wearing appropriate garb (expensive silks for higher stations, pauper's rags for lower) you gain advantage on this roll.

**Station in the Wilderness** In the wilds among the deserts, mountains, jungles, and oceans your

station will mean little. Genies do not care about station, nor do bandits or pirates or monsters. Those outside of Zakharan society are not affected by your Station modifier in social interactions. Only those in the cities and among the great nomad tribes will care about your position in the tapestry of fate.

## New Backgrounds

### Ajami

Zakharan society is a rich tapestry of cultures, moral codes, castes, and traditions. To someone not born among the desert kingdoms or on the pearl-white coasts, it may seem a strange and exotic place. A foreigner to the land, though treated with the politeness that the Law demands, are not people that are generally trusted. Those ignorant of the Law of the Loregiver are seen as unenlightened and savage, and they will find themselves having a difficult time interfacing with Zakharan society as a whole.

Those strangers that find themselves in the Land of Fate do so usually because of an extraordinary circumstance. Sometimes a wayward shipwreck washes ashore with someone lucky to be alive, other times inexplicable magic will throw someone among the sands. When they do arrive, they find a land full of customs that are not their own; a place of magic and passion as well as deep piety and art -though also a place that has a hard time accepting them.

**Station: 1 (-5 modifier)** Ajami begin at the very bottom of Zakharan society, regarded as unenlightened and savage. Only those ajami with the will to take hold of their fate and gain power and glory will find themselves rising in station among the desert peoples.

To create an ajami character, first choose a background normally from the PHB or other sources your DM will allow. After doing so, roll on or choose from the following table to determine how your character came to be on the Zakharan continent. You may also discuss with your DM to decide on an appropriate scenario if none of these fit.

#### d6 Event

- 1 A genie or sorcerer summoned you here for some purpose, leaving you wandering alone in the desert.
- 2 A ship you were traveling on was caught in a wild storm, and you awoke among wreckage on a desert beach half a world away.
- 3 You were captured as a traveler in foreign land and sold into slavery, finally ending up in Zakhara where you were inexplicably freed or escaped.
- 4 You were a prisoner, and under the dark of night you were transported without explanation to Zakhara by ship and left, free, on the dock of one of its great cities.
- 5 You were a member of a mercenary company hired by one of the great cities to protect against a nomad raid. Afterwards you decided to stay and explore.
- 6 You are a far traveler, and after many month of journeying by caravan you ended up in Zakhara.

### Al-Badia Nomad

When most people think of a Zakharan, they think of people in crowded streets behind great walls. The grand cities of the Land of Fate seem like islands amid a harsh desert ocean, the only pockets of civilization in an arid empty land. This isn't entirely true.

Among the sand dunes of Zakhara are the nomads, called the Al-Badia. Traveling in tribes great and small, these nomads are both fierce riding raiders and gentle shepherds. Living in light tents they travel on camels between oases and water holes, controlling vast stretches of territory. They live tough existences, seeming to scratch out what life they can in the harsh desert environment. However, to be among them one would realize they do more than survive. They flourish. And they believe themselves the true sons and daughters of the Land of Fate.

These nomads are impossible to count. Some in the cities believe they are few and on the decline, though others (with some anxiety) believe that they outnumber the city folk (called Al-Hadhar) more than two to one. Because of their constant movements and proficiency in hiding among the dunes, no one has ever gotten a good count of even a single tribe.

## Al-Qadim: Age of Serpents – Backgrounds and Station

They trade sometimes with the cities, but they look upon the water-fat people of the city with some exasperation and even disdain. They remind any who listen that the first Caliph, and the Loregiver herself who left the tablets of the Law in the desert for him to find, were of the noble nomad people. To them any who avoid the desert and the dangers it contains aren't really living up to the spirit of the Law she left behind.

A person of these people is acclimated to desert life, has lived most of their life in the saddle, and is good with animals. They have a strong sense of honor, which seems paradoxical to their love of raiding other tribes as well as villages. Stealing animals and loot does not seem to be dishonorable to many Al-Badia nomads, and to die in battle doing so is seen as a noble death.

**Station: 10 (+0)** While station still matters to the Al-Badia, honor is far more important.

**Skill Proficiencies:** Animal Handling, Survival

**Tool Proficiencies:** One type of musical instrument or artisan tool, Vehicles (Land)

**Equipment:** A staff, a rough spun traveling blanket, a *jambiya* with a common sheathe, a set of Al-Badia commoner clothing, and a belt pouch with 5 gp.

### Feature: Desert Wanderer

You are at home in the harsh desert of your homeland, and where others see shifting dunes and endless sand you are able to recognize landmarks and keep your sense of direction while in the desert. In addition, you are able to locate any source of water, like an oasis or a water hole, within a five mile radius using a variety of methods which might seem like superstition to others.

### Suggested Characteristics

Al-Badia are proud as a rule with few exceptions, and they have good reason to be. Their group is of the utmost importance, and many would easily give their lives for the health of their tribe. Sometimes they have a different sense of propriety than more civilized folk, and unprotected resources are seen as theirs for the taking.

### d8 Personality Trait

- 1 I find it hard to stay in one place for too long.
- 2 I am very protective of what little I own.
- 3 I do not get lonely, and have spent many days in the desert alone.
- 4 I delight in telling the stories and myths of my tribe.
- 5 I am curious of the cities and the many different peoples that live in them.
- 6 I have a deep affection for herd animals and prefer their company.
- 7 I have no trust in those who cannot take care of themselves.
- 8 Life in the desert can be dangerous -so I must be more dangerous.

### d6 Ideal

- 1 **Nature.** The desert holds both life and death, and we must be prepared for both. (Chaotic)
- 2 **Greater Good.** We must be willing to sacrifice ourselves so that the tribe might live on. (Good)
- 3 **Honor.** My honor is the stone pillar upon which I stand among the shifting sands. (Law)
- 4 **Power.** We can only survive by conquering and taking what we need. (Evil)
- 5 **Peace.** Always we must strive to live another day. (Neutral)
- 6 **Glory.** Battle is the forge in which we temper ourselves. (Any)

### d6 Bond

- 1 My companions are my tribe, and all I do is for the good of the tribe.
- 2 Children are precious to me, for it is they that ensure our survival.
- 3 I have made a marriage pact, and when I earn glory I will return to honor it.
- 4 My sense of justice is unyielding, and I cannot abide the civilized world's so called pragmatism.
- 5 My *jambiya* has been in my family since the time of the first Caliph.
- 6 I seek a great treasure of power to bring back to my weakened tribe.

d6	Flaw
1	I have no compunctions about taking what doesn't belong to me. If you can't protect it, you don't deserve it.
2	Life in the desert is short and brutal, so I do not fear death.
3	I only follow those laws that are convenient for me.
4	Strangers are just another desert I must keep an eye on.
5	Any slight on my honor must be met with a furious challenge.
6	My harsh life has left me with deep anxiety instead of true bravery.

### Barber

On the crowded streets of the great cities of Zakhara, merchants and callers ply their trade under the bright sun of morning. Here and there, among the crowd like islands in a sea, the barbers perform their own trade; a mixture of grooming and shaving services as well as medicinal -but most importantly as storytellers and sources of information and gossip.

Barbers are an important pillar of common Zakharan communities. Their ministrations are useful for a people that are obsessed with cleanliness and appearances, and they serve as a pulse for the mood of the city itself. Proficient at gathering and dispensing information, there are many tales that began with a smirking barber passing along information to a hero getting their hair groomed.

They perform their tasks, both grooming and healing, with flamboyant showmanship; some even go as far as juggling their razors. Their raucous calling is one part of the canvas of sound that is a Zakharan bazaar, and to not hear it on a hot day of shopping the market would be a strange thing indeed.

**Station: 10 (+0 modifier)** A barber is a product of the common middle classes.

**Skill Proficiencies:** Medicine, Performance or Persuasion

**Tool Proficiencies:** Barber's Tools, Healer's Kit

**Equipment:** a set of barber's tools, a healer's kit, a set of barber's clothing, and a belt pouch containing 15 gp.

### Feature: Service with a Smile

As a barber, you can ply your trade pretty much anywhere there is a street with people traveling on it. In doing so, you not only can make a living but also gain insight on the local goings on as well as rumors and gossip. While in a large city, you may perform grooming and medicinal services on a busy market street. Doing so allows you to make enough to feed yourself and rent a cheap room, and it provides you with local news and other information that a commoner would have heard.

### Suggested Characteristics

People that become barbers are generally social and have a flair for performance. They also tend to gravitate towards being care-givers, enjoying the idea of grooming others and seeing to their needs. They tend to have a knack for conversation and a quick wit. Their flaws might be a penchant for exaggeration, a small habit for petty theft, or talking a little too much.

d8	Personality Trait
1	I am a genial and soft-hearted person, and enjoy taking care of others.
2	I delight in the telling of a story.
3	I prefer to be the center of attention.
4	I am quick to make friends and enjoy meeting new people.
5	I tend to exaggerate everything a little bit.
6	I enjoy creature comforts; a soft cushion, a cup of coffee, and relaxed conversation.
7	I prefer to let others speak and let myself listen.
8	I enjoy speaking in such a way as to sound complimentary while being insulting.

## Al-Qadim: Age of Serpents – Backgrounds and Station

d6	Ideal
1	<b>Tradition.</b> We must maintain the traditions that make us who we are as a people. (Lawful)
2	<b>Joy.</b> The most important thing is to put a smile on people's faces. (Good)
3	<b>Freedom.</b> Each person must create their own way in life, and none should stand in the way of that.
4	<b>Profit.</b> Money and power is the end to all means. (Evil)
5	<b>People.</b> I need only the hustle and bustle of the city market to be happy. (Neutral)
6	<b>Tales.</b> I have a part to play in some tale yet unwritten. (Any)

d6	Bond
1	I have an antique set of razors that are worth more to me than gold.
2	The orphans and urchins of my city are like to me a family.
3	I was given a secret by a customer of noble station.
4	I am very pious and defer to imams in all things.
5	I have a burning dislike of disease and sickness and wish to cleanse it where I can.
6	Grooming and appearance are of grave importance to me.

d6	Flaw
1	I absolutely must pass along any information I gain to someone else, no matter who it is.
2	I have a lover who is far above my station.
3	I love the sound of my own voice.
4	I have trouble not pocketing loose items when no is watching me.
5	My social exterior is a mask I use to cover my cynicism.
6	Sometimes a lie is simply easier... or more entertaining.

### Mamluk

Slavery is a social structure in Zakhara society because of the Law of the Loregiver. In the Law, those who commit grave sins like murder or blasphemy are punished by giving their lives in

service to those they have wronged. From this part of the Law, and an endless amount of expounding and reimagining of the meaning, sprang forth an entire industry for better or worse.

Slaves do not lack station in Zakhara, and strict laws prevent improper handling and give them a somewhat narrow set of rights. Still though, they are property, and are not allowed to own weapons or have any agency. One type of slave, however, is different. A separate caste of warrior slave called a mamluk.

A mamluk is a slave trained from a young age in arms, war, tactics, civil service, government, and infrastructure. Their lives aren't given to a slave owner but rather into the service of the caliphate itself. They are organized like a military with different divisions and tasks and form part of the backbone of Zakhara civilization itself. They might be compared to a knightly caste in other kingdoms.

Though a slave, a mamluk of sufficient rank find themselves with many of the same liberties as free people. They are given tattoos, generally on the face, to mark them but they tend to wear them with pride instead of shame. Every city has at least a few mamluks in residence, performing various military or civil functions. There are even some instances of mamluks ruling cities in the name of the caliphate, often after having couped a disloyal or blasphemous sultan.

The central tenet that a mamluk lives by, and which is instilled in them at a very young age, is called *furusiyya*, a medina word that has connotations of chivalry as well as service to the caliphate. Because of this, free people often hold the mamluks in high regard for their honor and a near ironclad loyalty to the kingdom. *As loyal as a mamluk* is a common expression to denote someone of uncommon loyalty.

There are multiple mamluk organizations or societies in Zakhara, and a few even see themselves as rivals. Skirmishes between such forces are not unknown. Mamluk organizations tend to be based in single cities for which they work and serve, though some larger organizations cover multiple cities. Mamluk organizations also often oversee slave trade in the cities in which they are present, in order to make sure that the Law is being followed. They also recruit in this way, by selecting young slaves with talent and buying them to induct in their order.

## Al-Qadim: Age of Serpents – Backgrounds and Station

Ultimately, though they can rise to even rule cities, a mamluk belongs to the kingdom. If the caliphate calls for their life, they are expected to give it unconditionally. If a superior gives them an order, to not do so could mean death. This is a life unchosen and permanent and no matter how glorious, a mamluk is still a slave.

**Station: 14 (+2 modifier)** A mamluk represents the power of the state and the wisdom of the Law.

**Skill Proficiencies:** Athletics, and (choose one: History, Investigation, or Survival)

**Tool Proficiencies:** One martial melee weapon of your choice or one set of artisan's tool.

**Equipment:** a jambiya with a common sheath, a map of your home city, a set of al-badian commoner's clothes, and a belt pouch with 5 gp

### Role

A mamluk organization has many tasks to perform beyond simple soldiering. If you wish, roll on or choose from the following table to determine your place in the mamluk organization if your character did something more than serve as a soldier:

d6	Role
1	Honor Guard - You were tasked with guarding important people or places with your life.
2	Slave Law - You were tasked with ensuring slave traders follow the law, and in tracking down and breaking up illegal slave trading.
3	Civic - You were tasked with helping in the running and operation of a city, helping with the creation of census records and tax schemes.
4	Infrastructure - You were tasked with helping with the building and expansion of city holdings, often for defense (walls, fortresses, bridges, etc.)
5	Officer - You were tasked with leading other mamluks and soldiers into battle.
6	Spy - You were tasked with collecting information discreetly for the benefit of your order.

### Feature: Esprit de Corps

As a mamluk, you can seek shelter and succor within large cities for yourself and your

companions from brother and sister mamluks. If a mamluk organization is present that is not an active rival towards your organization, they will house and feed you and your companions for three days in accordance with the salt bond. Alternatively, nobles and wealthy merchants might provide you with shelter in exchange for the honor of housing one of the Caliphate's noble warriors.

### Suggested Characteristics

A mamluk is often defined by their loyalty to their order, their ruler, and their companions. In general they do not regret their position as a warrior-slave, but often find fulfillment from service due to a lifetime of strict obedience training. Some, however, might find themselves chafe under that yoke when they experience what life has to offer.

#### d8 Personality Trait

- 1 I follow orders without question.
- 2 The thought of battle gives me joy.
- 3 I am loyal to those I work with.
- 4 I talk little, action is louder than words.
- 5 I speak plainly, even to superiors.
- 6 I try to approach every situation tactically.
- 7 In stressful situations I try to take charge.
- 8 I suffer no insult to my lord or my order.

#### d6 Ideal

- 1 **Loyalty.** Service to the law and the people is what I am. (Lawful)
- 2 **Greater Good.** My life is given to those who need help most. (Good)
- 3 **Freedom.** I must use my position to guarantee the liberty of others. (Chaotic)
- 4 **Power.** Even a slave may one day be a ruler. (Evil)
- 5 **People.** Working with likeminded people is fulfilling enough for me. (Neutral)
- 6 **Caliphate.** Nothing else matters beyond serving my lord. (Any)

<b>d6 Bond</b>	
1	My companions are the family I never had.
2	When in danger, I must ensure everyone is safe before I see to my own hide.
3	My honor is my life.
4	I must free myself from these bonds, a slave is a slave.
5	My weapons and armor must always be perfect fighting shape.
6	I have a maternal/paternal instinct for anyone younger than myself.

<b>d6 Flaw</b>	
1	My honorable position has instilled within me a sense of arrogance.
2	I get angry very easily.
3	I am content and have little ambition to rise in station.
4	I cannot objectively look at a situation, everything is personal.
5	I am cruel in combat.
6	I am obedient even if it means doing something I will regret.

### Slave

Only a few slaves in Zakhara are lucky enough to enter into one of the Mamluk orders. Most are real and true slaves to fickle masters, lacking any agency and having only a few rights of their own. The Law of the Loregiver says that the punishment for very serious crimes must be servitude to the affected party, but this basic tenet has been extrapolated on and iterated into a huge slave trade common in most cities of Zakhara. Most of these slaves aren't criminals at all, but are rather people captured during war against the barbarian people of the steppes to the east of Zakhara or nomadic desert raiders. To most people, someone who would war with the Caliphate is deserving of the law's harshest punishment. Unfortunately this isn't always just enemy soldiers -children and the old, captured during raids into enemy territory, are just as likely to be handed over to slavers for money.

A slave's life varies. Rich and kind masters might treat their slaves as servants, taking great care of them. However, cruel masters can easily make a slave's life hell; though the law

forbids them from cruelty, it is hard to prove when cruelty occurs. Ultimately though a Zakharan slave has some protection in the law, their lot is not a good one, and the slave industry in Zakhara is full of corruption and misdeed.

**Station: 4 (-4)** A slave, once freed, is lower than a commoner in Zakharan society.

**Skill Proficiencies:** Athletics, Survival

**Tool Proficiencies:** One type of artisan's tools

**Languages:** One of your choice

**Equipment:** A tattoo marking your former master's name, a set of artisan's tools (your choice), ragged clothing, and a small pouch on a leather thong containing 5 gp

### Fate of Freedom

Though most of your life was spent as a slave, somehow you have been freed. Roll on the table below, or choose one. Alternatively you can work with your DM to come up with an appropriate event that caused you to be free.

<b>d6 Event</b>	
1	Your master set you free, either because they were kind or because it was more convenient to do so.
2	You escaped, fleeing from your master's house deep at night. Even now they seek you, and the law is on their side.
3	An imam bought your freedom for you, abhorring the slave trade as against the spirit of the law.
4	You killed your master and now flee from retribution.
5	Your master and you were captured by Al-Badia raiders while on the road. The nomads freed you and took your master. You do not know what happened to her/him.
6	Your master was assassinated by a Holy Slayer, and you were freed rather than sold back to the slavers.

### Feature: Safe Houses

In many cities exist safe houses; places whose owners are sympathetic to the plight of runaway slaves. Even if you were freed legally, you can still seek shelter at these places. They will provide you and your companions with meager food, water, and shelter for three days, as dictated

by the bond of salt. While in the safe house, any that might be seeking you will have a much more difficult time finding you.

**Suggested Characteristic**

No slave is unaffected by the experience. Having no agency or self-ownership can cause a person to become very protective of their newfound freedom, and to be suspicious of authority and those in positions of power. Some use the experience to motivate good in the world, though others become bitter and destructive. Ultimately no slave wants to return to that former life of servitude.

**d8 Personality Traits**

- 1 I am passionate about life and want to live it to its fullest.
- 2 I am suspicious of authority and those in power.
- 3 I am contemplative and like to think situations through before acting.
- 4 I am kind and prefer to mediate than argue.
- 5 I am very talkative, and get nervous when things are quiet.
- 6 I work as hard as I can when I do anything for myself or my friends.
- 7 Money has no hold on me, and I can give or take it with no thought.
- 8 I am weary of the world far before my time.

**d6 Ideal**

- 1 **Freedom.** Liberty is my most precious possession, and I will never let it go again. (Chaotic)
- 2 **Abolition.** Slavery is a taint on society, and must be ended. (Good)
- 3 **Law.** We must respect the law, even if it hurts us. (Law)
- 4 **Power.** One day I will be the master. (Evil)
- 5 **Life.** The time we have is precious. (Neutral)
- 6 **People.** I now have the power to serve who I wish, for whatever reason I choose. (Any)

**d6 Bond**

- 1 I seek my family, who I have not seen in since I was enslaved.
- 2 The other slaves I was indentured with are

- very important to me.
- 3 I have vowed to work towards abolition for those still under the yoke.
- 4 The natural world was my only solace as a slave, and even now it gives me comfort.
- 5 I wish to experience the freedom of sailing upon the open sea.
- 6 I hope to someday own land of my own.

**d6 Flaw**

- 1 To say I have trust issues is an understatement.
- 2 I have developed a nasty anger problem and lash out randomly.
- 3 I often find solace in intoxicants.
- 4 I secretly feel that those who haven't been able to flee their masters deserve to be slaves.
- 5 I resent having to take orders from anyone.
- 6 I have developed an inferiority complex.

**Variant Slave: Eunuch**

Some male slaves, especially those in bondage from a very young age, are physically castrated and given strict training in the affairs of the court. This barbaric practice's purpose is to instill a strong sense of service in the slave's mind. Unaffected, allegedly, by baser desires they are trusted above all other slaves. The slaves that physically touch high nobles or royalty, whether for bathing, grooming, or helping dress, are most commonly eunuchs. They are also used as guards in women's quarters or all female harems.

Because of their close proximity with the nobility it is not uncommon for an especially useful or loyal eunuch to gain much prestige. There are good portion of these eunuchs who end up as advisors, scholars, and sages for royal courts. When a eunuch has proven such loyalty or usefulness they are not considered a slave but rather a useful functionary within the court, able to buy property and function in some ways as a member of the noble class. (Eunuchs should use the variant feature listed below.)

**Variant Feature: Trusted Confidant**

If your character has the variant slave: eunuch background, you may select this background feature instead of Safe Houses.

You have risen above your servitude due to your skill and/or loyalty to the court in which you serve. People of the upper classes, upon learning that you are a eunuch, are more apt to trust you and consider you a necessary part of the social order. You can easily find food and shelter among a sheik or sultan or other noble, though not for your companions.

Your station is 12 (+1).

**Normal Backgrounds**

The following backgrounds are those found in the PHB. Additional information and the occasional tweak are provided to show how they fit into Al-Qadim. A Station score is also provided for each one.

**Acolyte (Imam)**

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Faith is an integral part of Zakharan civilization, both in the cities and among the nomad tribes. The core precepts that the law is based on are seen as spiritual truths, passed down by Fate herself to her messenger, the Loregiver. An acolyte in Zakhara would be both well respected and well learned. Imam is the word most often used to describe a full time priest.

**Station: 14 (+2)** Those who have had priestly training are some of the most well respected people in the Land of Fate.

**Charlatan**

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Though liars are often punished more severely in Zakhara than other places, there are certain tales told of paupers and sultans who take the guise of the other -tricking everyone from the common people on the street to great and powerful genies. Those who practice the arts of criminal trickery best keep it to themselves, however. In the more conservative cities trying to hide your position in society could lead to losing more than just your dignity.

**Station: 6 (-3)** Criminals and charlatans are not looked upon kindly in the Land of Fate, though if the tales are any indication they might find themselves rising high into the annals of history.

**Criminal**

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Though seen as worse than beggars, criminals are common element on the crowded streets of Zakharan cities. Cutpurses to thief acrobats prowl the night, hoping to finally get that one haul that will set them for life. They are also curiously a common element in tales as heroes, performing impossible tasks like stealing a jewel from a genie's belt or taking an egg right from under a sleeping Roc. It is best you avoid getting caught if you are a thief in Zakhara, however - punishments can be harsh, and you might find yourself on the slavers block.

**Station: 6 (-3)** Criminals and charlatans are not looked upon kindly in the Land of Fate, though if the tales are any indication they might find themselves rising high into the annals of history.

**Entertainer (Rawan)**

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Music and poetry are high arts in Zakhara, and the entertainer artist is well respected in the rich manses and caravanserai of merchants and nobles. Street performers are also common, performing daring feats of showmanship for copper coins. Entertaining musicians are often called *rawan* in Zakhara.

**Station: 12 (+1)** Artists are seen as a public good in Zakhara.

**New Instruments**

The following instruments are commonly found in Zakhara, and a skilled rawan would commonly know how to play one or more of them. You may choose one of these as your musical instrument choice instead of those provided in the PHB.

**Doumbek** - A roughly goblet shaped drum with a wide top and narrow bottom made of stretched leather over a wood or polished bone base. A favorite among nomads -though sees some play in large city celebrations.

**Oud** - This is a lute like instrument with anywhere from 10 to 15 strings. It is the preferred instrument of traveling rawans for its great versatility, it's long and storied history, and because it allows one to talk or sing while playing it. It can be tuned to have a high and right pitch, or a loose and low one.

**Harp** - A very ancient instrument, it doesn't see common use but is popular among historians and poets.

**Rebab** - This is a skinny stringed instrument with a long neck and a small bowl shaped body with a short spike on the bottom that is placed on the floor while playing it sitting or on a table surface if played upright. It is played with a curved bow made of camel hair. It often only has two to three strings.

**Mizwa** - This is a set of two reed pipes connected a bag, similar to bagpipes. It produces a pleasant trill sound, unlike bagpipes. It is a folk instrument, seen more in use among commoners.

**Zill** - These are small "finger" cymbals, usually played while performing a dance.

**Ney** - This is a long blown-end flute that has been in use for thousands of years, and is by far the most commonly used wind instrument in Zakhara. It is highly versatile, producing sounds everywhere from a buzzing drone to a soft whispering hiss.

**Zither** - This is a lap harp, and is the most complicated instrument in Zakhara. It has a lot of strings, and is played with a variety of plucking techniques. A common performance technique involves tuning as you play to produce dynamic sound in a single pluck.

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## Folk Hero

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The common folk of Zakhara are often at the mercy of the dangers of the desert, raiders, and sometimes their own aristocrats. Though shaking up the social order is even more frowned upon than other lands, those who champion the causes of the common person often find themselves well respected. Many heroes of the old tales have humble beginnings, and many commoners are willing to help those who might have a higher destiny if it means having a small part in the story. Even some of the most well-known figures in Zakharan history are thought to have come from humble beginnings, such as the Loregiver and the first Caliph.

**Station: 8 (-1)** Folk heroes are often of very humble birth.

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## Guild Artisan

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One bedrock part of Zakharan culture is trade. Because of the lack of resources within the desert, trade and travel became an institutionalized necessity of survival. It is ingrained in the social order, and no purchase is made without the expectation of bartering. Those who are at the core of trade are of course the artisans and craftsmen, the leaders of the middle classes. Even among the nobility taking up certain high trades is common.

Guilds in Zakhara are an important power structure within the cities, and every vocation will usually have one. The most common guild found is simply a guild of traders; they often run caravanserais (a type of roadside inn that caters to caravan travelers and merchants) on the outskirts of cities as well as private docks and harbors to circumvent taxes.

**Station: 12 (+1)** Artisans and merchants are at the top of the middle class.

**New Artisan Tool Proficiencies:** barber's supplies, coffee maker's kit, prospector's supplies, sculpting tools

### Hermit (Mystic)

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A common trope in Zakhara literature and poetry is that of the hermit mystic; the holy man (or *imam*) that lives in seclusion in the wilds among nature and meditates, prays, or ponders the nature of divinity and existence. Such mystics are actually the precursors to the city imams that run the mosques and temples; the Loregiver herself was one such desert mystic.

Among the desert tribes such people are respected and even sometimes feared; they will often travel to give these mystics food and water in hopes of appeasing the gods or even Fate herself. Rulers of larger tribes will invite mystics to live among their family and to give them advice on everyday spiritual matters.

Mystics often run way shrines or protect holy natural places, such as the famous Temple of Many Gods (a huge cathedral like cavern with hundreds of shrines to all manner of deity). They keep the place clean of human trash, sweeping and making sure they remain in respectful shape.

**Station: 12 (+1)** Hermit mystics are regarded with respect because of their closeness with the Land of Fate.

### Noble

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The aristocracy of Zakhara is a cumbersome beast. Every large city has an absolute ruler often called a Sultan or Sultana that has the prestige of a king or queen in other lands, and who answer only to the supreme Caliph in Huzuz, who is akin to an emperor. The desert nomad tribes have their own lesser kings, called Sheiks, who bow to no one except the Caliph.

Beneath the Caliph and the various Sultans and Sheiks is a complicated hierarchy of lesser noble families. Station is paramount in Zakhara society, so these nobles guard their family honor viciously. These nobles might be city nobles with various titles or they may be rulers of smaller towns, villages, or estates (though these are rarer in Zakhara than other places).

A noble in Zakhara is (or should) be raised in the knowledge that their power and position is a privilege afforded to them by the gods to help maintain the power and peace of the Land of Fate.

**Titles** Noble titles in Zakhara are many, and they sometimes contradict each other or mean different things depending on the region. The following is a very basic list that gives some idea of proper title names.

**Caliph (sometimes Padishah)** -

Ultimate overlord and authority in Zakhara, similar to an Emperor

**Sultan (m)/ Sultana (f) (sometimes Shah)** - The ruler of a city-state or large city, answerable only to the Caliph

**Sheik** - Similar in position to Sultan, sheiks are rulers of large and older nomadic tribes

**Emir** - Denotes a military commander of nomadic blood, sometimes Sultans and Sheiks of a military aspect will use Emir instead.

**Nawab (m)/Begum (f)** - These are a general title for powerful nobles, often members of royal bloodlines that aren't in line to the throne.

**Baig/Begzada** - A title for the common or lower nobility.

This list might not be relevant in some parts of Zakhara, and sometimes the titles a ruler adopts are specific to the region. For example, Mamluk rulers almost always use the honorific Emir.

**Station: 16 (+3)** Nobles are the topmost portion of the station structure, with the Caliph on the very top. PC nobles, however, aren't at the very top.

### Outlander

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On the fringes of Zakhara exist barriers that make it hard to invade; oceans, seas, and mountains. The lands beyond these immediate borders are home to hardy folk that the Zakhara call barbarians. Especially the mountains to the east, and the steppes beyond, are home to sturdy outdoors people who are at home in the wilds. These folk will often raid into the fringes of the Land of Fate for goods and food, and the soldiers of border settlements often clash with them. These would be outlanders, strangers in Zakhara - and also the most common victims of Zakhara slavery.

## Al-Qadim: Age of Serpents – Backgrounds and Station

**Station: 1 (-5)** As savages foreign to the enlightened lands, Outlanders start at the very bottom with the rest of the ajami.

### Sage

In Zakhara, sages and scholars are among the most highly respected people in the cities. Mathematics, astronomy, and poetry are considered the highest forms of academia, though many disciplines and arts are supported by noble patrons and merchants alike. Every court employs a multitude of scholars, and every palace has within it a grand library always in search of research and knowledge.

**Station: 12 (+1)** Scholars are well respected in Zakhara, and even those of low birth strive to gain an education.

### Specialty

For a sage of Zakhara, you may use the following table to determine your scholarly training. Roll a d12 or choose from the options in the table below.

d12	Specialty	d12	Specialty
1	Alchemist	7	Poetry and Literature Researcher
2	Astronomer	8	Professor
3	Discredited Academic	9	Mathematician
4	Engineer	10	Medicine
5	Librarian	11	Scribe
6	Philosopher	12	Wizard's Apprentice

### Sailor (Corsair)

Zakhara is surrounded on three sides by great seas and oceans, and thousands of islands dot the azure blue waters of this land. Sailors and corsairs are the nomads of the water, sailing on the dhows that are unique to this place.

Tales abound of adventuring sailors, especially in the unexplored islands of the Crowded Seas, interacting with genies and demons of the water, or parleying with the great sea giants that hunt the whales and sharks of the deep.

Trade would not be possible for many places without sailors brave enough to sail the seas, and the busiest trading routes sea a constant stream of barges crossing the water; sometimes enough to jump deck to deck in some places.

Pirates, too, are a constant danger for those that sail the waters. Attacking in small but very fast ships, usually three and four at a time, they surround large merchant dhows like sharks and attack with cutlasses and tiger claws.

**Station: 10 (+0)** Sailors are a very common element in Zakhara.

### Soldier

Every city in Zakhara retains a standing military force, often supplemented with elite mamluk troops. These are to protect from desert raiders, foreign barbarians across the mountains or seas, and the occasional monstrous uprising. Also, however, they are there to ensure that other cities aren't tempted to engage in a skirmish to gain some easy booty.

Joining the military is one of the easiest ways to gain honor and station in Zakhara. There are more than a few great Emirs in history that came from common stock but ascended the ranks as a military commander. When not patrolling or fighting, soldiers often help in public works such as building or tearing down structures as well as preparing the city for severe weather.

**Station: 12 (+1)** Those in the military are treated with a measure of respect.

### Urchin (Beggar)

Especially in the cities of the pearl and those in the heart of Zakhara, poverty is constant state of affairs for many Zakharan. While rich merchants and nobles feast behind white walls, the rest of the city streets are teeming with the downtrodden. Beggars are almost a subculture in of themselves, creating networks of urchins who spread information and warnings to each other.

The tales of Zakhara often feature beggars in heroic roles, however -usually in the form of the Beggar Thief, a witty and skilled beggar who is often underestimated by those above them. In reality, however, those that live in

## Al-Qadim: Age of Serpents – Backgrounds and Station

the street are nearly as looked down upon as foreign ajami.

**Station: 2 (-4)** Beggars and urchins are considered among the lowest of the low in Zakhara.