

Halak-Sha's Lair

Halak-Sha is the extremely powerful **Lamia** that controls much that happens across the whole Bakhaarka Tableland area, including the Oasis in which her Lair is situated. Lamias in myth and legend can take various forms, including fully Human, and although commonly beautiful, their lower halves are frequently considered bestial in some way - typically having a great serpent's body and tail, or sometimes a four-legged leonine body in a lion-centaur shape, with a Human upper body, head and arms. They are usually described as living in wasteland ruins, often in deserts, in association with various inimical creatures, such as jackals, wolves, vultures, owls, serpents, ghosts and similar unpleasantries. Able to use magic, notably illusions, they lure lone travellers to their doom, enchanting them as slaves, or as food, or both. In the case of Halak-Sha, she can assume a variety of forms at will, including Human, half-serpent, lion-centaur, part raptor (with clawed feet, bird legs and wings, and can fly) and upper half Human, lower half two clawed leonine legs. She can also animate and control a certain type of undead creatures, her **Sandy Skeletons**. These are like the typical undead animated creatures of RPGs, but their bones are covered with a magical armouring of rough desert sand. This makes them much more robust and a lot harder to damage than normal ones. They are armed with scimitars, spears and bows, and they have a magical spiderweb tracery covering them, which enables them to reform even if completely destroyed or magically de-animated, after a short pause, providing they are still within Halak-Sha's Tableland zone of influence. Other undead, including the Mummies, Shadows and Ghûls of the Tableland are drawn to this zone by her power, and although not directly controlled by her, part of their own power derives from her presence, and they may act as her agents, albeit unconsciously. Her magical abilities include a suite of illusion-based options, including charming individuals to do her bidding, disguising and enhancing her own appearance and that of her surroundings. Parts of her lair are so imbued with illusory magics that some elements have become genuinely real over the ages since she first appeared here, while other illusions that remain unreal are now permanent and cannot be dispelled by outsiders. She always has access to a variety of wavy-bladed daggers and scimitars, even when she appears completely unarmed, seeming able to conjure them from the air at times when required.

Features found on the map were drawn from, adapted and suggested by a variety of sources, including random tables in the Shadowdark RPG rules (by The Arcane Library), the *Dread Laironomicon* and *Dread Thingonomicon* from Raging Swan Press, the revised edition of the *Tome of Adventure Design* and the *Nomicon* from Mythmere Games. Real-world mythology was also drawn upon, including that surrounding Lilith and Lilitu/Ardat Lili (who may have been an ancient Mesopotamian precursor of Lilith), as well as the iconography of the female deity shown on an ancient Mesopotamian relief, modernly known as either The Queen of the Night, or (in earlier times) the Burney Relief, currently held by The British Museum in London.

The Lair Described

Halak-Sha's Lair is in one of the rock-cut tombs in the northeastern part of the Oasis Scarp that encircles the Bakhaarka Oasis, at the heart of her domain, a tomb that connects inside with a number of ordinary, if sometimes modified, caves. The tomb's general location is shown on the separate Bakhaarka Oasis Atlas map. Its external appearance is illustrated by the circular icon image on this map, showing the main entrance is flanked by a pair of smaller, 8 foot high (2.4 m) **Alcoves**, now empty except for their decorated floors and some drifted sand, the floor tiled using the same decorative eye symbol as found in the main **Jade Eye Chamber**. This Chamber is stone-tile decorated in a fashion similar to the better-preserved, more elaborate tombs by the Oasis, and is notable for its carved-jade eye design which forms a central feature on the ceiling and walls, as well as the floor. The other main features of the Chamber are a large, empty, wooden sarcophagus, with its lid removed and lying propped-up at one end, heavily decorated with painted pictographic inscriptions, a large, jade-mosaic covered **False Door** on the northwestern wall (the jade eye symbol here is on the door itself), and a series of large, rectangular, low-relief carved jade panels around the walls, each skilfully cut with a variety of mythological scenes, including creatures of the desert wastes, notably owls, jackals, desert lions, snakes and vultures, plus a winged female humanoid with legs and feet like a huge raptor, a female sphinx, and a serpent-tailed lamia. The ceiling in the Chamber is about 10 ft high (3 m), with that in the open, barrel-arched passage connecting to the outside around 12 ft (3.5 m). The False Door is simply a very fancy wall-decoration. The "S"-marked **Secret Door** on the southwest wall is completely concealed by one of the jade wall-panels. Hinged so it swings into the Chamber, the doorway revealed with the panel open is just 3 ft high and wide (1 m), leading into a similarly low, rough, natural cavern passage. The concealed floor **Trap** immediately to the northwest of the entrance passage, and that in front of the False Door, both open into 10 ft deep (3 m) pits with spikes at their bases. Their lids swing back into place and lock shut once someone has fallen in. The **Illusory Wall** section conceals the sole open accessway to and from the Chamber, an effect that cannot be dispelled by any means.

The central jade eye floor panel in the Chamber hides a **Chute**, hinged on its southwestern edge, which drops the unwary onto a short slide that opens into the ceiling of the **Serpent Cave** that lies mostly below the Jade Eye Chamber. The slide through the floor is around 4 ft deep (1.2 m), and the Cave ceiling only about 6 ft (1.8 m). After opening, the Chute trapdoor swings back up shut again, and locks. The Cave is fairly small, and has a steeply-sloping tunnel out on its northeast side, leading to the foot of a set of stone steps up to a three-way natural-cave passage junction. The ceilings throughout, while typically cave-craggy and rough, average no more than about 6 ft in height. Several venomous snakes live in the Cave, in dens of low, open-fronted wooden boxes with straw in, set towards the walls. They spend much of their time sleeping.

Halak-Sha maintains these traps to weaken intruders, rescuing the injured from the various locations and storing them for later in the two Guest Quarters. Each trapdoor only works once, until reset by her.

Following the cave passage behind the Secret Door, the first more open area just southwest of the **Unlit Candle Cave** has a 5 ft ceiling (1.5 m), which drops back to a narrow 3 ft (1 m) crawlway into that Cave, which also has a 5 ft ceiling. In alcoves all around the walls are part-used, but currently unlit, candles. The short passage east into **Weary Cave** is also 5 ft high, although Weary Cave has a 6 ft ceiling (1.8 m). When in this Cave, living creatures other than Halak-Sha become overwhelmed by sudden weakness and weariness, and may need assistance to move beyond it. The **Demon-Face Doors** blocking the narrowing passage to the Guest Quarters cavern are of natural wood, the width of a typical door in total, but centrally split and hinged from both side walls. Across both panels has been carefully painted a large, roughly circular, demonic face, entirely composed of winding lines of bowel-like appearance, all done in reds, with black and white highlights in places, to emphasize the maze-like winding of the lines in constructing the facial features. The right-hand panel must be opened first, or the doors jam solidly shut, as if locked. From the other side, both these doors are simply painted purple, with no design.

Once the narrowed passage opens into the central chamber of the **Guest Quarters**, the ceiling here quickly rises to around 10 ft (3 m) in its midst, dropping to 8 ft or less (2.4 m) in the alcoves, including that leading to the **Locked Door** to the southeast. This is a single, unpainted, wooden door. From either side, it has a metal disc below the latch which must be carefully pushed downwards before trying to open the latch (thus requiring both hands), or it is locked closed. The rest of the cave and the alcoves seem simply ordinary caverns, except that three of the alcoves, **Dimensional Pocket Cells A, B & C** are sealed-off from the central area by bronze jail bars. Each of these bar-walls has a small, 3 ft square (1 m) gate in it, although these will not open, and careful inspection shows they have neither a proper lock, nor hinges. They always seem to be quite empty when viewed from outside. However, by stroking the bars, Halak-Sha can open the unopenable gate, allowing one of her visitors to enter or leave the Cell area. Once inside, each Cell is actually a perfectly comfortable suite of rooms, not cave-like at all, including a bedroom, dining room and a bathroom, along with items suitable to interest the individual in question, such as manuscripts, musical instruments, games, an exercise area, and suchlike, and magical light sources. There are though no windows and no external doors, making it an elaborately-appointed prison. Any items the captive removes from their person will be silently teleported away to the Lamia's Quarters elsewhere in the complex for examination, and may be kept by her, discarded permanently, or returned to the Cell as she decides is best. Mildly drugged, though good quality, food and drink is magically provided regularly, the drugging sufficient to create a comfortable sense of ennui in the prisoners. In effect, the Cells are rather like the archetypal genie's lamp. By stroking the outer Cell bars, Halak-Sha can summon or return the prisoner at any time. More accurately, this is her larder.

Beyond the Locked Door in the Guest Quarters, the 6 ft (1.8 m) passage turns south, linking with that at the top of the stairs from the lower Serpent Cave, which then turns southeast before opening into the **Brass Disc Cave**. This small cave has an 8 ft or so ceiling (2.4 m), with 7 ft passages (2.1 m) out to the east and southwest. On the southeastern wall, near the eastern exit, a 2 ft diameter (60 centimetre) brass disc is attached at roughly Human chest height, which has 12 concentric circles carefully scribed into its surface.

Through the Illusory Wall from the Jade Eye Chamber, or the narrow passage southwest from the Brass Disc Cave, is the **Creation Cave**, which has a pair of natural floor to ceiling rock pillars in it, and a rugged, roughly 8 ft high ceiling (2.4 m). Both pillars and all the cave walls have been carved with low-relief images in an ancient style, still brightly painted, though somewhat worn, showing the mythological creation of the world from a great black pot by two deities, one male, one female. Two Sandy Skeleton guards lurk in the shadows around the pillars here.

Following the passage east from the Brass Disc Cave quickly reaches a T-junction, with a 7 ft passageway (2.1 m) running north to the Favoured Guest Quarters, and a broader opening south into the 9 ft ceilinged (2.7 m) **Bronze Pillar Cave**. Two floor-to-ceiling natural rock pillars dominate the western half of this Cave, the more northerly of which is covered with thin bronze sheets, etched to show a whirlwind creating a great sandstorm in the desert. A pair of Sandy Skeletons use the pillars for cover as they keep watch here. Smeared tracks in the sandy dust of the floor, enough of which are sufficiently clear to indicate them having been made by at least a large serpent, a barefoot humanoid and lion-like claws, indicate both narrower passageways out of here to the southeast and southwest have seen repeated usage in both directions. Each passageway is around 8 ft (2.4 m) tall.

The southwestern passageway is the narrower, and leads into **The Ossuary**, a 10 ft (3 m) dead-end cave, with three rock pillars towards its farther wall from the entrance. Many humanoid bones, picked clean by

Halak-Sha over long ages, have been carefully piled and stacked by the outer walls, using the pillars as support in places. Three more Sandy Skeleton guards are here too, one by each of the pillars. Any of these remains could be converted to more Sandy Skeletons by the Lamia as required.

The broader southeastern passage out of the Bronze Pillar Cave leads to a linked trio of small **Dining Caves**. Ceilings throughout this section vary between 6 and 8 ft high at most (1.8 to 2.4 m), higher in the two larger caves. Floor tracks similar to those in the Bronze Pillar Cave are found all across this area, and in each of the smaller caves, the floor has been repeatedly stained with splashes of long-dried blood, often smeared and half hidden by the floor dust and loose sand. At the southern end of the smallest, middle Dining Cave is a low, stone “banqueting table”, made from an unusually dark brown stone slab, dissimilar to the native rock elsewhere in the complex. It too has long-standing patches of dried blood on its top and sides. There is an unpleasantly metallic scent of old blood in all three Caves.

Northeast from the Bronze Pillar Cave, the passageway opens out into what is in effect the “lobby” for the **Favoured Guest Quarters**, above a roughly 10 ft high sheer, smooth, cliff (3 m), which has a set of **Illusory Stairs** apparently running down its northwestern side by the rock wall. While this lobby section continues the 8 ft (2.4 m) height of the passage into it, that ceiling level persists over the main, lower, area in the Guest Quarters here, so the ceiling over that section is an airy, approximately 18 ft high (5.5 m). Of the three alcove areas towards the northeastern end of this elongated cavern, two, those to the northwest and northeast, are raised respectively 6 ft (1.8 m) and 10 ft (3 m) above the main floor, and are accessed by genuine sets of rock-cut steps. Both have 8 ft ceilings. The southeastern alcove has a low-stepped tiled platform at its end, on which is situated a pleasing freshwater fountain, suitable for washing or drinking, and which is magically self-cleaning. The whole area is freer from sand and dust than the other caves, and is comfortably appointed with cushions, hangings, tables, chairs, rugs and a bed. The temperature is pleasant, and there are soft, magical lights throughout. Food and drink is regularly provided, and overall, the place functions much as the Dimensional Pocket Cells do in the other Guest Quarters - as a prison. Of the furnishings, some are illusory, some not, and some of the illusions are permanent, such as the entrance steps, and also the **Illusory Wall**, behind which is the sloping passage up towards the Lamia’s Quarters. Favoured Guests are of course much nearer Halak-Sha’s personal apartments and Dining Caves. She finds the meat always to be tastier if it has been well looked-after and not recently filled with fear-induced adrenalin.

A long, narrow, curving, 7 ft high (2.1 m) cave passageway links the Dining Caves and the Favoured Guest Quarters, off the eastern wall from which are two still narrower, tiled, cut-straight passages, both again 7 ft high, leading into the **Lamia’s Quarters**. Both these passageways narrow closer to those Quarters. The ceiling in this regular-cut, tiled chamber is 10 ft high (3 m), in the centre of which is an 18-inch circular plinth (45 cm) with a 7 ft tall stone statue of a naked, Human male deity, the surface of which appears polished. Halak-Sha often rests in her serpentine form coiled around this statue. In the left alcove when standing by the entrances is a table and two comfortable chairs, with sumptuous cushions and rugs in that to the right. Ahead, beyond the statue, the third alcove contains a pair of large wooden chests, very similar in form, if only a fraction the size, of the sarcophagus in the Jade Eye Chamber. The pair hold a mixture of clothes and assorted treasures, the latter retrieved from many of Halak-Sha’s “guests” over the ages. These chests also help conceal the secret door behind them leading into the **Lamia’s True Quarters**. This is a large cave with a 20 ft ceiling (6 m; as compared to the level of the floor in the large alcove opposite the stairs in). The steps behind the secret door descend 10 ft, 3 m, about to the surface of the freshwater pool that occupies about half the cave floor. Like the fountain in the Favoured Guest Quarters, the water here is magically always clean and fresh. The pool is of variable depth, up to 18 ft (5.5 m) in its northwestern alcove, though nearer 5 to 10 ft (1.5 to 3 m) elsewhere. The alcove platform is around 5 ft above the water level, and a set of stone-cut steps lead up from the floor of one of the pool’s shallows to the top of its northern end. Halak-Sha likes to bring especially favoured guests here to dine (on) after first marinating (drowning) them in the pool. She often disguises this chamber in various illusory ways, so the guest will not suspect until too late, and both it and the outer Quarters chamber can be magically lit when she wishes it. On the alcove platform is a large circular design cut in low relief into the floor, a series of shapes of wavy-bladed daggers and scimitars. When she wishes, Halak-Sha can retrieve any of these as genuine, magical, weapons, simply by touching part of the floor design.