

LAIR OF THE LANTERN WORM

AN ADVENTURE LOCATION BY MICHAEL PRESCOTT

THE SITUATION

Deep in the desert, an order of **Heelan mystics** practices a strange and lethal form of divination in a network of cliff-side caves.

Brought from deep underground by an unnatural source, the water—toxic to **Heelan**—is a source of mystery to them.

It is also home to one of the deadliest creatures of the underworld, a **lantern worm**.

RUMORS

Various rumors and half-truths are available to inquiring folks near the plateau:

- The Heelan know of a secret oasis on the high plateau where water can be found.
- Astrologers have pinpointed the forge that birthed Larmonak's legendary blade.
- The Heelan pay tribute to a serpentine god-in-the-flesh.
- A hermit named **Carduros** knows the secret of hiding from one's destiny.
- **Heelan proudskulls** that earn twenty kills are admitted to a secret order that prophesies the future.
- The high plateau conceals a gateway to the underworld.
- The Ballads of Larmonak tell of the hero snatching the secret of his death from the light of a dread lantern he found in the desert.
- An explorer once returned from the desert with strange orbs that shone blue for many moons.

TRAITOR'S PATH

Humid air blows out into the desert from the traitor's path, a sequence of slimy stepping-stones.

The second-to-last stone is false, crudely hinged to tip anyone stepping upon it

CAVE OF OFFERINGS

A twin waterfall cascades down from the **upper vault**, one of them splashing down a slippery limestone ramp, the other a straight drop of 20 paces.

The flat-topped offering stone is a sticky mess of water shade bones and desert-spider carapaces, from sacrifices brought by the **mystics**.

The rubbery, transparent eggs are stuck to the wall with a glue-like slime which can be dissolved by wine or spirits. The glue is stronger than the eggs, which will break if taken.

d6 eggs contain immature worms, half a pace long and tightly coiled within the egg. Each matures and hatches in d8 months, but will die if prematurely hatched.

Anyone drinking fresh egg fluid experiences powerful stomach cramps, but gains the ability to breathe in water for d6 weeks.

PROUDSKULL NESTS

Eleven Heelan proudskulls live here in this sequence of three small, dry caverns.

Each Heelan has a score of silver bullets drilled into its bony crest, signifying successful hunts and kills in battle.

Here they serve the **mystics** in the hopes of earning a place among them.

They each have terrible burns in various stages of healing from their trips out through the water, to hunt or to prove their mettle.

MYSTICS' CHAMBER

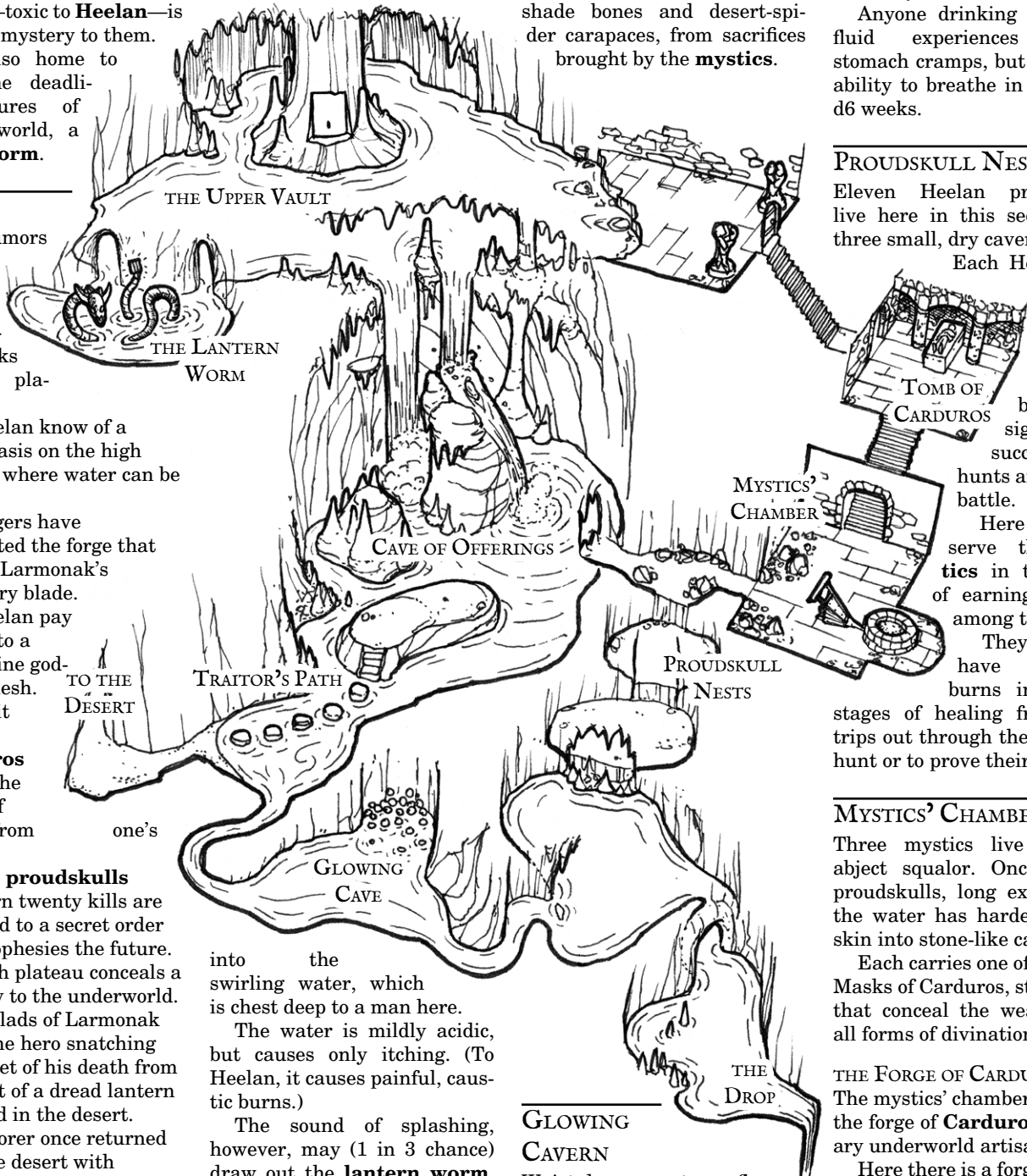
Three mystics live here in abject squalor. Once Heelan proudskulls, long exposure to the water has hardened their skin into stone-like carapaces.

Each carries one of the three Masks of Carduros, stone relics that conceal the wearer from all forms of divination.

THE FORGE OF CARDUROS

The mystics' chamber was once the forge of **Carduros**, legendary underworld artisan.

Here there is a forge of hard, porous yellow stone unique to the underworld. An enchanted bellows of bone and drake-skin is bolted to the floor of the chamber.



into the swirling water, which is chest deep to a man here.

The water is mildly acidic, but causes only itching. (To Heelan, it causes painful, caustic burns.)

The sound of splashing, however, may (1 in 3 chance) draw out the **lantern worm**, for the mystics have trained it to respond to live offerings thrown into the water of the **Cave of Offerings**.

GLOWING CAVERN

Waist-deep water flows swiftly here, but the lantern worm has laid a cluster of eggs in the far corner. An eerie blue light emanates from them.

d6	Cave Encounters
1	d6 Heelan phibs
2	d3 Heelan mystics
3	Saranok from the Tomb , with d8 proudskulls
4	d10 Proudskulls from the dry caves , proving their worthiness
5	d3 undead phibs
6	the Lantern Worm

If heaved three times, the bellows heats the forge so much that the stones glow white hot, burning the exposed skin of anyone nearby.

TOMB OF CARDUROS

This is the dwelling place of Saranok, master of the order. Ancient, with scales of stone from a century of water exposure, he no longer seeks the worm and wears no mask.

All his questions have been answered, and so Saranok contents himself with the tutelage of his three proteges.

The presence of strangers, however, will arouse his curiosity. Are they best fed to the worm as sacrifices? Or do they come with questions of their own, questions that may lead him to new and unexpected insights?

THE TALE OF CARDUROS

The tomb itself is engraved with a long tale in pictograms, depicting Carduros's exile from the underworld as punishment for the base crime of enchanting a sword for a many-armed demon.

In fact, it does not *commemorate* Carduros, but was carved

d6	Torn by the Worm
1	sudden, terrifying death, remembering nothing
2	worm bites throat, death whispers a clue
3	clear vision of a possible ally
4	clear vision of the doings of an enemy
5	clear vision of the past
6	a clear vision from beyond the gray veil

by him as a diary. Toward the end it grows sullen, emphasizing long years wishing for home in the deeps.

THE SARCOPHAGUS

Carduros carved his own sarcophagus from that same indestructible yellow stone of the underworld from which the forge is made.

The Heelan have been unable to open it, for the seam of the lid is false. In fact, the lid and sides are of one piece, and must be lifted together.

Inside is:

- Carduros's remains (little more than dust)
- Six ingots of **white metal**
- Three ingots of **dark glass**
- A stone mold in the shape of a key to the **silver door**.

THE LANTERN WORM

The worm is a slimy horror fifteen paces long and as thick as a thigh. Its head is bare bone, the white jaws delivering venomous bites from a pike's reach with blinding speed.

Most strikes are fatal.

At the tip of its tail bobs a lantern of bone, whose dread light casts a *prophetic snare*: if the worm is slain while the lantern still shines, time seemingly rewinds d20 minutes, undoing anything that happened.

In fact, the snare is a prophetic, mass hallucination, and the 'rewinding' merely an awakening.

Nevertheless, if the lantern is smashed in dream or in life, the worm loses this power.

THE WORM SEEKERS

Carduros forged his masks to hide from retribution from below as he continued to enchant weapons from his place of exile.

The mystics, however, use them to practice a bizarre form of divination.

Donning razor-spiked collars, they seek out the worm to

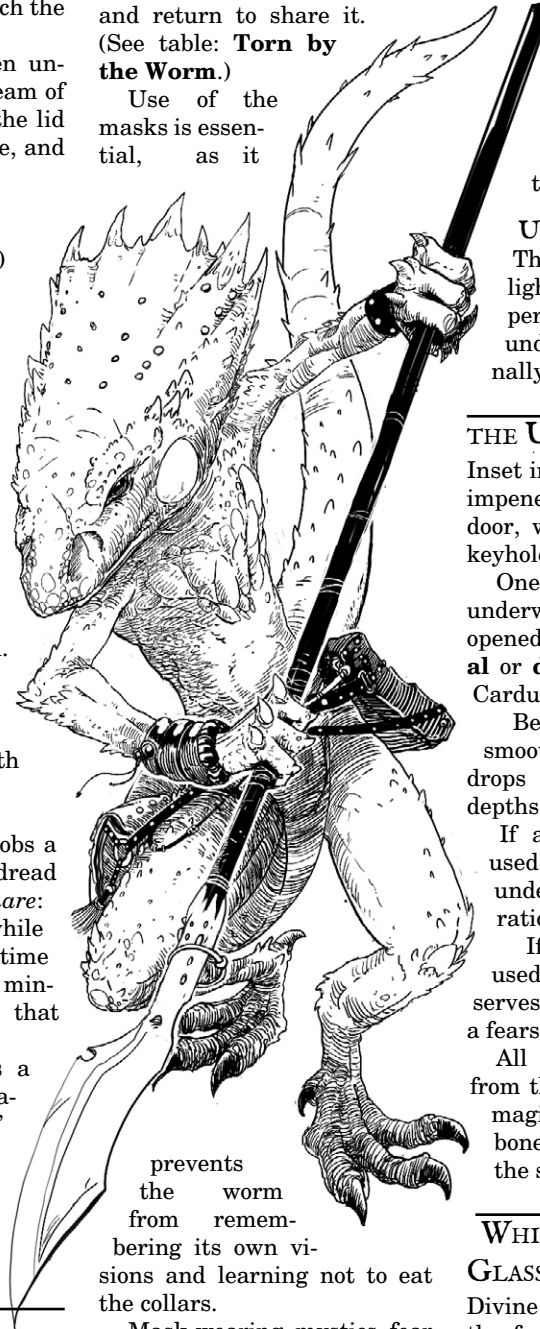
enter its *snare* and be killed.

Should the brute worm eat the collar (which it does 9 in 10 times), it dies. The snare dissipates, and the terrified worm-seeker lives once more.

With practice, worm-seekers can glimpse a prophetic vision through the act of dying, and return to share it.

(See table: **Torn by the Worm**.)

Use of the masks is essential, as it



prevents the worm from remembering its own visions and learning not to eat the collars.

Mask-wearing mystics fear nothing within the caverns, and if threatened, will retreat through them in to attempt to draw attackers into the worm's light.

HEELAN PHIBS

Not all Heelan can endure the trials of their apprenticeship in the cave.

Some fall to *water-lust*, abandoning the strength of the desert and reverting to a degenerate, amphibian form.

Their minds dulled by water, their bodies softened, they slither like animals through the caverns, chasing fish.

Dry Heelan scorn them, sometimes hunting them for sport. The worm ignores them, instinctively mistaking their wriggling motion for that of its young.

UNDEAD PHIBS

Those that die within the light of the worm's snare persist, living on as rotting undead until the water finally turns them to mush.

THE UPPER VAULT

Inset in a mighty column is an impenetrable, flawless silver door, whose only feature is a keyhole.

One of the gates to the underworld, it can only be opened by a key of **white metal** or **dark glass**, taken from Carduros's mold.

Beyond the door is a smooth, vertical shaft that drops several miles into the depths.

If a **white metal** key is used, the door leads to an underworld rich with exploration and discourse.

If a **dark glass** key is used, the same underworld serves up its worst demons for a fearsome reckoning.

All around, water springs from the submerged chamber, magically drawn from the bones of the earth to keep the silver door shaft dry.

WHITE METAL, DARK GLASS

Divine materials left over from the forging of the world, only dragon fire and Carduros's forge are hot enough to shape them.

Blades forged from either will cut through armor, and can bear enchantments that would evaporate lesser matter.

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