

Ruins of Marshmalika

Marshmalika ("Queen's Cove", also the name of the local bay on the coast) was the first settlement to be attacked and destroyed some time ago, when the mysterious invaders landed at the head of the Bay of Aqesh at the beginning of their assault on the peaceful, tropical desert land of Banjar. Setting a precedent they have tried to follow since, the invaders left a trail of destruction and a slaughtered local population in their wake. Their initial intention seems to have been to set-up their main base here. The buildings marked on the map as the Granary and Stores, with the River Docks and seaward Wharves, were left largely intact, and show signs of having been repaired since the invasion, for example. That plan seemed to have failed quickly, and their headquarters is now an increasingly fortified place on the next peninsula southwest along the coast of Aqesh Bay, some 50 miles (80 kilometres) away, and also not particularly near the coast there. Since then, this former small town has been completely abandoned, beyond an occasional perfunctory patrol, usually brought in and extracted by sea.

Why the invaders have not stayed is easy enough to fathom. Like all the destroyed settlements in the nominally "conquered" parts of Banjar, unusual quantities of poisonous scorpions and snakes have suddenly become evident at such places, far more than were ever noticed before, or that are typically encountered elsewhere in the country. More significant still though are the ghosts, the spirits of the dead of Banjar. These are, with a very few exceptions, not undead creatures, and they cannot be exorcised or banished by any means. Only the tiny handful of undead spectral beings can cause physical harm. Most of the other spirits simply appear and congregate increasingly over time, whether by night or day, standing silently, staring unblinkingly at the living folk wherever they appear. This soon becomes hopelessly unnerving, as they will not move or react at all, and their numbers grow ever greater, seemingly without limit, the longer they remain, until the living leave the area. The costume and appearance of those manifesting later in the process suggests the spirits include those from very recent times, back into the most archaic past of Banjar.

Consequently, none of the guards left at Marshmalika would stay for long. Some were driven mad by the experience of being forced to remain. The last such garrison made some attempts to restore the partly ruined building marked as "Guard Post" on the map, where a couple of ladders remain lashed in-place to bypass the damaged stairs to the upper tower. It had been intended this building would provide a suitable viewing vantage over the Coast Road that runs east and west by the shore here, east to and through the Old forest, and northwest by the Aqesh Road to and over the Bridge, since destroyed, a couple of miles or so north of town on the Kalabanjar ("Heart of Banjar") River. This Guard Post has since been abandoned too.

In theory, the Guard Post was also meant to keep watch over the nearby Pit, something else the guards soon became very nervous about. The Pit is a vast, unplumbed, irregular sinkhole where some of the town's buildings once stood, and where now only strewn rubble lies. There are many marks of scorching and blackening in and around The Pit. Where clearest, they look like marks made by gigantic, serrated-edge tentacles. On the ground and road surface very close to the northwest edge of The Pit, with one apex of its star-shape pointing directly towards it, is a huge pentagram, made from broad lines compressed into the surfaces, and which is almost as wide as The Pit itself. No one knows how, or if, the two may relate to one another, or who created either. What is clearer to those who try to linger too long nearby is that something has been awakened in, or summoned to, The Pit that should never have been disturbed.

Scarcely an intact building remains across the settlement. Many have been demolished, damaged, burnt, or made uninhabitable in one way or another. So little remains of some structures around the outskirts of the town, they are not even shown on the map, largely buried in dust, sand and ash which has sifted over and into pretty well every part of the settlement. Properties may need sand drifts clearing from doors or windows simply to enter them in places. A few trees, and more smaller plants, survive, although many trees are dead (shown as blackened on the map; whether all or only some were really burnt is left to GMs). The four wooden dock piers on the shoreline Wharves are mostly solid and intact, if repaired in parts, and some traces of two or perhaps three others no longer here can be seen above the high-tide line. Similarly, the River Docks on the Kalabanjar can be used still (only the Southern Docks are shown on the map; the Northern Docks are a little beyond the western edge).

In the town, the great, open, paved Market Square is more or less intact, with numerous pieces of former wrecked stalls scattered over the surface, faded, tattered and broken, along with the ubiquitous sand, dust and ash drifts, the stall remnants a sad reminder of better days. Few properties still show clear evidence of their original use. The Temple ruins are perhaps the most obvious as such, once a Temple venerating The Prophet (see the Tomb of the Prophet map at Sussara for more details on The Prophet). The old Temple Garden and Coin Well adjoin this ruin to the east, the Garden badly damaged and neglected, although the Coin Well's water remains surprisingly safe and fresh (unlike the dried-up well on the northeastern corner of Market Square). There are no coins in the Well's pool by the Temple remains. However, it can be used still for divinations as of old, by those sufficiently talented and knowledgeable, and in-favour with The Prophet.

On the southeastern edge of town, the Old Forge is still recognisable, thanks to its furnace. Almost on the opposite side of the settlement from it, on the northeastern outskirts, is an Inn, with pieces of smashed tables, seats and bar inside, and a faded, more or less illegible, painted sign half-buried in drifted sand outside. The Aqesh Road begins nearby, at the northeast corner of Market Square. It continues from here alongside the Kalabajar (mostly on its west bank after crossing the River on the old Bridge north of town) all the way to Sussara in the distant mountains. One other trail leads away from Marshmalika, the Hunting Trail towards the northeast over the low hills in that direction, for all it peters-out after a mile or so.

There are also a few more recent additions to the town. In the southwest quarter, it is clear someone spent a good deal of time torturing and killing captive local villagers here - the elderly, women and children, primarily. A line of spikes with what are now fleshless skulls on them have been set-up in rock-pile bases west of one of the less ruinous properties here, labelled on the map as the House of Bones. The reason for its name is that inside, several people have been nailed to various walls, although what was done to them after that, perhaps fortunately, is no longer obvious, as all that remains are bones, some still attached to the walls. Skulls enough to account for those on the line of spikes outside are missing from inside this building. Southeast of the House of Bones are three rows of statues, or more accurately, people who have been turned to stone. Some are still draped with clothing rags, and all have had their heads smashed off. Some of the intact heads lie nearby, while others have been broken into pieces, fragments or dust. By the crossroads east of here and north of the western Wharves is Gold Corner, so labelled, as there is a scatter of golden items lying by the road, looking much like dropped loot. All though are fakes, base metal items painted to look like gold.

The last labelled item shown on the map is rather more intriguing. Given that barely a stick of furniture survives complete anywhere in the settlement, it should be quite a surprise to discover standing in the road near one of the less damaged houses on the northeastern edge of town, a large, beautifully made, dark wood, double wardrobe, doors closed, upright and unmarked, with a key still in the lock. Only a light covering of dust films its surface. The front is carved with simple, elegant, flowing arabesque decoration, and the piece is clearly a high-class, expensive item. Why it is here, and what its significance may be, is left entirely for GMs to determine.