

THE ROOTS OF AMBITION

AN ADVENTURE REGION BY MICHAEL PRESCOTT

THE SITUATION

Deep in the sun-blasted desert is a high, rocky plateau. A century ago, this arid land was the realm of the reptilian Heelan.

Now, an **alchemist** toils here, turning the rocky desert into a forest, inch by inch.

She is aided by a strange, underground power, a **soil mother**.

SLAR OCCUL, EYETOWER

On a huge, stone pillar stands a 60' tower, terracotta red and dotted with fist-sized, round holes. It is now occupied by a dozen ghost bats, gray furred with a two-pace wingspan.

They are hospitable toward guests, even supplying them with forest blackfruit or desert hare, but grow resentful unless regularly thanked.

At night, they fly far in search of insects.

By day, they hang in the tower, hiding from the heat and purring softly of the many Heelan ruins hidden in the **blasted sands**.

THE ALCHEMIST

Toad-Eyed Antephna is barely recognizable as human; many transmuting accidents have distorted her body.

She croaks her words, moves by hopping, and licks her eyes constantly.

She has come to the plateau to raid its many sand-buried ruins for relics, with the aid of the **soil mother**.

She is furious at having had to abandon the **transmuter** at **Slar Nilta**, and is desperate to secure it before **Byor's proud-skulls** do permanent damage.

She will use deception, threats, or promise of silver to draw the adventurers to **Slar Nilta**, in the hopes they will drive off the Heelan.

THE LOUD PARCELS

Antephna knows a secret method of making explosives from bat guano, though it is time

consuming. She has prepared three *loud parcels* during her time with the ghost bats.

THE INVESTOR

With her is the expedition financier, Unguff Dunwattle. He is short, sweaty, and wears tattered orange silks.

Having witnessed the loss of everyone and everything he brought here, he distrusts Antephna's judgment and is terrified of never seeing home.

He has bankrupted himself to get here, however, and the instant he catches a whiff that something of value might yet be plucked from the sands, he will attempt to take control of the expedition.

Desperate though he may be, he is a shrewd bargainer.

THE BLASTED SANDS

Beyond the **cinder cones** lies a land so hot, exhaustion and death come within a day or two to those without magical protection.

Only the Heelan tread freely there.

THE BLACK LAKE

Dark, viscous fluid seeps from the sides of the cinder cones and collects in a large, shimmering lake.

The fluid is somewhat flammable, and occasionally burning cinders from the cones send sheets of fire across the lake surface.

d6 Plateau/Forest Finds

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Relentless, deadly heat / sudden, heavy rain |
| 2 | Tiny oasis, d8 beautiful carnivorous harpoon cactus / pond of oil |
| 3 | A Ruined Hole |
| 4 | Giant rock owl / A Daughter of Elil |
| 5 | d6 Heelan scouts |
| 6 | Scabrous devil |

Those who watch the flames might see the tentacles of the **devils** within the lake reach up, receiving the fire as an infernal sacrament.

SLAR NILTA

The ruin of a terracotta brick palace stands here, squeezed between the Black Lake and the drop to the lower plateau.

Wavy patterns are pressed into each of its slimy, smoke-blackened bricks.

Antephna and her workers rebuilt the gate house with nearby rubble, and in place of the gate built the **transmuter**.

Great plumes of fire and steam burst out as the impurities are destroyed; the heat, in turn, energizes the transmuter.

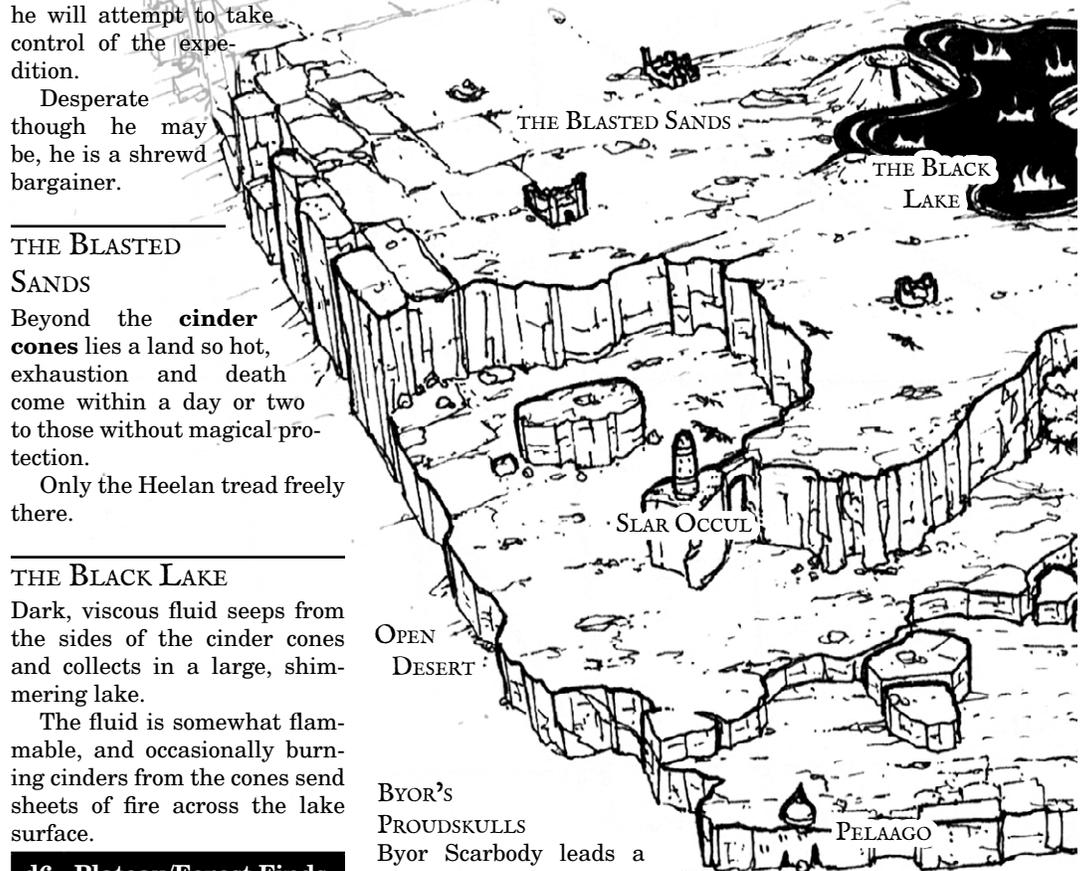
Byor has yet to decide whether to destroy it, leave it alone, or wrench it from its base and haul it back across the blasted sands to his masters.

PELAAGO

A most likely route up onto the plateau. See *The Oracle's Decree* for details, or treat it as a six-room **ruined hole**.

RUINED HOLES

The blasted sands of the upper plateau are a tapestry of ruins, remnants of a glorious earlier age of Heelan domination.



BYOR'S PROUDSKULLS
Byor Scarbody leads a group of 20 Heelan warriors, their bony crests drilled with dozens of silver bullets, each marking a kill.

They watch the **transmuter** from hiding, a safe (and dry) distance away, and may ambush inferior parties to gain information.

THE TRANSMUTER

An ornate archway of silver filigree purifies the stinking water that passes beneath it.

Roll on the three ruin tables (page 2) to determine the type, occupants and treasure of each ruin.

DEVILS & MONARCHS

Miles below the cinder cones is a dark, hot sea of murk and devils. Devils occasionally venture to the surface realm and fall into the lake.

**TRILEMMA
ADVENTURES**

Recent arrivals resemble black, monstrously sized squid. They cherish fire, can squirt flaming pitch at will, and devour anything that fails to entertain them or indulge their perverse, destructive bargains.

After a year of mad frolic in the black lake, they are forced to take to the sands to find food.

The desert environment is not kind to them; the sand flays their skin, and their tentacles wither and tear off.

Mad with pain, they live as unthinking predators, burrowing to avoid the heat and bursting from the sands to devour prey.

SAND MONARCHS

A rare few devils survive long enough to acclimatize and regain their hellish majesty.

These will be attended by d6 enthralled giant camel spiders, d3 giant geckos, and d12 enslaved Heelan.

THE SOIL MOTHER

The entire forest is permeated by the fungal threads of a vast, intelligent being: a soil mother.

Her thoughts are slow and deep, spread among thousands of coconut-like ganglia buried deep in the soil, and by touch and taste she knows every-

powerful, able to reshape the landscape entirely. Streams, trees, and bushes flow and grow only where she pleases.

There are few animals in the forest, but in other climes, soil mothers use fruiting groves to lure prey and predators together, for what she needs most are the brains of intelligent animals.

Made poisonous by mycotoxins in the fruit, berries, and plants of the forest, animal brains are left uneaten, and are claimed by the soil mother so she can grow **onddo**.

Soil mother ganglia are sweet and nutritious, but eating

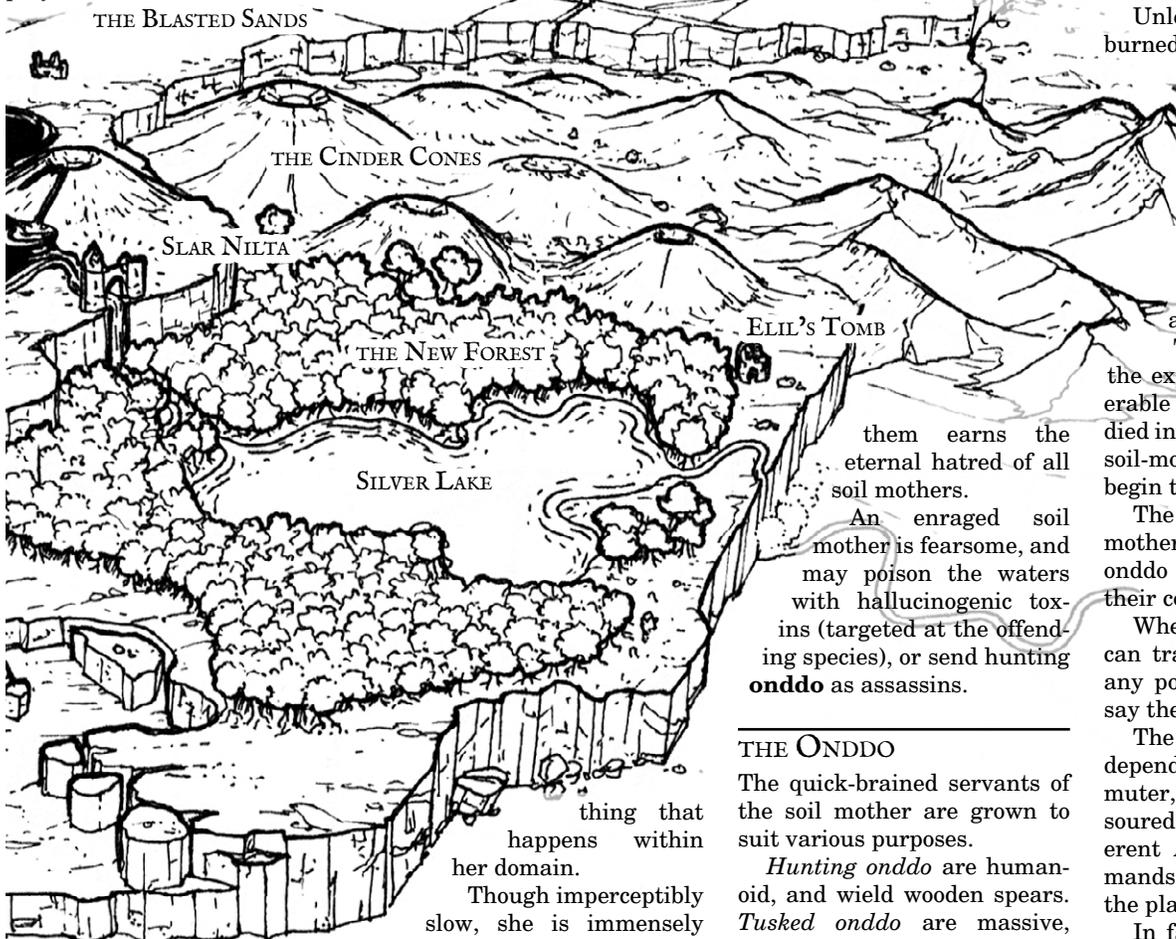
headless quadrupeds, used to dig stream beds or to haul boulders.

Seed onddo are roughly dog-like, whose sharp beak injects a spore-filled venom that causes an irresistible wanderlust. When victims (eventually) die, a new soil mother is born.

All *onddo* have a tough, woody exterior mottled like the leaf litter of the forest floor. When stationary, they are extremely difficult to spot, often mistaken for logs or stumps.

They are speechless, but constantly release and exchange spores with the forest, and so know the will of the soil mother instinctively.

Unless hacked to bits or burned, they regenerate fully overnight.



THE DAUGHTERS OF ELIL

The soil mother is also served by an order of human animists, her heralds and translators among speaking peoples.

They came here with the expedition, and their venerable leader, Elil Leafbringer, died in a ruined tower to let the soil-mother seed in her body begin the forest.

The daughters hear the soil mother's will in their dreams; *onddo* and forest animals obey their commands.

When covered in soil, they can travel 'along the roots' to any point in the forest. Some say they are immortal.

The survival of the forest depends entirely on the transmutter, but relations have soured with impatient, irreverent Antephna, and her demands that the forest reveal the plateau's hoards.

In fact, the order keeps secret a dozen forest ruins; they hope to use the silver within to pay traders to bring animals to the forest—especially deer, wolves and bear cubs.

Failing this, the brains of adventurers will have to do.

Though only five 'daughters' remain, replacement clones sleep beneath the soil.

them earns the eternal hatred of all soil mothers.

An enraged soil mother is fearsome, and may poison the waters with hallucinogenic toxins (targeted at the offending species), or send hunting **onddo** as assassins.

THE ONDDO

The quick-brained servants of the soil mother are grown to suit various purposes.

Hunting onddo are humanoid, and wield wooden spears. *Tusked onddo* are massive,

thing that happens within her domain.

Though imperceptibly slow, she is immensely

| d6 | Ruined Hole Type |
|----|---|
| 1 | Wall fragments |
| 2 | Ruin, d6 rooms |
| 3 | Complex, d3-1 levels above, d4 below ground |
| 4 | Well shaft drops 40' to d8 limestone caves |
| 5 | Hollow obelisk |
| 6 | Subsurface tomb, d12 rooms, no entrance |

| d6 | Ruin Occupants |
|----|--|
| 1 | d3 giant camel spiders |
| 2 | d6 Onddo |
| 3 | d12 Heelan scouts, d3 water shade mounts |
| 4 | d2 expedition survivors |
| 5 | d6 Heelan skeletons and wight-prince |
| 6 | Sand Monarch and attendants |

| d6 | Ruin Treasure |
|----|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | Pools of drinkable water, 50% w/ fish |
| 2 | Cache of d8 weapons, minor valuables |
| 3 | Preserved, rare oils (d6) |
| 4 | Graven map to d12 other ruined holes |
| 5 | d3 graven spell tablets |
| 6 | Funerary hoard |

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