

A CROWN OF BONE AND BRANCHES

By Mechristopheles

A Crown of Bone and Branches is a significant ritual artefact submission for the Halloween 2024 Swap Meet Jam under the modern folk horror prompt.

Recognisable from recent pop culture imagery, the bone crown is a mask made from a horned animal skull large enough to fit over a human face. After the skull is cleaned by "*crawling things*" for a season, the preparers remove the horns and ritually anoint, bathe or drown the skull, depending on the source documents, in a fired, red clay pot filled with virgin olive oil for another season. If the skull is cleansed or bathed during a Hunter's Moon, it works. The final part of the preparation of the "*Πρόθεσις τοῦ θηρίου*" or Beast's Prosthesis is attaching dead branches were the animal skull's horns or antlers sat. The branches need to be taken from a dead tree but need to be whole and unbroken. The branches may break after it's attached but not before. The mask is ripe until the next winter solstice when it immediately spoils.

Hunters affix the mask to the recipient, who is crowned stag king or queen, with wire, duct tape, leather straps, glue or something else. The only criterion is that prior channelling an archetype disqualifies the recipient and spoils the mask with "*The reek, as the putrefaction and filth of Golgotha's sullen, cross-burdened hilltop, doth astonish.*" Once affixed, the mask clings to the face securely and removing it is difficult and dangerous: it causes hand-to-hand damage equal to the Fitness or identity roll, whether successful or not. It will leave burn-like scars. Magical removal may be the safer option, if it's available.

As the stag king, the recipient is usually the stag of the Wild Hunt. The magical advantage is that the hunters can only slay the stag king by hand-to-hand combat. All mundane firearms damage reduces to hand-to-hand damage until the stag king loses half his wound threshold and then firearms damage is one point every attack. The other advantage is that the stag king gets a +20% increase on all Abilities. Once attached, the mask's magic only spoils and disappears at the next winter solstice.

The hunter who kills the stag king using mundane hand-to-hand combat, mundane weapons permitted, permanently adds the stag king's highest identity rating to her or his Wound Threshold. The buff is magical, so while it can be dislodged and destroyed by magical means, it is otherwise permanent. The recipient rejuvenates by as many years as the stag king's lowest rated identity which reduces or holds off age-related problems but is otherwise cosmetic.