

The Undercroft

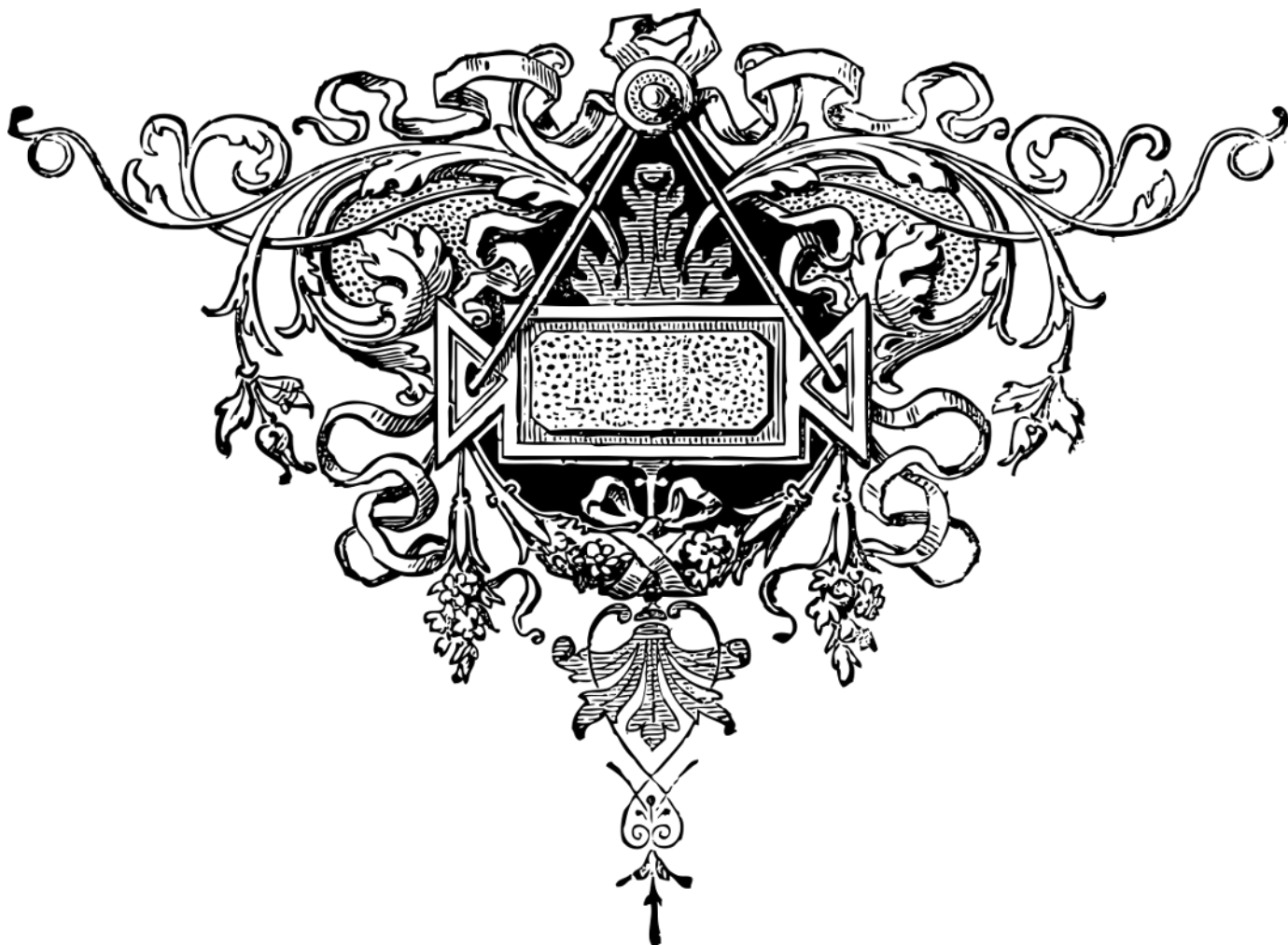




Melsonian Arts Council, 2014

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while England is upturn'd

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lead by a Dark Star to the Fern Court

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an old man, & a bridge

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& Dragons clones



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Our Bees Make Honey

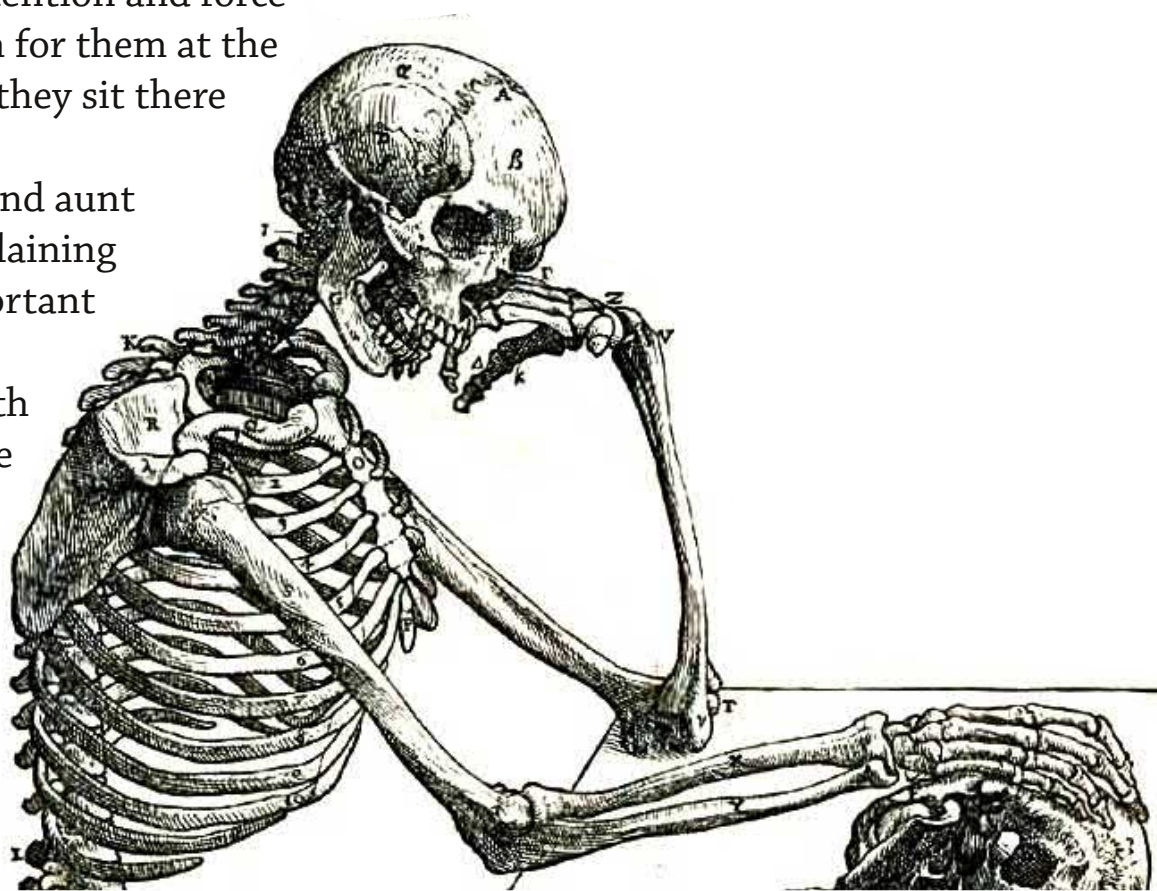
an editorial

We return again, sooner than ever before, stripped back, packed tight and full of interesting people. Mercenaries and forest men, neither what they appear to be, both examined in their own way and at length, sprawled at their leisure across the lion's share of the issue. More than just transferable actors, they are part of the worlds from which they come and can bring it with them if you allow it. Each being so situated that admitting to their existence is tantamount to accepting the place that spawned them; the civil disorder and portentous forest suggest themselves through these ambassadors, and this is a *good thing*. Let them into your campaigns untouched and then rejoice as you create beautiful rationales for their existence.

Accompanying and complimenting this are the capable word craftings of Alex Clements who kindly plays us out. Prick up your ears to hear his tinkle of Pratchett and let the bass undertones of *The Wizard Knight* wash over your sweaty eyeballs as you read his welcomed return to *The Undercroft*.

You will see that nothing sits comfortably into genre this edition, all elbows and knees. These are the kind of things one looks for when running a campaign. People and places and things and ideas that don't mesh, that demand your attention and force you to find room for them at the table. But when they sit there beside old uncle

Drunkendwarf and aunt Lawfulcleric explaining why it is so important that they mix seminal fluid with the gravy lest the stars find them, then you will understand.



-Daniel Sell

van Steen's Company

by Barry Blatt

Mercenaries were not used in the English Civil War, the great days of the Condottieri and Landesknechts was a century before, and besides neither King nor Parliament had enough money to pay their regular troops let alone hire foreigners on top. In the wars of religion in the Netherlands and Holy Roman Empire men from the British Isles had served in armies they shared a faith with, though a few very hard up ones may have been more motivated by the money. When civil war broke out in Charles' Three Kingdoms few men from a war weary continent in the last stages of what would be later known as the Thirty Years War would come and fight, with the notable exception of Prince Rupert of the Rhine and his German retainers.

Which makes van Steen's Company wandering Kent in the summer of 1643 a bit of an oddity. They appear to be Calvinists, a small party of maybe 40 men with black coats, pikemen's armour, morions with black cockades and orange sashes, armed with arquebuses and tucks¹. They have some other peculiarities, as Captain David Yaxley of the Lt-Gen Wemyss' Firelocks² explains:

'The Dutch are damned well drilled, damned well. They load and fire with an efficiency I can only dream of inculcating into my Kentish farmboys. They stand cool as you like and volley either three ranks at once in the Swedish style or in a roll, one rank after the other, in a waterfall of shot that is marvellous to behold and hell to face I'm sure. Serious about their work and steadfast in their faith as well, never saw one of 'em flinch, never heard one of 'em curse - and even the most Godly of our troops have a few choice words to say when they are sighting down the barrel at a Royalist. It's almost like they have the Ten Commandments tattooed on the inside of their eyelids, and a manual of arms as well.'

Eliza Lamb of Greenhithe has a few things to say as well:

'It was my son Harry, I'm sure of it, I'd know him anywhere. They say he went missing at Brentford last year, fighting the King's lapdog Prince Rupert. But when I shouted out to him he didn't hear, when I grabbed his coat he just marched on, said nothing. They say I'm mistaken, he was a Dutch boy just happens to look like my Harry, but it's him, I know it.'

Observing the Company shows them to be, as Yaxley says, a very serious lot, marching in lockstep everywhere, responding to their sergeants orders immediately and efficiently, something not often seen at this stage of the war before the advent of the New Model Army. And the silence is unnerving. There is no chit chat and joking in the back ranks when on the march, no muttered curses when they enemy come into view, and, most suspiciously, not even any prayers as action becomes immanent. They do not drink to excess, do not smoke and do not complain about the rations. In fact only their captain and sergeant speak much at all.

The orders barked by their sergeant are of course in Dutch - or so everyone assumes. A cleric or magic user of sufficiently broad learning might notice that the orders are actually in Hebrew. And when the rest of the troops get a nice fat pig or flitch of bacon, the 'Dutch' will still be eating bread and cheese or pottage. They also lag behind the army from time to time. They set up camp early on Friday, make a smart set of tents, or reserve exclusive use of a barn or stable, and do not stir again until sunset on Saturday, making forced marches to catch up with any army they are attached to.

Who they really are

There has been no Jewish community in England since 1290, when King Edward expelled them all. They settled in the northern provinces of the Holy Roman Empire and in Poland, and after further bouts of persecution and flight they lost all sense of their history. Eventually the religious freedom established in the United Provinces after the expulsion of the Spanish attracted many Jewish settlers, including some whose ancestors were once English. One such is Lodowijk Franken, whose father studied under Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel in Prague, the famous golem-maker, and who is a descendant of Solomon of Southwark, a Jewish craftsman killed while trying to flee England in 1290.

Golems, the proper nigh-on indestructible ones made of clay, are difficult to make and take the prayers of whole synagogues-loads of Rabbis to activate and the cunning of a genius of Kabbalistic scholarship like Rabbi Loew to program. Franken, exposed to the esoteric and scientific learning of half Europe in Amsterdam, has researched a magical shortcut. A ritual involving tattooing the Hebrew word for Truth on the scalp of a living human creates a Demi-Golem, and he got the chance to put this into practice when a corrupt Royalist colonel tried to sell a group of Parliamentary prisoners to a Dutch merchantman in Chester. The Dutch acquired a reputation for such dubious dealing in England since a Dutch convert to Islam, Jan Janszoon, aka Murat Reis, had raided England and Ireland for slaves to sell to the Ottoman Turks in the 1620s.



Captain Willem van Steen was indeed a man of considerable moral flexibility and took up the offer at the suggestion of Franken, his ship's surgeon. The prisoners were converted. Franken could at last pursue his dream. Solomon of Southwark had made certain magical bronze heads for the Knights Templar. When the edict of expulsion came he had pleaded for help at the Temple in London, and Guy de Foresta, Master of the Temple, had personally killed him on the church steps. The dissolution of the Templars a few years later was a fairly quiet process in England, there were none of the show trials that happened in France, and it is entirely possible that the heads made by Solomon might still be found at one of the old Templar fiefs, such as Temple Ewell or Strood in Kent, or Temple Cressing in Essex.

Masquerading as a bunch of Calvinist soldiers gives Steen, Franken and their odd little troop the excuse to commit all kinds of iconoclastic acts, trashing old churches and smashing statues of saints was a favourite pastime of the Parliamentary troops, so their raids on the round Templar chapels would not be too out of place.

They are currently playing at being proper soldiers, hoping to win the trust of the Parliamentary command and to get papers that will allow them to wander more freely around the country. Franken is positive the Templars will have left some nasty surprises behind for anyone trying to take their old treasures, and suspects they are still a going concern who will need to be fought at some point, hence the body of troops.

Captain Willem van Steen

Level 3 Fighter (Alignment: Cavalier Neutral, Religion: Lutheran)

Cha 14 Con 12 Dex 10 Int 12 Str 15 Wis 8

AC 17 HP 20 Melee AB +5 Missile AB +4

Languages: Dutch, English, French, Portuguese

- Sword (with basket hilt usable as a cestus)
- Flintlock pistol
- Brass key to treasure chest
- Pikeman's armour with buff coat, morion and tassets
- Brass pectoral (see Demi-Golem below)
- Purse with 2 gold sovereigns (gp), 5 shillings (sp) and 12 pence (cp)
- Gold earring (2gp)

Willem is in his thirties, tall and square jawed with a receding hairline. He is greedy and was easily persuaded by a Charm Person spell from his ship's surgeon to go along with his nefarious scheme on the promise of great wealth. Willem is only in it for the money, he makes pious noises about the need to get rid of Catholic influence and the desirability of establishing a republican government in England as they have in the Netherlands but doesn't really give a hoot. He has sold African slaves in Brazil, tried to sell Portuguese captives as slaves to the English planters of Barbados (he offloaded a few) and has no qualms about using the English prisoners as Demi-Golems. In fact he has grand plans for expanding this side of the business, with Franken's magic and few cheap slaves he could turn the tide of the war with the Portuguese over Brazil and secure the western Dutch Empire.

Sergeant Lodowijk Franken

Level 7 Magic User (Alignment: Roundhead Neutral, Religion: Jewish)

Cha 11 **Con** 8 **Dex** 14 **Int** 16 **Str** 13 **Wis** 13

AC 15 **HP** 18 **Melee AB** +1 **Missile AB** +2

Languages: Dutch, English, Bohemian, Hebrew, Latin

- Spontoon (Polearm)
- Rapier (with a basket hilt usable as a cestus)
- Flintlock pistol
- Morion and buff coat
- Brass key to treasure chest, brass key to book chest
- One phial of Digby's Weapon Salve³, a fine blue powder, five doses
- Brass pectoral (see Demi-Golem below)
- Surgeon's tools
- Five gold guilders (gp) sewn into hem of buff coat
- Purse with a sovereign, 3 shillings and fourpence
- Folded black velvet yarmulke in a red velvet bag

Memorised spells:

1 Charm Person, 1 Enlarge, 1 Mending, 2 ESP, 2 Mirror Image, 2 Phantasmal Force, 3 Phantasmal Psychedelia, 3 Suggestion, 4 Hallucinatory Terrain

Lodowijk Franken is in his mid forties, a short but broad chested man with large deft hands, a friendly smile, greying black hair and green eyes. His day job was as a barber-surgeon, but he came from a long line of magicians and always had little magical side projects like the Weapon Salve. When he finally got to inherit his father's notebooks from his days in Prague he found out about his family connection to England and spent a lot of money on researching how to create Demi-Golems. He signed up as a ship's surgeon to get a chance to scout out Templar ruins in England, but the war has complicated matters.

He is mildly guilty about what he has done to the prisoners, and keeps a notebook with what details of their next of kin he can glean, and in the event of a death he writes a letter to them in the name of Lord Fairfax, with various false heroic tales of how they died facing the awful cavaliers. He has two sons of about the age of some of the younger men in the company, and he has some sympathy for their parents.

Not that that has stopped him making plans to create a female Demi-Golem, programming her with pornography and seeing what the result might be. He thinks he can deprogram the golems by simply making a scar through the tattooed letters on their heads, or maybe by removing the skin entirely. It would be a nasty wound, but at least they would be their own men again.

He is not entirely sure what the Templar's brazen heads actually did. He thinks they were intended as repositories for the knowledge and personalities of dead Grand Masters of the Order to be consulted as oracles. In his opinion the garbled tales spouted by the Hermetic alchemists and Rosicrucians about homunculi and turning base material into imperishable gold allude to this; the soul's abandonment of the imperfect body of flesh to inhabit a perfect and immortal body of metal, clay or stone. Rabbi Loew of Prague worked with clay, but there is nothing in the Sefir Yetzirah to rule out other materials.

Joachim Franken

Level 1 Cleric (Alignment: Neutral, Religion; Jewish)

Cha 11 **Con** 9 **Dex** 9 **Int** 11 **Str** 13/+1 **Wis** 14/+1

AC 16 **HP** 6 **Melee AB** +2, **Missile AB** +1

Languages: Dutch, poor Hebrew, very broken English

- Buffcoat
- Morion
- Pikeman's armour
- Tuck¹
- Drum
- Purse with 2 shillings and four pennies
- Black velvet yarmulke in a red velvet bag
- Bible (old testament)

Memorised Spells:

1 Sanctuary

Joachim is fifteen, Lodowijk's youngest son and the company's drummer. He has had some education at a Jewish religious school in Amsterdam and Lodowijk would very much like him to go on to become a Rabbi, but he needs to raise more cash for fees. Joachim is a surly lout and a bully, but he is the apple of Lodowijk's eye and is endlessly forgiven. He has gained a taste for English beer and for adventure and wouldn't mind becoming a merchant like van Steen. His drum is unusual in that it has a Seal of Solomon (a well known magic symbol) painted on the upper surface.

Marco Bisset

Level 1 Specialist (Alignment: Cavalier Republican, Religion: Huguenot)

Cha 7 **Con** 17 **Dex** 16 **Int** 5 **Str** 9 **Wis** 7

AC 14 **HP** 8 **Melee AB** +1, **Missile AB** +3

Languages: French, poor Dutch

Skills: Stealth 3, Sleight 2, Tinker 2

- Knife
- Penny whistle
- Pouch with 8 pence

Marco is about 20 and is a pretty sorry sight. He was a soldier in a Walloon unit which went to help the Catholic League in the wars of Religion in Germany. Marco is not the brightest of souls and did not really grasp the religious aspect of the conflict, and when the rest of the troop found out he was a protestant they decided he must be a spy for the other side and tortured him. He has no ears, just burnt scar tissue and his left hand was severely burned and is a useless clenched claw. He is however pretty tough and escaped to find refuge in the United Provinces where he survived by begging and petty crime until van Steen took him on as a sailor. Marco currently leads the company's two mules and helps around the camp.

He knows Lodowijk casts spells on people and is terrified of being turned into something unnatural if he lets on, and is terrified of van Steen because of the severe beatings he gives out. He is now picked on mercilessly by Joachim too. Anyone who shows him some kindness may be able to persuade him to betray the operations secrets as far as he knows them.

The Company have two mules. There is a treasure chest, a stout wooden strongbox that contains 12 Dutch gold guilders, 6 English gold sovereigns, 65 English silver shillings and 472 copper pennies. Both Lodowijk and van Steen have a key and there is a cashbook inside with withdrawals and deposits countersigned by both men.

There is also a larger book chest containing Lodowijk's magical gear. It is a sturdy iron bound item with a brass lock which has in addition been *Wizard Locked*. The chest has a secret compartment in the base where the spell book has been hidden.

Spellbook

Spells are in 1-4 Hebrew, 5 Dutch, 6-7 Bohemian, 8 Latin

Level 1 Bookspeak, Charm Person, Comprehend Languages, Detect Magic, Enlarge, Identify, Magic Aura, Mending

Level 2 ESP, Forget, Knock, Locate Object, Mirror Image, Phantasmal Force, Wizard Lock
3 Explosive Runes, Phantasmal Psychedelia, Secret Page, Speak With Dead, Suggestion
4 Creation, Minor, Hallucinatory Terrain

- *Sefir Yetzirah*, (rare book in Hebrew worth 500sp in a research library)
- *Talmud* (in Hebrew, worth 50sp in magical research) including a page concealed by the Secret Page spell bearing the formula for creating a Demi-Golem
- *Apologia Compendiaria* by Robert Fludd (in Latin, worth 50sp)
- Pamphlet on weapon salve by Sir Kenelm Digby (in English, worth 100sp)
- Diagram of the Tetragrammaton which has Explosive Runes cast on it
- A small box containing a tattooing needle and some ink
- Manual of Exercise with the Musket (in English, illustrated, marginal notes in Hebrew)
- A commonplace book with the names and contact details of the next of kin of all the demi-golems currently in the company, plus notes on herbal remedies, surgical techniques, magic formulae, in a mixture of languages, mostly Dutch
- A cheap erotic chapbook entitled 'In the Sultan's Harem', with lurid inked woodcut illustrations
- Some pieces of vellum marked with Hebrew letters - they will be found to be translations from the 'Sultan's Harem' book
- Some scraps of chamois leather

The mules also carry a barrel of gunpowder, plenty of shot, waterskins, tents and rations.

The Demi-Golems

The enchantment involves having the word 'emet', the Hebrew for 'truth', tattooed on their scalps. The hair is then allowed to regrow, but the word may be visible on more recent acquisitions.

The demi-golems follow the commands of anyone wearing one of the enchanted brass pectorals, and knows the meaning of each word due to a 'program' called a 'shem' in Hebrew, a strip of fine vellum written in miniscule Hebrew writing describing the matchlock drill and the actions to be taken at each command, plus various phrases from the *Sefir Yetzirah*. These are folded up, sewn into pouches of thin chamois leather and placed in the demi-golem's mouth.

Removing the package will remove the programming and the golem will be immobile and able to follow only the simplest commands, which must be issued in Hebrew, and that slowly (-2 initiative). When acting within the program they act quickly and efficiently.

They have double the normal maximum hit points of a normal first level fighter, but if the golem enchantment is removed, the extra hit points are lost immediately and if the golem is injured he may be killed by his wounds.

Demi-Golems may be healed by normal medical means, but only have half effect from clerical cure wounds spells and are healed 1d4 hp by a Magic User's Mending spell.

The Demi-Golems are subject to a few religious restrictions. They must not be active on the Jewish Sabbath, and Lodowijk will remove all the program packets before sundown on Friday. If this is not done they will begin to run amok. They must also not eat pork, again, this will make them run amok.

Their drill with a matchlock is excellent, as long as they have their program held in their mouths. They can reload in a mere six rounds if using an apostle and if the commands are issued promptly, and have a +2 ranged combat bonus. A missing command will leave them hanging, unable to continue, and they are unable to act on their own

initiative as they have none. They can fight hand to hand, but their reliance on drilled moves and inability to think on their feet means they have +0 melee combat bonus. Without the program they have -2 combat bonus. Each has a strip of tin on a leather thong bearing a number, which correspond to the notes in Lodowijk's commonplace book. Only number 12 and 17 have died so far, and the highest number is 38.



A Magic-User may control a number of demi golems equal to his Int+Wis+Cha+Level using a magical brass pectoral plate modelled on the ones used by old priests at the Jerusalem Temple. These are three inches square and bear an engraved Shield of Solomon with the tetragrammaton (YHWH) in Hebrew letters. Each has four semi-precious stones, a jet, a milk opal, a tiger's eye and a malachite, set in the corners. Anyone wearing such a plate may issue orders to a Demi-Golem, and Magic User may make one such plate per level for use by officers and allies at a cost of 150gp.

If two people are trying to control the same golem roll 1d10 add Int, Wis and Cha bonuses and add Magic User level, the highest wins. On a tie the Demi-Golem dithers and does nothing, taking 1d6 damage as the magical conflict damages its brain.

A successful Dispel Magic will temporarily free the Demi-Golem from control, but if the tattoo remains intact it will have to save vs spells at each subsequent command it is given or be brought back under control.

The ritual takes three hours, is equivalent to a third level spell and requires knowledge of Charm Person, Forget, Suggestion and fluency in Hebrew to perform. Research using the Sefir Yetzira, Talmud and Hebrew Old Testament should enable a magic user to find a spoken magical formula that will release a Demi-Golem immediately and permanently.

Thirty-six Demi-Golems

AC 16 HP 15+1d6, Saves as first level fighter,

Melee AB +0 Ranged AB +2

- Tuck¹
- Matchlock
- 12 apostles
- Pikeman's armour
- Buff coat
- Morion
- Numbered tin tag
- Water flask

If critically hit with a bladed weapon there is a 5% chance that the blow has dislodged the Morion and damaged the tattoo holding the golem in thrall. The freed man will lose 1d6 rounds in a daze as he tries to work out how he came to be where he is and will lose half his maximum hit points.



Demi-Golems save vs spells as the same chance as their creator and controller, in this case 10, and are immune to any mind affecting magic and Sleep spells.

The squad can all fire simultaneously if lined up in three twelve man files, a devastating volley. Anyone in front must save three times vs Breath Weapon with Dex as a modifier, +4 if at medium range, +8 if at long range, and get an additional +2 for having pikeman's armour if at medium range or further. They will take 2d8 damage, halved if they make one save, halved again if they make two, and none at all if they make all three. The maximum effect on any large group of targets is 36d8.

Their other tactic is three rotating lines, and they can loose 12 shots every second round at +4 to hit from aiming

¹The Tuck is the ubiquitous side arm of the English Civil war, a rather crudely made version of the Italian Estoc churned out by ordinary blacksmiths. They are short and pointed and are intended to slip between the plates of full armour, but in practice are used like a gladius or other typical shortsword. They do 1d6 damage and have -2 to hit against anyone wearing AC15 or more. The fancy Italian originals have +2 to hit against AC 15+

²Wemyss's Firelocks were artillery guards and used expensive but fast loading flintlock muskets to keep cavalry away from the guns. They could also double as artillerymen. Artillery in the ECW was not particularly effective; large caliber guns were few and far between thanks to the King's skimping on military expenditure during the period of personal rule.

³Digby's Weapon Salve is a peculiar medical preparation that must be applied to the weapon that caused a given wound. This will heal 1d4 points of damage to any extant injury caused by that weapon at whatever distance, but will corrode the weapon into uselessness at the same time. It is simplicity itself to make according to Sir Kenelm Digby's recipe - 'Take Roman vitriol [copper sulphate] six or eight ounces, beat it very small in a mortar, shift it through a fine sieve when the sun enters Leo; keep it in the heat of the sun and dry by night.' It takes 1d6 days to make and costs 25sp a day per dose. It has no effect on poison nor on infected wounds, but Franken has found it useful in gunshot wounds where the ball it easily recovered from the injury and treated.

The Cunning Men of the Fern Court

by Daniel Sell

*Putrefaction of the wise their raven-head.
When you see the blackness delight,
For it is the beginning of your work.*

-Tattoo found on the palms of Baldanders, cunning man

Folk tales are the leavings of an irrational mind, a black pearl formed around an ill-sitting grain of truth. It is passed around the fire, each hand polishing it more so they can better see the fear on their own faces. But the grain remains and some are not so distracted by the black mirror, intent on staring deeper.

Their arrival wasn't planned. First one, then another, drawn by dreams of a dark sun rising above the primordial canopy of the Fern Court. They didn't know what it was or what would happen when it rose, but they were compelled to find answers. The forest speaks to those with an ear for it, but it talks in omen and subtle metaphor, a growing knot that the cunning can unravel. And they were cunning. They, the kindly ones, the painted folk, the cunning men.

The Fern Court is old, the woods are deep, thick and storied. The villages found there hide behind palisades choked with rose vines, closing their ears to the scratching at the door. The homesteads and charcoal burners are far and wary, the pathways to their homes littered with charms and fetishes against the night. The people on its borders share stories of children being taken from their beds to dance under its boughs.

Indeed, those who call the forest home are isolated, paranoid and prone to eccentricity, but it is not the realm of death one is lead to believe. Merchants cross it, lords claim it, and the very story tellers decrying it lived to learn and continue their tellings.

The forest men have long memories, and the cunning men loom large in them. A monolith of stability, as permanent and old as the forest, a coming and going as regular and inevitable as the seasons, roaming where their calloused feet take them. The woodsmen might not question the attention of so many magical practitioners but the cunning men do. Each of them was drawn to this place, haunted by dreams and omens until they found themselves beneath its rancorous branches. Now they spend their energies trying to understand why, what brought them here and what the black sun means.

Within the small and quiet world of the woodsmen the tattooed face of the cunning man is a good omen. They rove from settlement to settlement swapping news in exchange for food and shelter, sitting by hearths and hearing what news they have in turn, seeing their sick and blessing their children, and as the nights go on his questions will come. He will ask about the owls and the milk, about the patterns in the frost. Have they seen Baldanders? Did the sparrowhawk fly east at dawn? Did it return by night?

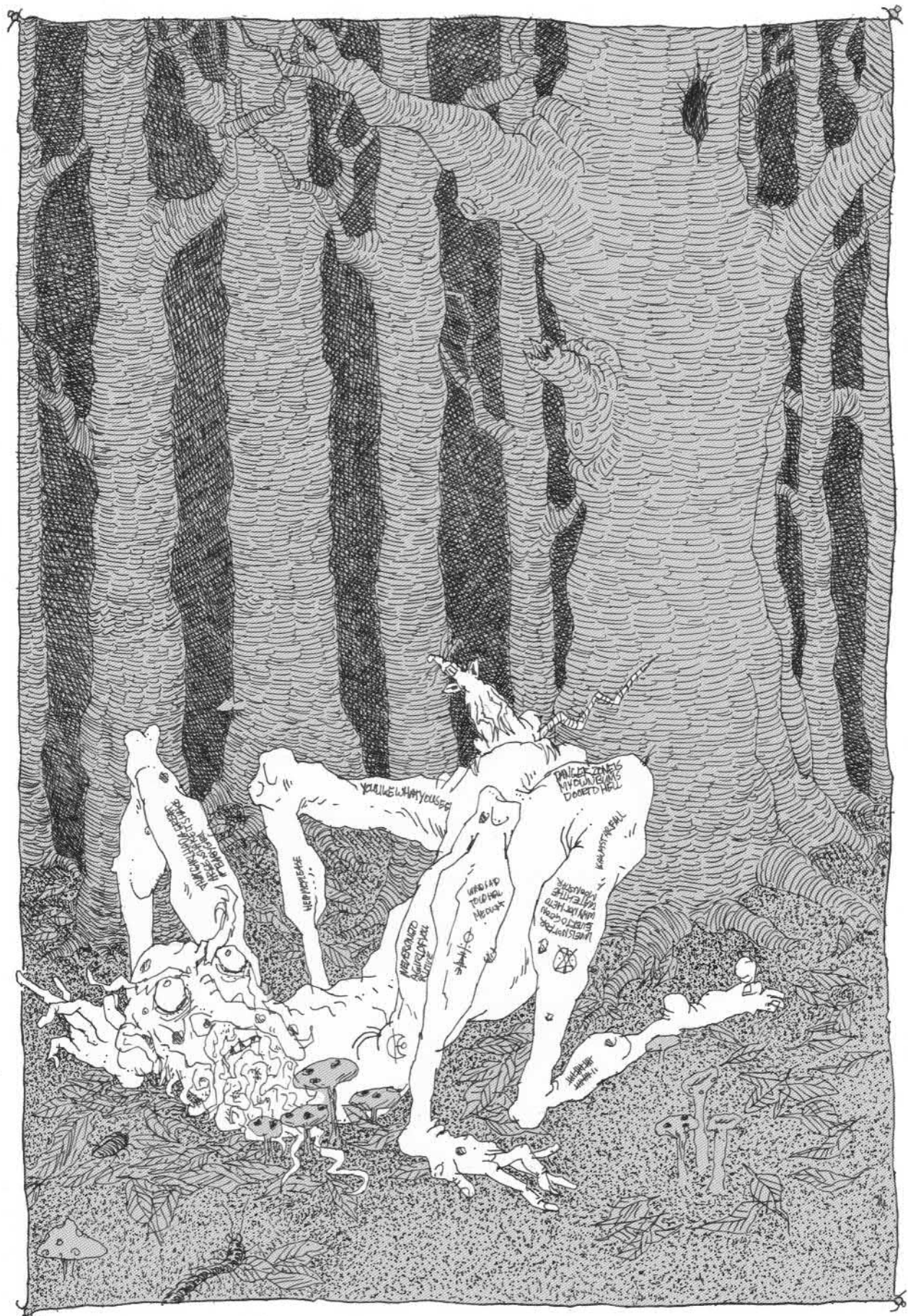
They will answer and he will leave, satisfied but burdened.

Their covenant is both newer and more organised than it would at first seem. Though they travel widely they always return to the seasonal moot to unload their weighted minds. Unusual amongst practitioners of the cunning arts, they share knowledge freely. Every scrap and clue is kept in the hopes of leading to answers, every detail tattooed on their flesh. Volumes are inscribed in their private script, in streaks and swirls the letters abound. In there is everything that they must know, both magical and mundane, it will be preserved and never stolen like other tradition's books of spells so easily lost or destroyed. They stand before their peers, sky clad, and allow an inspection of the season's happenings.

When one of their number dies they take great pains to retrieve and prepare them for one final moot. Their skin is dried and stretched, displayed on a rack for all to come and learn from before it is destroyed utterly.

Stories in Flesh

The Cunning Men have adopted an unusual method for recording their work, that of tattooing it directly into the flesh, most often by rubbing ash or other matter to hand into fresh cuts. This scarification negates the risk of losing their notes to an environment rife with wet, rot, and fungus but comes with its own particular disadvantages. Though you can not lose your skin (at least while you live), you can damage it. If a cunning man is severely wounded they may lose some essential segments (*when below OHP 1 in 6 chance of losing one random known spell*), and if they die a violent death it is very likely much of their work dies with them (*lose 1d6 spells per known spell level*). The moot will recover it all the same and carefully stitch it together as best they can, but what answers will be lost?



Babble

Magic-User Level 1

Duration:

As long as the caster concentrates and does nothing else

Range:

Sight

The cunning man uses words wisely, and wise people fear the cunning words. They are a bridge between minds and can be used to gain access to the unwary, common knowledge amongst the justly superstitious woodsmen

The caster whispers unintelligibly while staring intently at his target. While the muttering continues the fellow will be unable to get their words out, spluttering and becoming confused. Additionally the caster may force the target to say one thing, one single sentence.

This trick can be performed with subtlety, where onlookers would only see the caster muttering like one whose mind had withered roots.

The Spleenful Led

Magic-User Level 1

Duration:

Until the next sunrise

Range:

Unlimited

The trails of the Fern Court are fickle and old. They confuse the mind with such poetic timing as to suggest a malignant awareness; eloping lovers will be separated and bloodied merchants will be circled back to their pursuers. The cunning mind can make use of this spiteful logic.

The caster must have in their possession a fragment of the target: a strand of hair, seminal fluid, toenail, blood and such. With this, they must bind it in mud or clay and throw it as far as they can, out of sight. The target must save vs. magic or from then until the next morning be unable to find their way.

For that period they cannot reliably find their way anywhere without someone leading them forcefully. They will take wrong turns, leave the trail and generally wander aimlessly.

Protection from Rain

Magic-User Level 1

Duration:

1 hour per level

Range:

Self

On the darkest night in the most vicious storm the most remote charcoal burner can still expect a knock on their door with a muddy, tattooed fist.

The caster is immune to the effects of turbulent weather. No rain nor hail will touch him, lightning will dance around him, the wind will die at his tread. But only him, mind. The elements have no strong feelings for his companions.

Read Entrails The search for answers consumes the cunning men's lives now. Everything holds meaning, nothing is indiscriminate, we must go deeper.

Magic-User Level 1

Duration:

One disembowling

Range:

Touch

The creature being used for this spell must be slaughtered especially for this purpose. Creatures stumbled upon or killed for utilitarian purposes are not suitable. For each HD of sacrifice the cunning man may find a vague detail of the answer to one question in the entrails. Hair colour, mannerisms, times, smells, all delivered in as obscure a manner as possible.

Pick Up Sticks

Magic-User Level 1

Duration:

D6 rounds to pick everything up

Range:

5 metres

The cunning men were drawn by the developing patterns of the forest. They can see a dark future creating its own troubled past. A lightning-struck fir, a rotten fairy circle, hard faces in the burr, all figures in an unwinding tableau that they strive to understand. Solutions are not expected but an understanding is essential to placate the gnashing of their minds.

Some signs are not so subtle as to require a mind awash with magic; the woodsmen mistrust the owls and know to shutter their windows on the new moon. With the knowledge of how the forest connects meanings the caster throws a pocket full of twigs, bones, furs and feathers in the air. Those viewing must save vs. magic or fall to the ground obsessively picking up the assorted debris.

Can effect 2HD of sentient targets per caster level.

The Even Flow

I say to you that I am the thing itself, but you must not touch me; within me lies the seed of all animals, herbs and ores.

-Leadbeater while attending to the Margrave's daughter

Magic-User Level 1

Duration:

Instant

Range:

Sight

Used, as they are, to the queer messages of the woods it's no stretch of their skills to apply a seasoned eye to the flow within a person. The caster lets his vision hover somewhere between here and elsewhere, revealing the ailments and troubles in a body. With this they can determine how someone is feeling, if they are sick and why it is so. If the sickness is mundane then it can be soothed away, if there is medical attention rendered then the cunning man's advice will aid it, if the source of discomfort is of esoteric origin then they will gather insight towards its resolution.

Umbilicus

Man stands at the centre between the two suns, between love and wrath; which spirit he makes his own, he is of it. Of love, you and I.

Magic-User Level 1

-Bhôme, cunning man, lover

Duration:

6 turns

Range:

10 metres

The caster must taste the sweat of the target of umbilicus, must imbibe the pure life salts of the body to which he wishes to be linked. It is common to see a desperate cunning man, when cornered, dive at his oppressor and lick his face from chin to crown.

This act forms a life bond with the target. Any damage inflicted on one is felt by the other, though one may save versus magic if unwilling.

You will know nothingness

Magic-User Level 2

Duration:

1 round per level

Range:

Self

Some of the magic of the cunning folk has developed from practical necessity rather than as a result of their peculiar obsession with the forest. The Fern Court is a tough environment, one through which they brazenly walk and crawl heedless of generations of collective fear. Some would claim that it is a result of their single and somewhat muddle minded search that causes this; others know better.

The caster can detach their consciousness from their body, ignoring all mundane stimuli: hunger, pain, cold, fear etc. are nothing but tricks of the flesh. While in this state the caster does not feel and can re-roll any failed saves or tests that are caused by such things.

A Fire Walks With Me

Magic-User Level 2

Duration:

Instant

Range:

One league per level

Distance is elastic within the confines of the Fern Court. Once you leave the trail your feet are prone to wander unless your mind is sharp enough to cut through the cloying vines. The cunning men learn the wiles of the woods and step off the path most willingly, guided by the ethereal rays of the white sun.

When they walk with fire they can travel a league per step, taking with them one companion per level. To those travelling it doesn't seem different to walking normally. To observers they appear to vanish the moment they go out of sight behind a tree or rock.

Zoanthropy

The forest hides its secrets well and in plain sight.

Magic-User Level 2

Duration:

Until cancelled

Range:

Self

The cunning man must take off his clothes and arrange them neatly and deliberately in a hidden place. Naked, they must walk into the wilderness and with each step lose their mind and body until eventually taking the form of an animal. They may choose what animal to be, but it must be appropriate for the environment and they must try their hardest to imitate the creature or else the trees will notice and the spell will end.

While in animal form they cannot be found through magical means. They may maintain this form for as long as they like, but must save vs. magic every new moon or else lose their minds to the beast and stay that way forever.

To return to their old ways they must find their clothes, whereupon they will be reformed.

Many cunning folk have lost their mind through the divine sublimation of the zoanthrope. They still search the forests for Old Father Aldous, whose skin was almost black with writing, who they say glimpsed the horizon of the black sun before he retreated into quietude. At every hamlet and homestead they always ask after sightings of the black hare.

A Curse to the Unjust

Magic-User Level 2

Duration:

Until the full moon

Range:

Spitting distance

I make honey

The death of the rose was accursed

In the view of the Sun

Now it is entirely lovely

Through the judgement of your death

-words first found on the skin of Burgundofora, mired in the form of a boar

Feared by every petty baron and castigative husband, to all those who could not hold their hand, who let their hubris cloud the woods. The caster must take a live woodland creature (a rabbit or sparrow, for instance), strangle it in rose vines, disembowel it with their teeth and spit the resultant effluence in the face of the unjust. While the blood is dripping down their beard they must recite the omen.

The recipient of this fearful proclamation must save vs. magic or not be able to strike another living creature until the next full moon (or 4d6 days if you have no idea when that is). Those ignoring the curse must save vs. magic once again or die.

Brittle Twigs & Bird Song

It seems not to be generally known that sound produces form as well as colour, and that every bird song leaves behind it an impression of this nature, which persists for some considerable time and is clearly visible to those who have eyes to see.

-Leadbeater, on reading the forest

Magic-User Level 2

Duration:
Instant

Range:
Mutual sight

The forest speaks in metaphor and omen and one can respond to it in a similar fashion. Though its discourse is obtuse it does not make it any less real, or the effects any less dire. A cunning tongue can get you many places.

The caster takes a dry twig and snaps it across his knee in full view of his foe. They must save vs. magic or take 1d8 damage and suffer the effects of a broken appendage (caster's choice).

A Tower of Thorns; A Wall of Vines

Magic-User Level 2

Duration:
Instant

Range:
100 metres

The Fern Court is old, deep, and thick with creeping rose vines; its villages hidden behind palisades and hedgerows, ears closed to the scratching at the door, trusting the thinnest skin of civilisation will hold the thorns at bay. They do not realise that the forest is already inside them, they are thick in its miasma.

Casting this spell causes thin rose vines to bust through the skin of one individual. The caster may determine how vigorously he pulls forth the thorns, causing up to one vine to appear per caster level. Everyone within three metres of the source must save vs. device or get hit by one vine for 1d4 damage. Pulling out the foliage may further injure the unfortunate recipient, at the game master's whim.

Do Not Trust the Owls

Magic-User Level 2

Duration:
12 hours

Range:
Touch

The cunning men are not immune to the confusions and permutations of the woods. Their studies may take them beyond the trails and through the hedges, deep into the twisted darkness, beyond even their capabilities to discern truth from un-truth. For these periods they must rely on external, simple tools.

Take the tongue of a dead person, pull it out with your teeth (your hands must not touch it while it sits in their head! Hands cheat and steal and lie), then pierce it with a leather thong and hang it around your neck. For the next 12 hours it will twitch and squirm like a maggot on a hook in the presence of mis-truths and wrong light. Also receive additional saves versus illusions.

Path of Guilt

The fire gives form and makes everything perfect, as it is written: He blew into his face the breath of life, the fire that makes subtle all earthly things.

-Barchusen, reading from himself

Magic-User Level 3

Duration:

1d12 turns, kept secret from the player

Range:

Touch

The caster makes a poultice of thorns, rags and soil, with this they scrub the soles of the feet until they bleed freely (1d4 damage). While the blood flows they count as having 6 in 6 stealth and the evidence of their passing is invisible to the mundane eye. Once the bleeding stops the spell wear off and the bloody footprints appear for all to see.

The Subtle Heart

The divine light irradiates all things equally, but this is assimilated in different ways: the lower, coarse heart swallows it like a black hole, the upper, subtle heart absorbs and emits it.

- Fludd, speaking at a moot

Magic-User Level 4

Duration:

Instant

Range:

50 metres

The caster boils honey and amber in a copper pot in direct sunlight and drinks it. This will sear their hands and scorch their insides (causing 6d6 damage), which may kill them and cause the sublimation to fail.

Everyone within sight and range has all curses and sickness seared from their body and soul, all health is returned. However no limbs will regrow, what is lost is lost. The light, though invisible, is intense. Everyone within in range must save vs magic or die, including the caster.

Unmasked

Magic-User Level 5

Duration:

Instant

Range:

Touch

The wise men that came to the Fern Court soon found their itinerant lifestyle didn't accommodate their sorcerous trappings. Robes held in the damp and grew moss, their alembics broke, their tools rusted and, most galling of all, their books became home to beetles and rot. After some time of experimentation the current method was developed, that of recording their knowledge directly into their flesh. Now nothing is lost.

This spell is often used at moots to remove the skin cleanly from a deceased member of their covenant. In one swift movement the caster grabs the hair or ears and gives a tug and a flourish, removing the skin in one whole piece and leaving the corpse an intriguing mess. It is a simple matter to apply this method to the living with predictably gruesome effect.

Anyone hit with the casters bare hands must save vs. magic or have their skin pulled off like a tablecloth. This of course kills them after a period of both screaming and writhing.

A Black Sun Climbs the Ladder to the Heavens

Magic-User Level 6

Duration:
One round

Range:
Sight

A vulgar magic, the caster takes a shard of petrified wood and carves an aperture in his chest. He must dig his nails beneath the flesh and peel back the skin until the black sun shines through. Takes 1d10 damage from this procedure.

The target of this spell will perceive the black sun replacing our own. It will bleed, thick puss dripping down the sky. The trees will buckle, the walls will fester and boil and they will fall to their knees as their sanity leaves them in a boiling puddle of filth.

Target must save vs. magic or die. If it dies, then the caster must save vs. magic or die as the light falls upon him. If he dies then everyone within sight of him must save or die. Closing your eyes won't help, you won't need eyes when the dark sun rises.

On a successful save you are shaken for d6 turns and cannot do anything but stare at the sky (caster unaffected by this)

The Nature of Blackness, All in Glass

Magic-User Level 7

Duration:
Until cancelled or the
caster dies

Range:
Sight

Thus we understand the forest; that it is awakened life; its primal state is in fire, and fire is its life: but it does not go from the fire with its will and imagination into the light, as if through grim death into the other Principium into the Love-Fire, it remains in its own original fire, and has nothing but bitter fury, a desire in the fire, a consuming and a hunger; and yet an eternal quest which is eternal fear and the Black-Fire.

-Bhôme, cunning man, philosopher

The cunning eye sees the purest empyreal fire, suffusing the darkness with a light so far from the prosaic rays that struggle through the canopy as to be an insult to name it as such. That beauty is seen by few but holds an indescribable fascination for those that have. A feeling beyond words or any other tawdry attempts at communication. It can only be shown.

The caster will emanate light with no fixed point of origin while babbling seemingly incoherently. Anyone viewing the light must save vs. magic or grow uncontrollably as the light fills them. They will spontaneously sprout new limbs, their flesh will flow like a flood and they will grow exponentially until the light fades. Their flesh will remain forever malleable and readily absorb more. From here on they are considered horrifying monsters by all, and are very likely blind, deaf, and insane (2 in 3 chance of each).

If you know to do so and are prepared, looking away will avoid this unpleasant fate. However, anyone caught in the area of an individual glutting on empyreal light will be absorbed into the target, dealing 1d10 damage per turn as they are melted into their loving embrace. If they are cut free they will suffer d6 permanent damage from missing flesh and skin.

Bloody Roots *After much suffering and torment I was resurrected large, pure and immaculate.*
-Barchusen, inadvertent discoverer of the bloody roots, from sacrificing a pregnant hare

Magic-User Level 8 The caster takes a creature, heavy with child, and splits its loins most gently. From it he takes their spawn and hurls them to the earth, whereupon they and all nearby are accepted into its loamy womb.

Duration:
Instant/2d6 years

Range:
20 metres The recipient of this curse is dragged under the earth by thick roots, whereupon he is stored in a small encystment. He will not starve and cannot escape through normal means, though he can be dug up. Those recovering his encystment will find a sack of flesh, inside of which the poor fellow will be held.

After a time a tree grows on the spot, the fruit of which will fall and split into animals of the variety sacrificed in its creation. They will speak of the trapped individual, but only to the young and the lonely. After 2d6 years the tree will split like a lily to reveal the sorcerous sufferer, naked and new.

Dissolved in the Subtlest Middle Air *In the centre are the dark waters, far from the light, forming the source of matter; at the edge are the upper waters, from which the divine fiery empyrean will unfold.*
-Fludd, former astronomer, found carved into his inner thigh

Magic-User Level 9 A refinement of the workings of the nature of blackness. Whereas before they were merely a channel, now they hold the light within themselves in an effort to solve a troubling future.

Duration:
Permanent

Range:
Self The caster opens their soul to purest Light, seeming to bulge and gyrate most unnaturally. These gyrations will last for an indeterminate amount of time (d6 turns) and cause a noticeable scorching to their body. For every round this lasts they will suffer d10 damage from the immense and most divine heat growing inside of them. If they have not succumbed to the fires their body will suddenly pop and degenerate into what appears to be a crude mass of life, a toxic puddle whose touch will turn others in kind. It will take on the appearance and texture of phlegm yet thicker (if one were to touch it and live to report such). In this state the caster will attempt to save the world from the black sun by enveloping it in its entirety, expanding with every absorbed creature and become more powerful. In this form the caster gains 10% of the experience and hit points of the people it absorbs, using their power to further his mission.

Due to having complete access to the minds of those they absorb they count as being a laboratory and library of a value equal to their level times one hundred and to have all reagents necessary for magical research at hand. Thus enabling them to continue their magical studies.

It is also quite possible that the cunning men will willingly join themselves to the mass.

The Bridge

by Alex Clements

The river had carved a gully through the red clay of the forest. The trees, beech and birch mostly, which had been unable to find purchase in the slopped, eroding ground had laid down their roots further up, arching inwards to the light over the river. The hollow this opened up created the impression of a tunnel with green leaves above and red and brown mulch and clay below. Along the bottom of this tunnel was the river which meandered in wide loops, along which walked a man wearing a breastplate and carrying a sword.

The man was of poorly preserved middle age and the colour of his skin matched the earth about him. He wore the bright red and yellow slashed fabrics popular among the local soldiery, although his hose and the sleeves of his tunic were ripped and muddy. When he had started walking in the morning he could still hear the fighting, but now all he could hear were the birds and the insects and his own feet squelching in the red mud.

Ahead of him was a wooden bridge that cut across a particularly florid loop in the river. There was a flat patch of ground on the other side on which a small tent was pitched, with a fire and a felled log to sit on. A red headed youth was standing on the bridge. He wore a black leather jerkin, practical, but of good quality, and held a buckler in one hand and a wide, flat bladed sword in the other.

“HO THERE TRAVELER!” called the youth.

“WOT?” the man called back.

“STAND YOUR GROUND. ALL WHO PASS -”

“WOT?”

The man had stopped walking forward. His shoulders were slumped and he swayed a little as he stood.

“COME CLOSER,” shouted the youth.

The man had been walking with the same trudging pace all day and he carried on in the same manner until he was at the foot of the bridge.

The youth continued. “Stand your ground. All who pass into the Margraviate of Bradenhorn must pay tribute or face me in single combat.”

“Is it yours?”

“The Margraviate?”

“No, the bridge.”

“Of course not, this forest belongs to his lordship, the Margrave, as do all structures within it.”

“Oh. Well what’s it got to do with you if I want to walk across it then?”

“I have been talked with defeating ten warriors who would cross this bridge to prove myself worthy of my master’s name. I have defeated nine such fighters so far, and once I defeat you, I will return to be initiated into the highest secrets of my craft.”

The man looked past the youth to his camp. From this new angle he could see behind the tent were a row of eight swords and a spear stuck into the ground. “Right. What was the other thing? About a tribute, yeah?”

“You may instead bend the knee to my guildmaster and serve our brotherhood in any way we see fit.”

“Oh great, yeah, I’ll do that then. The knee bending one. I choose that option.”

The youth looked at the sword at the man’s side. It was a long, curved kriegsmesser, the sort favoured by mercenaries.

“I make a point never to trust a coward.”

“Pffft, fuck off. Why give me the option then?”

The youth blushed. “It’s just... part of the speech.”

“Could I walk around the bridge?”

“No! We must fight! Arm yourself!”

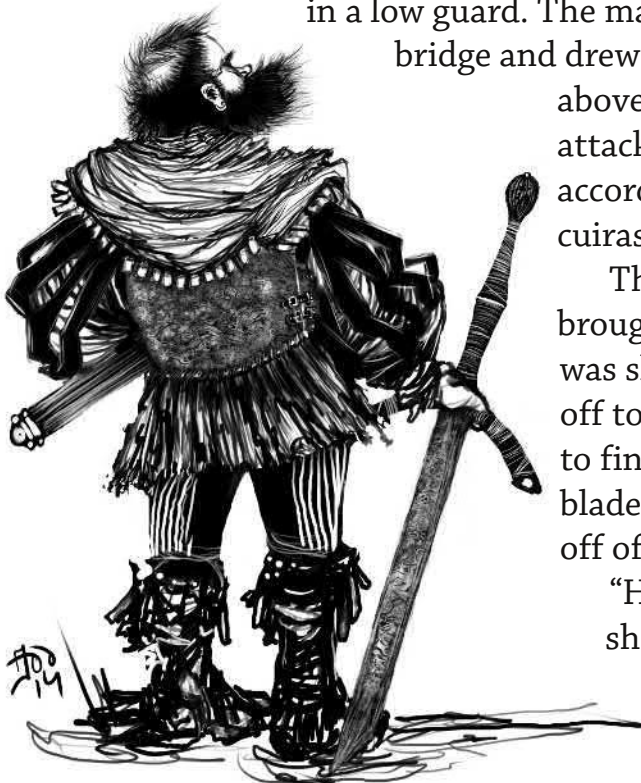
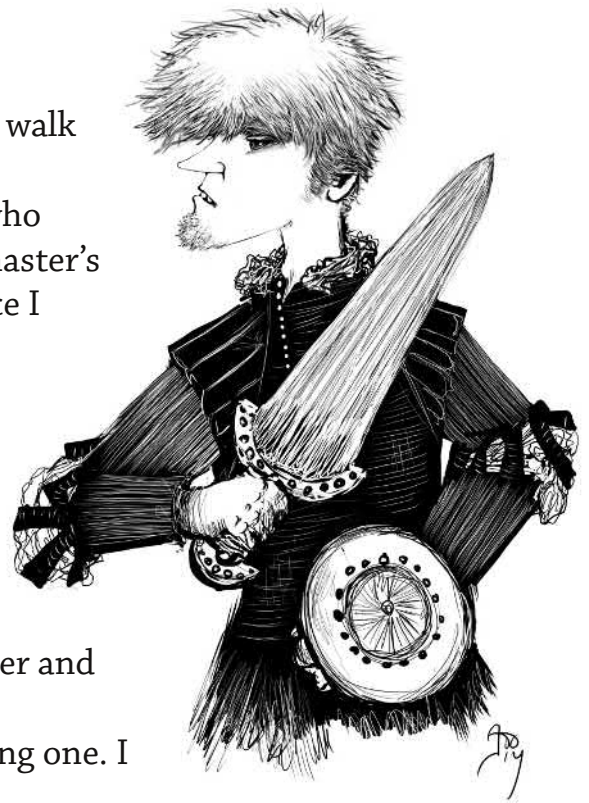
The youth advanced down the bridge, buckler held in front of him and sword in a low guard. The man stepped forward onto the surer footing of the bridge and drew his own sword. He raised it into a high guard above his head, ready to strike downwards or parry attacks to his sides. The youth shifted the buckler accordingly and stabbed low, aiming beneath the man’s cuirass.

The man pulled his leading leg back in time and brought down his sword at the youth’s head, but he was slow, and it was caught by the buckler, and slipped off to the side of the little metal disk. The youth tried to find a favourable position in which to bind their blades, but just as the steel met the man jumped back, off of the bridge and into the mud again.

“Hold on, hold on,” he said. “I’ve got a thing in my shoe.”

“Pardon?”

“A stone. In my shoe. Do you mind if I...?”



The youth looked at the slick clay on the other side of the bridge. "Erm. Ok. But be quick!"

"Well back off, then. I'm not going to do it with you right there."

The youth eyed the man suspiciously but when he was back in the middle of the bridge, the man stuck his sword into the ground and used it to balance on as he removed his shoe and, standing on one leg, shook it out.

"Nope, nothing there." He declared, peering inside the mud-caked leather shoe.

He put it back on, wobbling precariously as he did, then pulled the sword from the ground and wiped the tip it on his hose.

"Are you ready?" asked the youth, and the man shrugged and stepped back onto the bridge.

This time they advanced slowly until they were just beyond the man's greater striking range. The youth's muscles tensed.

"Nope, it's still there," said the man.

The youth held still. "Well it shant pain you much longer, whoreson."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I shall kill you momentarily."

"No, about my mum. I mean, yeah, I never met my dad, and yeah, he was a foreigner, so let's face it, yes, my mum probably was a whore. Also my sister didn't look anything-

"Silence!" said the youth as he tensed again, ready for another attack.

"Can I sit on your log?" said the man, lowering his guard.

"What?"

The man nodded towards the felled tree by the youth's encampment. "So I can get the stone out. I think it's in my sock."

"Absolutely not."

"Alright then. Fine, you little prick. I just wanted to die comfortably, but ok, let's get this over with."

The man brought the blade back up and the youth shifted his footing. Beneath them, the river splashed and gurgled. It ran clear and there were small fish darting about, sometimes swimming against the current so that they appeared to hover in place. From the bridge there came the sound clanging metal, a grunt, and then a shout, cut off by a quick death, such as would be caused by a stab or strike to the neck. And when the body splashed into the river, the little fish all darted away, swimming very hard upstream, as the water became obscured with disturbed silt and the blossoming cloud of blood.