

A Walk in the Woods

A Cugel-Level scenario for DERPG by Ian Thomson

Through Violet Cusps: www.dyingearth.com/violetcusps.htm (Footsteps of Fools campaign 1.4)

Illustrations – Commode Minstrels in Bullface: pp2; Andrew G. Wright: p3; Carrie Walters: p4.

The Origins (of Species?)

This adventure outline was originally created in note form as material for extending the end of the *High Road to Kaiin* adventure (that is also available at the 'Through Violet Cusps' page). Thus, if that other scenario either played through too quickly (leaving time to be filled at the end of Session 1) or - more likely - too slowly (leaving the bulk of Session 2) the game could go on to the end of either session. This was later rounded out into a prototype of what you see before you to become an Appendix for the Dying Earth Bestiary. This did not suit the style of the Bestiary as it evolved, and so was rearranged as an unofficial appendix to appear at Violet Cusps once the Bestiary was published. Now (July 2005) that the Bestiary has changed form again and the publication date is not likely to be any time soon, I feel I cannot delay the publication of this material any longer. So, here at last is Part 2 of the 'High Road to Kaiin'.

Introduction

This adventure is presented in outline. The GM will need to make notes for each scene before running it; expanding it to their conception of a single session's entertaining play. The GM will need to carefully adapt/invent ratings so as to design foes suitable for their PCs. The action is set in the Great Da Forest, but GMs can alter this location if it best suits their campaign. It could be easily adapted to Turjan-Level by those GMs with access to the conjectural abilities of Dying Earth creatures as presented in the Bestiary (in whatever form it is eventually published). Even Cugel-Level GMs are advised to invent strange abilities, such as frightening appearance, astute use of nature as camouflage, tiny magic slingshots, shapechanging, resistance to non-magical weapons, or hypnotic vocal powers. (Remember that even creatures that look the same have variant capabilities in this odd world, so consistency is not a consideration.)

The 'High Road to Kaiin' (including as it does three separate types of creature) is eminently suitable to be run as the contiguous first part of the adventure before you. Nonetheless, 'A Walk in the Woods' can be easily added into your campaign at any suitable point even if you don't have access to the 'High Road to Kaiin'. In such a case, merely have the roguish PCs fall foul of an angry magician or a magical trap. Whichever you choose, each is snatched up (perhaps one PC per claw – that is two per beast) by an Agency of Far Dispatch (see 'Thasdrubal's Laganetic Transfer', DERPG, p110). Instructions to the Agency will be something like – "Deposit these villains in the heart of the Great Da Forest. That may teach them to think twice before further attempted burglaries!"

The huge leathern-winged demons grip the PCs tightly and carry them up high into the cold air, and far across the land. (The beasts respond to no magics or Persuasions, nor other puny attempts to escape, and so this section can be narrated swiftly.) If the PCs are snatched up in or near Kaiin or the Scaum Valley, the demons carry them for around two hours. Eventually, the characters can see that they are over the southern edge of the forest (or whichever edge they will shortly be making for at best speed). This is an essential plot element, as it gives them sufficient geographical awareness to see the best way for them to travel in their attempt to escape the forest before nightfall.

"At last the demons swoop suddenly down, and you can see that the ancient forest stretches away in all other directions even further than the great green expanse you have already covered. Nearer the ground you can also see a weathered tower. Then, without ceremony, you are dropped from a height of fifteen feet, fortunately landing upon springy turf in a pleasant sun-speckled clearing. The demons fly off; croaking and chortling."

Thematic Overview

This scenario is linear. Nonetheless, it is not intended as a 'monster bash', but rather to give a strong feeling of the ancient natural beauty and wonder of the Dying Earth. That is why we have provided descriptive scene introductions. GMs should ideally continue this theme as the characters travel, using similar tones to describe the trees, underbrush, beams of sunlight etc, between scenes. Even when the characters climb trees from time to time (as they must in order to check the sun and be sure of their bearings) mention that they note the enchanting expanse of majestic hearty trees, dappled glades, and pleasantly wooded hillsides around them. Remember also, that the scenes do not follow each other in rapid succession. It is important to establish a sense that the day is passing and that the characters are covering substantial ground, so create and use appropriate fill-in descriptions.

Scene 1: The Old Tower

"You gather your wits and look around. The clearing is about thirty yards across, though irregular in shape. Through the trees at one edge you can see some kind of ancient circular tower, worn and cracked with age, but still largely whole. It is two stories high, with narrow windows on the upper floor. The single closed wooden door seems blocked with debris and vegetation."

Initial Action: The characters will know that time is pressing, and that a push for the southern edge of the forest might be their best option. Since they only just landed, orientation will not initially be a problem. The GM can assure them that the only edge of the forest they saw was the one they passed above some time ago (or saw ahead if this is a sequel to the High Road to Kaiin) – confirming that the other edges must be even more distant. Other knowledge that will come easy is that they have several hours of daylight remaining, after which the half-men of the forest will waken and begin to hunt. Mind you, not all creatures sleep during daylight - not even all half-men - so some degree of caution will be warranted.

Involving the PCs: It is possible that smart PCs will decide that they should hole themselves up in the tower overnight, and then set off for the southern edge of the forest at daybreak. This would give them more hours during the following day to leave the forest whilst the sun is still in the sky. This is not a hazard-free course of action, as you will see below, but nonetheless could be encouraged as a motivator for getting them to explore the tower. Or, general consensus may be to avoid the tower and depart at best speed. At Cugel-Level, if the characters were transported hence at the behest of a trap of magician foe, a greater motivator for their entering the tower could be that their weapons and other equipment were not brought along. Also, since a tower so deep in the Great Forest is not likely to have been disturbed for a very long time, and may contain untold treasures or rare magic items. Resistances against Avarice might also be evoked.

The Tower: Entering can be accomplished (Ψ ATHLETICS) by climbing or by breaking in the door (not easy without weapons). The windows are too small to enter, though through them can be seen a room mostly bare, but carpeted with dirt and leaf detritus that has fallen from the open skylight above. On the flat roof is a square hole – though the trapdoor itself is long since rotted away. Inside the first floor is another hole, descending into a gloomy lower chamber. Also hidden amongst the debris here, PCs may (Ψ PERCEPTION) find a magical item of the GM's choosing (from one of the DERPG publications), though they won't necessarily know what it is.



Down below the light is dim, but PCs may (Ψ PERCEPTION) be able to make out one or more from: a strange earthy odor, a darker patch of shade perhaps indicating an opening to another room below, some bones protruding from the dirt, the glint of a rapier hilt lying in a corner, a torn backpack...

The ground floor is a visp's dining hall. Here are the bones of many half-men, and several humans (though few recent). In a Cugel-Level scenario where they have lost their equipment, provide sufficient weapons for them to re-arm themselves, though one rapier will need to be carefully bent back into shape, and at least one PC will be left with a weapon that does not match their style. Where Cugel-Level PCs are not missing equipment - and at Turjan-Level - add further items of interest. In the basement is a sleeping visp. It will eventually be woken by their investigation. For weaker PCs it is extremely sleepy and sluggish, for stronger PCs it is alert (and perhaps also accompanied by its mate – and/or one or two young). Should unlucky rolling suggest the demise of a PC, perhaps they will fall into the basement and there discover further useful magical items or weapons to defend with.

The Visp

The visp takes shelter by day, although a characteristic reek can identify its presence. By night their melancholy calls may be heard. They are known across the moors and forests of the Land of the Falling Wall. The visp is a scavenger without sentience, and one of the most dangerous creatures of the wilds. The only good thing about them is that they prefer carrion when they can get it.

Attack (Ferocity) 17, Defense (Dodge) 15, Health 15, Magic (innate) 12, Athletics 10, Stealth 4, Tracking 8, Wherewithal 13

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Scene 2: A Nesting Erb

“In the branches nearby you notice a great globular mass of woven twigs, tree-limbs and foliage, together seeming nothing so much as a huge nest for some enormous bird or arboreal creature. On one side and slightly beneath this object is a large hole – presumably the entry.”

Involving the PCs: This is an incidental scene, to be tacked on during the second or third time that a PC climbs a tree to confirm that they are traveling in the right direction. The PC is unlikely to deliberately disturb an erb, nonetheless, some groups of confident PCs may wish to capture the erb to assist them through the forest in some way. Again, if they are outmatched, the creature is extremely sleepy and when wounded flees, or is perhaps only a juvenile. If they are undermatched, it wakes and attacks, and perhaps the inhabitants of other nearby nests are drawn to the fray.

Tree Erb: Glib 5, Penetrating 4, Cunning 9, Misdirection 8, Health 8, Athletics 8, Concealment 3, Perception 4, Stealth 6, Tracking 7, Wherewithal 4



Scene 3: The Twk-Folk

“Fluttering through the trees are a number of small shapes. They appear to be large dragonflies, their wings coruscating with myriad colors as they pass through patches of dappled light beneath the leaves.”

Involving the PCs: The Twk-Folk are more of an ‘emergency option’ than a scene, though even at Turjan-Level (where PCs are easily capable of fending for themselves in the wilds) they may be spotted flitting through the trees and briefly conversed with. Perception rolls will initially be required to notice the twk-folk riding the dragonflies, unless these creatures arrive to the rescue in a cavalry charge. (In such a case the foe they aid the PCs against will be a creature that recently killed some of their own – and they have been hunting. Or at least a member of the same species.) We have placed the encounter here in the running order as the first likely point at which PCs might require healing. These Twk-Folk are an exploratory group and their healer is with them. In payment for their assistance, they will bind the adventurers to a service to be performed at some future date. They will not accompany the PCs after this encounter, but may provide them with a temporarily enchanted twig that will always point south. (This saves them climbing any further trees and is a great plot device to stop them becoming lost.)

Forthright 11, Wary 16, Speed 6, Dodge 16, Health 3, Appraisal 4, Athletics 7, Concealment 19, Gambling 4, Perception 6, Stealth 18, Wherewithal 3. (all incorporating dragonfly steed)

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Scene 4: The Musing Leucomorph

“Almost undetectable due to its preternatural stillness, you notice a tall humanoid shape, corpse-pale standing in the shadows at the edge of a small glade. Although you are close enough to make out the glint of its fearsome fangs, and note the rise and fall of its chest, it appears to be unaware of your presence.”

Involving the PCs: Another semi-incidental scene. If the PCs manage decent rolls (Ψ PERCEPTION, CONCEALMENT, STEALTH), they will see it in time and pass by safely. However, if they are unlucky, instead of being just a strange and eerie sighting this scene becomes one of action and bloodshed – as the PCs defend themselves from a horrible predator that they have disturbed. In this case, play the creature for eerie and alien cunning, as it skulks about. Should the PCs be faced with death and/or disablement, bring forward the encounter with Grashpotel and his students. If they are outmatched it is sleepy and sluggish.

Humanoid Leucomorph

Charming 17, Lawyerly 14, Cunning 15, Sure-Footedness 12, Health 11, Appraisal 4, Athletics 8, Concealment 4, Pedantry 2, Perception 2, Stealth 3, Tracking 2, Wherewithal 3.

Plasmic Leucomorph

Speed 17, Misdirection 20, Health 18, Athletics 11, Perception 6, Stealth 2, Tracking 4, Wherewithal 5.

Scene 5: The Huge Stone Head

“Through the trees you can see an enormous stone head, something like twenty feet high. Though largely covered in moss, its peculiarly distorted features are still clearly visible.”

Involving the PCs: Resting alone - several miles deep inside the Great Da Forest: if you own ‘Demons of the Dying Earth’ this can be ‘Xendallet the Speaker’ (DDE, p109). If not, it is a representation of Bampath – the old god of wisdom, and the GM will need to devise further details. In either case if ignored it will call out to the adventurers, offering them information to enhance the chances of their survival – and mocking their chances of leaving the forest alive ‘if you ignore me’. Astute readers will notice that this encounter is not ‘creature-related’. This is deliberate – in order to diversify the content of this scenario, and to enhance the Dying Earth flavor.

Scene 6: Wefkins

“As you move quickly between the trees, merry laughter rings out from nearby – as if several children were snickering at the results of, or in anticipation of, some prank.”

Involving the PCs: The PCs encounter a small valley containing thicker and damper vegetation. It does not seem any great hardship to pass through, but stretches beyond sight (for a mile or so) in either direction – so to pass round would cost time. If fearful PCs want to waste time going around, then they can (and the encounter can occur a little later as they pass a particularly dense thicket). However, mentioning that the daylight is starting to fade, and looking meaningfully at some nearby timepiece, should spur the action onwards down this gentle ravine. (Read out the quoted text above only **after** the

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valley crossing/avoidance has begun.) This incidental encounter provides another opportunity to interact with strange creatures – a likely event whilst traveling through this ancient forest. The wefkings read surface thoughts and try and tempt the PCs to follow them into boggy terrain. Perhaps they pose as nature spirits or lost children, trying to lure travelers closer and closer to a patch of syrupy bog in which they may well become mired. Charming 10, Pure-Hearted 12, Sure-Footedness 13, Health 6, Magic (resistance only) 12, Athletics 4, Concealment 16, Gambling 4, Imposture (vocal tones) 7, Perception 5, Quick Fingers 14, Stealth 10, Wherewithal 5.



Scene 7: Another Ruin

"You stand upon the edge of a wide overgrown plaza. Grasses and small plants sprout forth from between the fractured flags, and several tall statues are so overgrown with moss and creepers that until this moment you had mistaken them for boulders."

Involving the PCs: This 'Ruined Wonder', is a former temple to Paphnis, the Goddess of Beauty. The statues are of elegant nymphs draped languidly against pillars. The GM should devise a small sketch, which will include a large, murky ornamental watergarden and the remains of at least two ceremonial buildings. If the adventurers explore, they will definitely find some small magical item. (Indeed Resistance against Avarice might be required if they wish not to at least make a rudimentary examination of this area.) The distant echoing laughter of ghostly nymphs will be an appropriate feature of this place, plus some odd soporific (or intoxicating) enchantment. One potential feature is the need to clear the rest of a mostly-blocked doorway to an inner sanctum, where intriguing, stoppered pottery urns can be seen.

Scene 8: The Wakeful Half-Man

"The hairs bristle on the back of your neck; a strange odor drifts to your nostrils. Something unwholesome draws near!"

Involving the PCs:

At Cugel-Level this might be a typical pleading and slaving deodand. At Turjan-Level, it might be something more dangerous such as a bazil or sime – and possibly more than one.

Scene 9: Grashpotel's Field Trip

"Voices drift to you from nearby – not the growlings of half-men or the snickering of wefkings, but the chattering of carefree wanderers, and the gruff tones of an elder."

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Grashpotel (KPG, p111) and his band of nervous students are close to the end of today's field trip, and may (Ψ PERCEPTION) be heard before they are seen. The sage will not initially be likely to help the travelers, being certain that they are bandits. Instead, he threatens them with magic and bravado, and if necessary can use a non-fatal spell of surprising potency against them. If someone manages a good Persuasion success (NB: Grashpotel may have Rebuff bonus due to his idea that they are bandits) the sage will ease his position and begin to converse. However, just when they seem to be convincing him, one of the students will remind their lecturer that the enchantment that brought them here is set to expire some time before dusk. Though Grashpotel begins to rectify this, he seems to have forgotten how to annul it, and after a minute or so of embarrassed apologies and trying different ineffective cantraps (perhaps with humorous results) the entire group vanishes with a loud 'pop'. During this encounter, a student will inform the PCs that they are less than an hour from the edge of the Forest. They will also let on that the student group is here to study the habits of the <insert appropriate creature name>, and saw three specimens less than half an hour ago, though drove them away with magic when they became belligerent. NB: If necessary to support the finale (below), Grashpotel leaves behind some lightweight, but extremely valuable magical/scientific equipment. (Make it obviously of some use to the PCs, so that they take it.)

Scene 10: Despair

"Though you have been trying to pretend it is not so, dusk is setting in. The shadows are lengthening, and the ancient sun is slipping inexorably closer and closer to the horizon."

A small number of horrid creatures are on their trail. These creatures (the very ones that Grashpotel and his students were researching) cannot sprint, but follow relentlessly as the PCs tire. At Turjan-Level, use larger numbers or more mobile creatures. The idea of this scene is that the PCs will fear for their lives, and someone may even be slain – if your version of DERPG is so unrelenting. Cover the harrowing chase in detail. If the PCs are still redolent with spells, have more half-men join the chase or be spotted just as soon as the adventurers burst from the trees and begin running up and down the low hills of the lightly-wooded grasslands south of the forest. Some may fight amongst themselves if this adds to the horridness.

Finale: Rescue

The PCs take cover on top of a huge rock, in a ruined inn, a solid but abandoned old barn, or some other place equally steeped in appropriate Dying Earth atmosphere. They cannot hope to hold out until morning. Describe the taunts of the half-men, plus sufficient attacks to exhaust the PCs resources. One rescue option is that Grashpotel returns with a few of his more magically potent students. (Though he claims to have returned out of pure altruism, he in fact wishes to reclaim the piece of equipment he accidentally left behind – see above.) If a rescue by Grashpotel is not appropriate, real adventurers armed with spells are the ones to arrive and save the day. They will be suitably scathing of the situation the PCs find themselves in. It turns out that a village is only a mile away, and adventurer rescuers direct them there. (If Grashpotel is the rescuer, he will magically transport everyone back to Kaiin.)