**The Heartsblood Marsh**

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# **Summary & Basic Descriptions**

Heartsblood Marsh is a bizarre place. Mushroom shoots climb hundreds of feet into the sky, and the air is alternately thick with clouds of spores of buzzing insects. Disease is rampant, and for that reason alone most travelers avoid it.

The Heartsblood Marsh is a blood soaked and wholly alien swamp drinking in the Red River flowing from Salt in Wounds, growing year by year. Here, huge insects roam forever feasting on the blood rich fungus, one another, or the unwary. Savage grippli ‘rule’ the swamp, many empowered by strange magic. Plant creatures and small green dragons roam and are liable to strike seemingly at random. And at the core of it all, the mad-druid Afrindi Gunterhix sits; his body spun into endless knots of of mushroom now known as the Fungal Sieve. What remains of his druidic impulse to stop the outflowing Tarrasque corruption wars with his baser fungal nature; he suppresses the urge to spore and spread and claim ever more for his insatiable need to grow. Most grippli of Heartsblood Marsh worship Afrindi, while their high priests (in addition to half a dozen adventurers and investigators) are infested with his spores and transformed into servitors through which he can most directly pursue his goals.

## **Adapting the Heartsblood Marsh to Your Setting**

**While designed with the Salt in Wounds Campaign setting in mind, the Heartsblood Marsh can be adapted to many settings. Maybe it’s fed by a mysterious blood stream emanating from a mountain of which no man knows the source. Perhaps it has grown on the site of an ancient, cursed battleground; the soil forever blood sodden till strange fungus began to grow centuries past. Perhaps there was a magical accident that stained the land, and Afrindi has set up shop to attempt to remove the stain from the earth itself. However you use it, the Heartsblood Marsh works best when its food source doesn’t come from photosynethesis but rather some other source of nutrients (and the bloody/worse the better). Remember, in real world biology the ‘poison’ to one species is food to another.**

**History of the Heartsblood Marsh**

To most of the world, the Heartsblood Marsh simply is; the dumping ground of Salt in Wound’s outflow full of strange, dangerous creatures that is best avoided and left alone. Only a small number of select individuals know its true history.
During the early years of their mission to keep the defeated Tarrasque bound & chained, the binders of [Salzinwuun](http://www.saltinwoundssetting.com/2016/01/the-fortress-salzinwuun.html) (what is now the city of Salt in Wounds) used efficient techniques to endlessly slaughter the beasts. Little of the creature’s blood was spilled, and the effects were minimal. However, as the city swelled, bloated; and its ruling Binder-Lords grew wealthy the focus shifted from maintaining the beast’s imprisonment to economic utility. As a consequence, more and more magically charged blood and tissue was spilled, pouring out of the city’s gutters and swelling the small stream that would become known as the red river. This flow transforming everything it touched. The land and its creatures changed, as the water became unsafe to drink And as the corrupting waters crept ever closer to the sea (with unknowable consequences) the gnomish druid Afrindi Gunterhix decided that extreme measures would be required to prevent the monster's essence from further perverting the natural order.
In order to best preserve nature, Afrindi would have to create a wholly artificial and alien ecosystem designed to absorb and digest as much of the outflow of Salt in Wounds as possible. He would have to create Heartsblood Marsh.
To this end, Afrindi used his druidic magic to call upon and collect animals & organisms from across the world; any he thought might best process the Tarrasque’s essence into a state of magical inertia. His two most successful imports were insects and fungus, who thrived with the nutrient rich, fetid waters and humid, almost tropical air that surrounded the city. As he tested what could best survive and thrive along the banks of the [Red River](http://www.saltinwoundssetting.com/2015/09/water-red-river-and-clear-water-aqueduct.html), he used his magics to tweak and combine these creatures, guide the mutations enabled by the Tarrasque’s corruption. Afrindi also changed the land, erecting a huge earthen dam to stop the river and creating thousands of arterial like channels to redirect the flow into an ever growing swamp. The creatures of Heartsblood Marsh grew large and strange amidst the blood of the Tarrasque and the manipulations of the druid, and Afridni’s own power seemed to increase as did his madness.
But even as he labored for decades, Afrindi never fully trusted his creation to maintain itself after his death. He well knew the impossible web-like complexity of natural systems and was unsure if he had engineering a stable configuration. As he grew on in years, he transported a small tribe of primitive grippli to Heartsblood Marsh; intending to teach them (and their descendants) to be its stewards. But the grippli made poor students, the tribe more interested savagery & superstition and eager to raid as their martial capabilities were increased thanks to the emergence of ever stronger warriors, mutated sorcerers, and blood druids. The band was fecund, split into competing tribes which warred with one another and even launched raids outside the swamp (limited by their sensitivity to cold).
Afrindi despaired; he knew of no other with the necessary power or skill who could be convinced to continue his work. Every druid circle on the continent saw his creation as an abomination and the gnome as a great heretic of the Green Faith.
Nearing the end of his natural life and running out of options, Afrindi twisted his druidic magic and poured himself into a new species of fungus he’d spliced together from multiple strains. He would live on, his body and spirit spread throughout fungus. The core of his essence would perch at the dam he’d first constructed, the place where the flow of Tarrasque viscera was at its strongest and where he would digest & grow even as the outflow of Salt in Wounds increased. Since his death/transcendence, an initial knot of fungus which consumed his body and transformed his essence has grown into a castle sized core of fungus at the center of the Heartsblood Marsh, where Afrindi’s face can still be seen and spoken with; the so-called ‘Fungal Sieve’ which soaks in and tastes nearly everything that flows down the red river. From here, Afrindi is able to shepherd the swamp via pheromone communication. He uses spores to the capture and enslave any who would threaten his creation, and in his new form he guides the warring tribes of grippli who worship Afrindi/the Fungal Sieve as a God.

# Locations

Tribes Moot

Paladin’s Last Stand

## The Fungal Sieve

*Controlling Dungeon/Creature at the Core of Heartsblood Marsh*

**History**

After spending decades of his life establishing [Heartsblood Marsh](http://www.saltinwoundssetting.com/2015/10/the-heartsblood-marsh.html), Afrindi Gunterhix despaired. Given its artificial nature, he didn’t have faith that the marsh would continue serving its purpose without a steward. The grippli he’d imported had descended to base savagery, and every other druid he contacted considered his life’s work an abomination. Without other options, Afrindi decided that he would have to live on and guide the [Heartsblood Marsh](http://www.saltinwoundssetting.com/2015/10/the-heartsblood-marsh.html) beyond his lifespan and his mortal frame. To that end, he created/merged with the Fungal Sieve - the pulsating core of the swamp.
The mad druid combined several types of fungus (including [Ophiocordyceps unilateralis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ophiocordyceps_unilateralis)) and teased these into the form of a chimeric fungus. Gestating the new growth near the dam he’d built to shunt the Tarrasque blood tainted waters into the thousand twisting streamlets of Heartsblood Marsh; the Fungal Sieve grew quickly. It filtered as much magic (as well as any indigestible inorganic matter) out of the Red River, forcing treasures and junk alike into pockets and pores spread about its body. And as it grew, Afrindi Gunterhix poured his essence into it until the gnome was nothing more than an empty husk and the gnarled weave of fungus reached the size of a small fortress.
When Afrindi’s body finally fell, lifeless, it was absorbed by the Fungal Sieve. At the core of the creature/structure, it is said that Afrindi’s face can still be seen and spoken to. However, this is only the word of the most devout grippli that worship the Fungal Sieve as a God.
Recently, the sieve has begun to spore. Rather than creating viable copies of itself, the sieve instead put out a fine mist of spores capable of infecting vertebrates, shooting fungal tendrils deep into the afflicted creature’s flesh. Any creature thus infected is compelled to work tirelessly to increase the amount of organic material fed into the sieve’s massive filter/grinders and otherwise tend to Heartsblood Marsh according to the designs of Afrindi. Fourth generation Grippli sometimes choose infection as a religious right.
Currently, the sieve has the intelligence of an average human being, although an entirely alien mindset. It primarily uses scent to understand the world, with this sensory information being processed through an intricate series of thousands of olfactory pits (making sneaking up on it potentially impossible) and it communicates with its off-shoots and servitors via overlapping mists of pheromones. Though only as intelligent as an average human, the Fungal Sieve has access to vast stores of knowledge, absorbing the collected memories of every sentient being it has digested. Nearing capacity with its current river and sensing a nearby food source of tremendous, limitless capacity, the fungal side of the sieve has begun to grow its next iteration of spores; ones that are intended to drift downwind to create child copies of itself. Thus far, Afrindi has been able to stifle this biological imperative.

**Layout**

The sieve is riddled with tubules large enough for a human sized creature to crawl through (or a child sized creature to walk through). It is also full of room size bladders and empty organs, in which a variety of strange creatures seek shelter (including the spore infectees). These are used by the sieve to force air, water, and other important matter throughout its body. Hostile creatures attempting to move throughout these tubules will most likely have to face crushing, grappling damage alternated with washes of digestive enzymes or water (in addition to housed creatures and parasites) as the sieve attempts to kill any intruders.
Near its core are its filter-grinders – thick, web-like strands of fungus coated with alternating rows of bony growths. Blood Tainted Water and food is shot through this area and matter is digested or sorted and squeezed out to the rest of the sieve’s body. These filter-grinders can also be reached more easily by following the stream’s path directly into the core of the sieve; but the fast rushing flow of water over innumerable rapids make such entry perilous.
Above the filter-grinders looms the face of Afrindi, thick strands of fungus rooted into his eyes and translating the olfactory senses of the sieve into something approaching vision.
The sieve is slowly crawling upstream towards Salt in Wounds at the rate of about a tenth of a mile a day.

**Treasure**

Several pounds worth of precious metals (gold, silver, and platinum) can be found secreted in specially shaped bulbous protrusions. In addition, scattered throughout the sieve are the remains of numerous adventurers and others that have been consumed – while all organic material (including leather, paper, or any animal or plant product) long since been digested the sieve protects its soft, vulnerable innards from inorganic, metal objects (like weapons and armor) by encapsulating such things in semi transparent cysts scattered throughout its body.

**Race Grippli**

**Background Marsh Touched**

# Monsters

Grippli/Bullywug

Heartsblood Marsh is full of savage Grippli. Most of these creatures worship the [Fungal Sieve](http://www.saltinwoundssetting.com/2015/10/the-fungal-sieve.html) as a god and nearly all of whom are relentlessly hostile to outsiders. A large portion of
these creatures exhibit the rage like abilities of barbarians or the powers of sorcerers thanks to a diet heavily tainted with Tarrasque blood.

## Green Dragons (Wyrmlings and Young)

While (a still mortal) Afrindi was exploring a southern swamp while searching for fungal cultures he was confronted by a territorial green dragon. After a tremendous battle the gnomish druid emerged victorious and discovered a wonder; a clutch of unhatched eggs. After transporting them back to the HeartsBlood Marsh, Afrindi now keeps them in a special chamber within the Fungal Sieve where he uses alternating hot and cold to perform a staggered hatching schedule.

When the dragon hatchlings first emerge, Afrindi attempts to infest them with mind controlling fungus. However, this has largely been an unsuccessful effort and (besides of cadre of fiercely loyal young and wyrmling green dragons) Heartsblood Marsh is now home to dozens of uncontrolled green dragons all vying for dominance and prey. The incredible fecundity of the marsh supports a higher population than would be possible elsewhere but does nothing to temper the territoriality of the dragons. Some ‘heretical’ bands of grippli serve the most powerful of these green dragon young instead of the fungal sieve.

## Giant Invertebrates

Afrindi bred and magically transformed numerous species of regular invertebrates and insects to serve as important links in the Heartsblood Marsh food web. These creatures are preyed upon (and sometimes prey on) the other occupants of the marsh in addition to being trained and utilized as beasts of burden/mounts by certain grippli clans.

## Giant Frogs

Where there are giant insects, so too are giant frogs; the largest of which can measure up to twelve foot long.

## Leshy/Blights

Formed from the fungal tendrils that are woven throughout Heartsblood Marsh, these mushroom shaped blights differ little from similar creatures formed of vegetative matter. One key difference however, is that all Heartsblood Marsh blights are formed with a direct connection to the Fungal Sieve and created with a specific purpose in mind. However, once that purpose is served, they are generally left to their own devices (which usually involves laying in ambush for prey). It should be noted that, even when directly connected to the mind of Afrindi the former druid’s madness can see various groups of blights working at apparent cross purposes.

Sieve Slaves

Creatures and animals exposed to the sieve’s spores have a chance of being infected and colonized by the sieve. Fungal tendrils spread throughout the creature’s body and upon colonization by the sieve the infected are compelled to dump food ‘upriver’ of the sieve so that it can flow/float into the creature and be absorbed, or to dig ever longer the trenches the divert Tarrasque tainted water into the fungal fields of [Heartsblood Marsh](http://www.saltinwoundssetting.com/2015/10/the-heartsblood-marsh.html).
Marching and working its converts past the point of collapse and exhaustion, the sieve will then callously digest any infested that has outlived its usefulness.
If threatened, the sieve will compel all its infected to rush to its aid; these creatures will fight to unconsciousness to defeat anything the sieve deems a threat. Infected do not control their own physical actions but can talk and think, most of them have long since screamed themselves hoarse calling ineffectual for help or sobbing. Almost all sieve slaves have seen the fate of the infected no longer able to feed the sieve.
One of the creatures currently enslaved carries on his person a small vial filled with an antifungal powder powerful enough to kill the sieve as well as instructions on how it might be used. Unfortunately, it will only be effective if applied directly to the filter-grinders without dilution; if attempted to be applied elsewhere the sieve’s ability to regenerate and chemically adapt will make the attack less than lethal.