

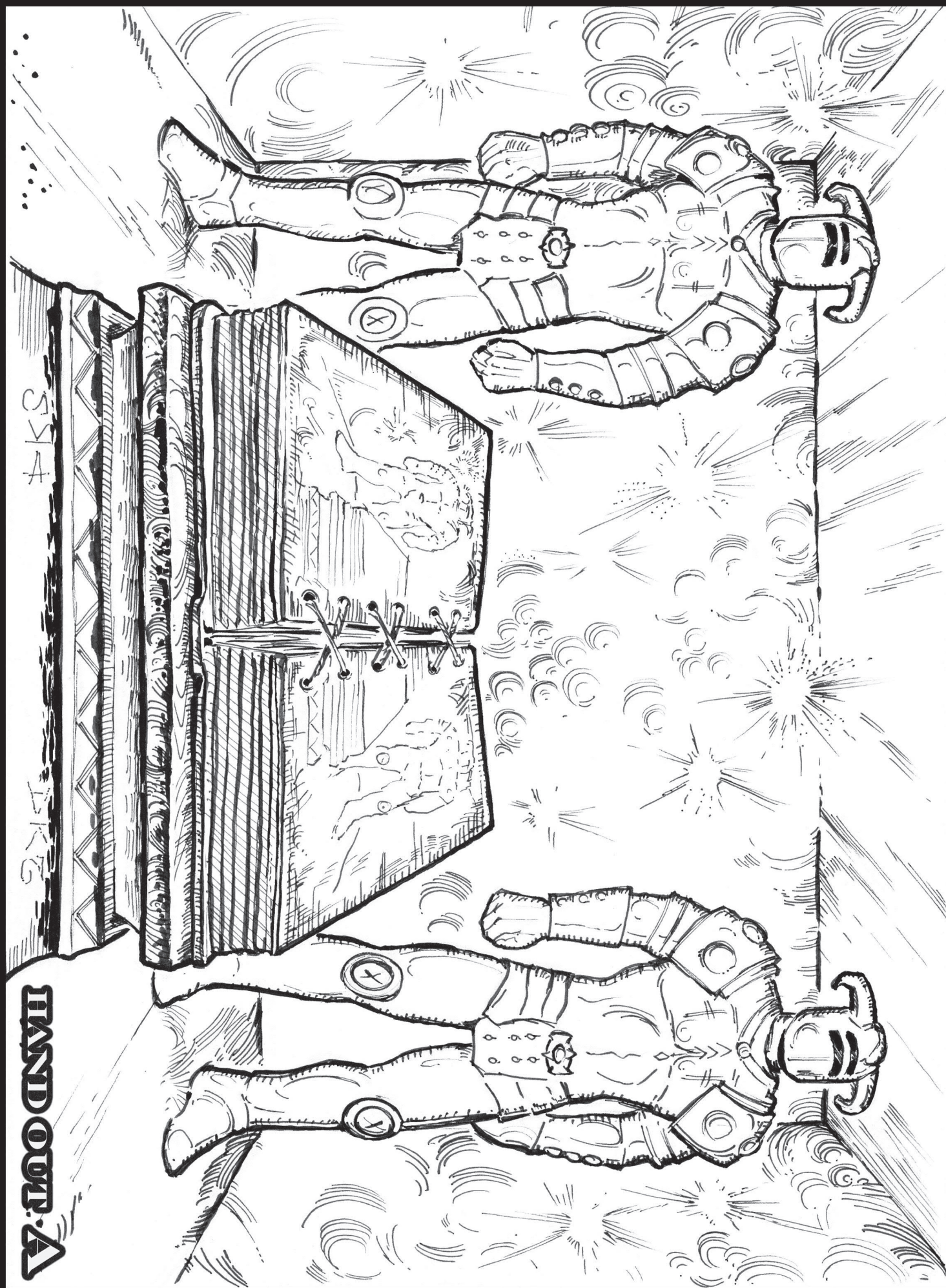
DUNGEON CRAWL CLASSICS

The 13th Skull

#71: A LEVEL 4 ADVENTURE
BY JOSEPH GOODMAN



Plus: **The Balance Blade**
Bonus adventure!



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The 13th Skull

A LEVEL 4 ADVENTURE

By Joseph Goodman with additional material by Daniel J. Bishop
Cover artist and cartographer: Doug Kovacs • Editor: Aeryn "Blackdirge" Rudel • Interior artists: Jim Holloway, Doug Kovacs, Peter Mullen, Stefan Poag • Art direction & layout: Joseph Goodman • Additional proofreading: Terry Olson

Playtesters: (San Diego Playtest Group) Karina Benish, Kevin Cousineau, Sam Carter, Matthew Davis, Steven Thivierge; (GameX / Strategicon 2011) Chandler Bootchk, Isaac Bootchk, Benn Boyer, Andrew Linstrom, Brett Miller, Mike Olson, John Schroder; (Dicehead Games) Fred Dailey, Todd Hanson, Brian LeGrand, David Parker, Logan Parker, Kim Swanson, Kyle Turner; (SoCal Mini-Con 2011) Joel Arellano, Reverend Dak, Simon Kesenei, Steve Ramirez, Daniel Waechter; (Origins 2012) Rick Hull, Doug Kovacs, Jennifer and Phillip Lewis, Christy Powell; (Chicago Playtest Group) Andy Frielink, Jim Frohlich, Krissy Frohlich, Tim Wadzinski; (Finarvyn's Fellowship of Foragers) Allan Bean, Anna Breig, Dardrae Breig, Kaylina Breig, Marv (Finarvyn) Breig, Ryan Breig, Paul Luzbetak

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INTRODUCTION

The *Thirteenth Skull* is a short adventure for a party of level 4 characters. It should take about one four-hour session to complete. The adventure requires a good mix of character types; a thief, cleric, wizard, and multiple warriors are essential to success. The adventure contains multiple situations that can kill incautious characters outright (such as falls from great heights and very powerful magic). In playtests with six level 4 characters and four retainers, there were varying mortality rates. In one session, the entire party was nearly wiped out and only two characters survived, while in another session, there were only a few casualties.

This adventure doesn't have a happy ending. The characters are sent to save the daughter of a duke, but she will most likely be killed in the final combat (see area 1-5B). The characters are able to rid the world of a great evil known as the Silver Skull and end a damning prophecy, but they probably can't save the girl. In multiple playtest sessions, only one party managed to rescue the duke's daughter.

BACKGROUND STORY



Early three centuries ago the wizard Edward Magnussen made a deal with a devil. That devil gave him precognitive powers and uncanny good luck, which Edward parlayed into a royal title and his own duchy, becoming the first Duke Magnussen. The devil also promised him immortal life. In exchange for all this, Edward had to deliver his own soul, as a deposit of sorts, and then twelve additional souls — those of his next eleven male heirs, and finally, the first daughter to follow. When all thirteen souls were delivered, so said the devil, Edward would come back to life, revived with pieces and parts from his descendants, and they would go on to an afterlife in hell.

Underneath his keep, the duke and his devilish patron built a grand crypt with thirteen stone coffins. The first duke was buried first, and each of his heirs followed. He requested unusual conditions for his own burial rites: his skull was to be removed from his corpse, plated in silver, and buried apart from his body. Even though the gravediggers were sworn to silence, the strange rites were hard to keep secret. Even now, it's common knowledge that the first duke's silvered skull is kept in a special room within the crypt beneath the keep, while each of his heirs has been buried in one of the stone coffins.

Now, twelve generations later, a daughter has been born to Duke Magnussen XIII. Father and daughter have lived in terror for years, afraid that the prophecy of the Magnussen clan would someday come true.

PLAYER BEGINNING

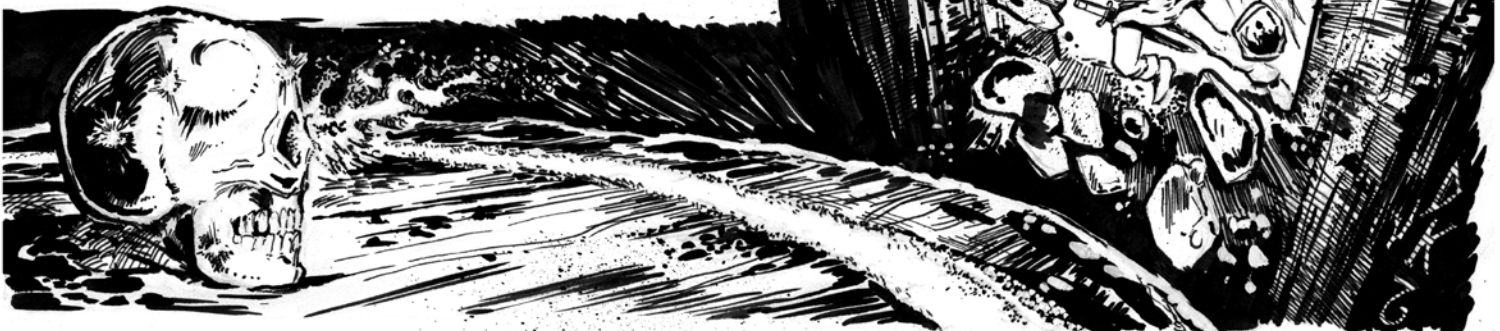
You are pressed shoulder-to-shoulder with sweating peasants under a sweltering summer sun. The stench of hog herders and grain farmers permeates the crowd as you look north to the rickety scaffolding erected beside the city wall. A large, slovenly man in a black hood heaves an axe over his shoulder and mounts the steps to the platform atop the scaffolding. Waiting for him to arrive is a prisoner, his face covered in a burlap sack, his arms held securely by three men-at-arms. Even from hundreds of yards away, you can hear the prisoner's sharp intake of breath as the wooden beams creak under the executioner's heavy steps. Thirty feet above him, the thirteenth Duke Magnussen looks down from the city wall, nervously fingering his thick iron crown. This is the iron crown given to his sire twelve generations removed, when the ambitious first Duke Magnussen made a fell pact with an unknown power, who asked for the first daughter born to the thirteenth Magnussen duke. Now, generations later, that daughter stands shaking beside her father, watching the executioner sharpen his axe. The man to lose his head today is a screeching prophet who called for the death of Magnussen's daughter before disaster should befall the city. For his words, today he dies.

The executioner swings his axe in a looping motion. Thunk. The severed head somehow misses the waiting basket and rolls into the crowd, which shrinks backward to avoid it. There is a moment of stunned silence as the burlap sack falls away to reveal the dead man's face. It is...the duke's face! The dead man has the duke's same face! All eyes turn to the stricken duke, who looks on in horror.

Suddenly the obese executioner pulls off his black hood and the crowd gasps as one. He has no face — no — instead there sits at the top of his neck a brilliant silver skull, gleaming in the hot sun. The silver skull turns to face the duke, and then the sun is blotted out as a vast winged lizard descends from the sky. In a flash it grasps the duke's screaming daughter in one of its massive claws and picks up the silver-skulled executioner in the other! As it flaps ponderously upward, the silver skull laughs ominously as the duke reaches futilely to the sky while his stunned men-at-arms are too slow to release their arrows.

"My daughter!" cries the duke. "A fortune in gems to the man who returns my daughter!"

In the distance, you see that the silver-skulled executioner has mounted the great flying lizard as it wings back across the city walls to drop behind the duke's mountaintop keep.



ADVENTURE SETUP



The Silver Skull and his pterodactyl mount are easily tracked to a cave set in a sheer cliff under the duke's keep. A river flows from this cave mouth, but its current has slowed over the years. The riverbed and the cave are said to connect to the Magnussen family crypts beneath the keep.

No one can explain why the screeching prophet's head changed to that of the duke. But it is so. The duke himself is unharmed.

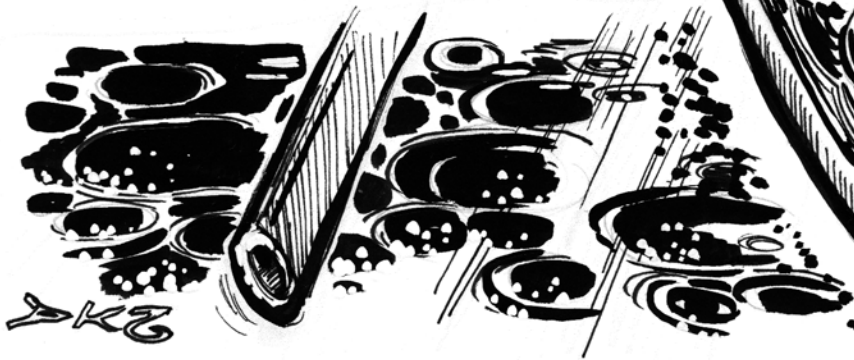
The duke grants access to the crypts and the cave mouth to any brave man who agrees to explore them. The city guard is frightened and gladly makes way for the adventurers. Characters can enter at the start of the crypt (area 1-1) or the cave mouth (area 1-4C), provided they have grappling hooks and ropes.

LOCAL LEGENDS



Allow the players to seek knowledge of the duke, the Magnussen legacy, the Silver Skull, and other such things. Below are the rumors they can learn. These can be learned verbally at pubs or via research or consultation with sages. Rather than read these aloud, we recommend you write them on index cards and let the players pull out one card per character.

- Aye, it's said that the Magnussen clan only got that iron crown by making promises no man should keep. They must have black hearts to have kept those promises.
- The Silver Skull is the very thing them Magnussens made their pact with, thirteen generations ago. It's kept them in power all this time.
- They say the Silver Skull is the possessed skull of the first Duke Magnussen, brought back to life by the same power that they bargained with so long ago.
- The Magnussens have always stayed in power through mysterious means. Their enemies die in strange ways, pestilence always infects their rival cities, and it seems like they're just a little too lucky for mortal men.
- There's a crypt under the Duke's keep. Them Magnussens have been burying their own down there for centuries. It's said there's a *reason* they insist all Magnussens stay there—they don't decay like normal men.
- That first Duke Magnussen wasn't buried normally. They say he had his skull removed and plated with silver, and they buried it separate from the rest of him.



AREAS OF THE MAP

Area 1-1 – The Magnussen Family Crypt: The guardsmen escort you through the dark, echoing corridors of the keep's lowest levels. You arrive at a stout oaken door, carved with the Magnussen family crest. The guards haul mightily on the iron ring and open the door with a terrible screeching noise.

"There you go," says the first guard, motioning into the darkness beyond. *"Every Magnussen has been buried here. May the Gods be with you."*

The corridor is made of worked stone. The air is surprisingly fresh for being so far underground. There are no wall sconces for torches.

Area 1-1B – The Vault: At the end of the hall is a large marble vault. It is ornately built of carved stone, like what you would see in a fine graveyard. The vault is about twelve feet tall and has a large stone door set on iron hinges. The Magnussen family crest is inscribed on the door.

The door radiates magic. When a character first touches it, read the following:

The door seems to fade away and you find yourself seeing inside the chamber beyond. A ghostly figure stands where the door was, though you still feel like the invisible door is somehow still there. The ghostly figure is a mean-looking, scar-faced man in heavy royal robes and an iron crown. The Magnussen family crest hangs from a thick gold chain around his neck. The specter points to his family crest, then to you, then vanishes.

Any person carrying a Magnussen crest (in any form) finds that the door opens quite easily.

Anyone without a crest must push with all his might to budge the door (DC 16 Str check). Additionally, when walking across the threshold, he suffers a mild curse: -1 to Luck and all die rolls while in the crypt. The curse is lifted once he wields a Magnussen crest or leaves the crypt.

Area 1-2 – The Sepulcher: The vault opens into a long chamber made of large, fitted stones. The left wall is lined with a succession of covered stone coffins placed at right angles to the wall. The right wall is lined with narrow, deep stone shelves. The shelves are filled with bones, some of them spilling over onto the floor. Far in the distance, large stone double doors lead out of the room.

There are four important elements to this room: the **shadows**, the **skeletons**, the **trapped doors**, and the **secret staircase**.

The Shadows: As the characters explore this room, they notice disconcerting movement among the shadows at the edge of their torchlight. Over time, a tenebrous host of sentient shadows sift in from the crepuscular edge of the torchlight to attach themselves to the characters' own shadows. These shadows are just like regular shadows—that is, they have no physical composition or dimensionality; they exist only as two-dimensional shapes outlined against the floor, wall, or other surface.

After the characters have explored for 1d6 rounds, inform them that the characters on the edge of the group, furthest from light sources, notice their own shadows have two or three "reflections." Somehow, there are additional shadows cast around them, which seem to have no relationship to the light. In fact, some of the shadows actually act contrary to the light, darkening spaces leading into light sources!

The tomb shadows avoid light and attach themselves only to those characters furthest from a light source. A bright light forces them to scurry back into the darkness. They also avoid holy symbols; they will not attach themselves to clerics or other obviously pious creatures.

These supernatural creatures cannot be harmed by physical means, but they can be turned or damaged via magic. Bright light will deter or potentially damage them (see stat block). In playtests, the shadows were deterred by the characters lighting as many light sources as they could (multiple torches, lanterns, candles, etc.). The shadows do not attack, but will slowly drain the energy of characters to which they've attached at



the rate of 1 Strength point per round. Once the characters first “notice” the shadows, give the characters one round to react, then the shadows’ attack begins.

Tomb shadows (6): Init N/A (able to always surprise); Atk enervate (automatic hit once attached, dmg 1 Str (temporary)); AC N/A (incorporeal); HD 4d8; hp 17 each; MV fly 60’ (move at same speed as character they are attached to); Act 1d20; SP attach (once adjacent to a target, tomb shadow attaches to that target and moves with it, as if it were a normal shadow), incorporeal (moves along ground/walls like a normal shadow), immune to physical attack, vulnerable to turning (avoid attaching to clerics), vulnerable to light (chased off by bright light; full daylight causes 1 point of damage per round), vulnerable to select magic spells (e.g., *banish*, *magic missile*, etc.); SV Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +10; AL C.

The Skeletons: The shelves opposite the coffins hold the bones of wives, children, cousins, aunts, uncles, and other relatives of the various Dukes of Magnussen. There are 10 to 12 skeletons crammed into the shelves across from each coffin.

The coffins hold the dukes themselves. The thirteen stone lids (DC 14 Str check to move) are engraved with the numerals I (1) through XIII (13) and contain the remains of the corresponding duke, except for the thirteenth coffin, which contains the secret staircase.

All royal skeletons: Each skeleton wears rotted royal robes, assorted gold jewelry, and a signet ring with the family seal. The curse from area 1-1B is relieved by anyone wearing such a ring. The jewelry is worth 50 gp per coffin.

I: Skull is missing.

II: Skull and right forearm are missing.

III: Skull and left hand are missing.

IV: Skull and left leg are missing.

V: Skull and most of upper rib cage are missing.

VI: Skull and spine are missing.

VII: Skull and left arm are missing, but left hand is there.

VIII: Skull and right upper arm are missing.

IX: Skull and lower rib cage are missing.

X: Skull and right leg are missing.

XI: Skull and pelvis are missing.

XII: Skull and neck bones are missing.

XIII: No body. When the stone lid is removed, the characters reveal a dark staircase that leads down at a very steep angle. It leads to area 1-4.

The Trapped Doors: The double doors to area 1-3 support a massive granite block built into the ceiling. A dwarf or thief who carefully examines the ceiling around the double doors will note that it is composed of a single large block. The doors open inward to area 1-3, and when pushed open they remove the supports for the large granite block, which crashes to the ground. All characters near the door must make a DC 12 Reflex save or take 1d6+3 damage. The granite block crumbles

when it lands, allowing safe passage to 1-3. The trap can be disabled (DC 14) by a thief who somehow supports the block while carefully opening the doors partway.

The Secret Staircase: The thirteenth coffin contains a steeply-angled staircase that winds down more than 100 feet to area 1-4. There are no railings on the staircase.

Area 1-3 – Mourning Room: *This square room has two stone arm chairs against each wall. Opposite you is a plain-looking granite door with a single iron handle set into its center. Crossed halberds are mounted before the door, and two well-worn shields bearing the Magnussen crest hang from the wall beside the halberds. The room appears to be a sitting room of some kind, perhaps used once for mourning the dead.*

No one has been beyond this room since Duke Magnussen I. Any character who approaches the door notices that the halberds and shields begin to rattle. A royal signet ring is no protection. If the weapons, shields, or door is disturbed, the weapons and shields spring to life and attack, with the halberds on offense and the shields on defense (reflected in the AC noted below).

Importantly, the door opens *outward* into area 1-7. The door was closed once, generations ago, and then mortared shut from the other side. It can be opened only via magical means (e.g., *knock*) or prodigious strength (DC 20 Str check). A character who bashes down the door finds himself tumbling through the doorjamb into the empty space beyond – allow him a DC 14 Ref save to grab the edge; otherwise, he falls 100 feet to the river below at area 1-4 for 9d6 damage (reduced due to water landing).

Animated halberds (2): Init -4; Atk slash +6 melee (1d12+2); AC 18 (reflects steel hardness as well as shields that leap to intervene and block attacks); HD 3d8; hp 15 each; MV fly 30’; Act 2d20; SP immune to turning, immune to mind-affecting magic, poison, disease, etc.; SV Fort +6, Ref +1, Will +6; AL N.

Area 1-4 – Cave of the Pit: This cave is quite large and is divided into several sub-areas. Read this description when the characters first enter, then go on to the appropriate sub-area:

This large natural cave is several hundred feet wide and at least that tall. There is a small river crashing out of the northern wall and bisecting the cave before it rains outward through a cliff into the open air. The sound of rushing water is incredibly loud, and murky sunlight filters through the misty cave opening.

On your side of the river is the staircase you descended and a strange circular arrangement of bones.

Rising out of the river is a gigantic column, its top unseen in the darkness above. Its base has been badly eroded by the river, and it leans at a precarious angle.

On the other side of the river is a stone archway leading into the cavern wall.

The Stinking Pit to Hell at area 1-4E periodically vomits forth 1d4+1 devils, which immediately attack. The author recommends these be used as random encounters at a pace of roughly one set of devils for every 30 minutes of character exploration. Alternately, the judge can use them to encourage the characters to keep moving. See area 1-4E for more info.



Area 1-4A – The Revivification Circle: At this place in the rocky cavern floor, there is a disturbing arrangement of bones. A collection of skulls has been arranged in a circle with a skeleton at its center. There are twelve skulls arrayed equidistant around the circle. No, not quite equidistant: one place is an empty slot marked by a carved depression, so there are thirteen slots and only twelve skulls. The skeleton at the center of the circle is missing its skull, and is quite clearly composed of bones from different sources; the length and shape of the various limbs don't quite match each other.

The twelve skulls each come from a Magnussen duke, as do the bones; all were harvested from the parts missing from the coffins in area 1-2. When the thirteenth skull is placed in its position, the first duke's ritual will be completed; the Silver Skull will then materialize atop the skeleton, which comes to life as the other souls are condemned to eternal hell. Wizards have a 75% chance of understanding the purpose of this arrangement.

Area 1-4B – The River: The river has a very fast current. It looks to be at least 5 feet deep, possibly more.

The river runs quickly. It can be crossed, though it reaches a depth of six feet at its center and some swimming is required. Characters with the appropriate 0-level occupation can swim across (provided they doff any heavy armor).

Area 1-4C – The Waterfall: The river passes out of a natural cave mouth into the daylight beyond, where it then crashes down the cliff face in a cloud of mist.

The waterfall covers about 100 feet of descent. Anyone who falls down the waterfall takes 7d6 damage (partially reduced due to water landing).

Area 1-4D – The Column: The gigantic stone rising up from the water must be 30 feet across. It seems to be man-made: it is perfectly round and smooth, except for what appears to be a rocky hole near the top. At its base, however, erosion has taken its toll. The column has been worn down to a width of only a few yards across at the waterline, and the stone there is spider-webbed with cracks. In fact, the whole column tilts at a slight angle, starting at this well-worn

point. Strangely, there seem to be "rings" visible in the worn-away column, like the rings of an aged tree.

The column is DC 15 to climb. The top of the column supports the Silver Skull (see area 1-7). There are thirteen consecutive rings of granite in the stone column, each the proportional width of the lifetime of one duke. As each duke's lifetime passes, the stone slowly wears away. When the last duke dies, the column will collapse. If the Silver Skull has not escaped to the revivification point (area 1-4A) by that point, it will fall into the Pit (area 1-4E) when the column collapses, its soul forever claimed. Of course, if the Silver Skull has escaped and completed its ritual, the column will collapse with no effect.

There is a small cave on one side of the column (area 1-6). It is clearly visible from anyone standing close to the waterfall but is otherwise obscured by the curve of the column.

Area 1-4E – The Stinking Pit of Hell: Any character who carefully observes the river notices the pit. Otherwise, it is not noticed until the devils rush forth (see below).

You notice that the water behaves strangely in one portion of the river. About halfway across, upstream of the column, there appears to be a 5-foot-wide hole in the river. You haven't seen anything like this before: the water level remains steady, but waves seem to simply stream around the hole. A yellowish-looking steam spurts upward from the hole in fits and starts.

If characters wade close to the pit, read the following:

The air becomes unbearably hot as you get near the pit. Waves of heat emanate outward from it. The water nearby boils and bursts into sickly yellow steam when it touches the pit's interior. The walls of the pit appear to be a lava-like rock.

This pit is a direct conduit to Hell. The devil that bargained with Duke Magnussen I captured his soul in the Silver Skull and built a direct route for transfer of the souls of his descendants. This same route will of course be used for Duke Magnussen I himself should he not live up to his side of the bargain. Over the centuries, the duke's infernal patron has called

up many devils from this pit and sent them on important errands (such as harvesting bones from the coffins above to form the circle at area 1-4A or carting the current duke's daughter to the 417th level of Hell in area 1-5B).

In game terms, the pit is an extradimensional portal. Anything that travels down the pit finds that gravity ends after about 500 feet of falling. At that point the object begins moving horizontally and emerges from a cave in Hell.

Long before any creature can make that journey, however, they have to contend with the many, varied devils that dwell within. For every 30 minutes the characters spend anywhere in area 1-4, 1d4+1 devils are vomited from the pit to attack. The first to come forth are worm devils, then toadstool devils, then eyestalk devils, then the pattern repeats.

Worm Devils (1d4+1): *These squirming, maggot-like creatures are revolting to look upon. About 75 pounds in weight, they consist of a central worm-like body with four legs jointed in opposite pairs. Instead of feet, they have hands with thumbs with which they walk like loping monkeys. One end of their vermiform bodies has three eye-stalks, and there is a single fin-like wing set to one side of their backs.* Init +2; Atk claws +6 melee (1d8+2) or projectile vomit +4 missile fire (60' range, 1d4 acid plus target has -2 nausea penalty to all actions for 1 turn); AC 14; HD 2d8; hp 9 each; MV jump 40' or fly 10'; Act 2d20; SP half-damage from non-magical attacks (including fire, cold, acid, etc.); SV Fort +5, Ref +2, Will +4; AL C.

Toadstool Devils (1d4+1): *This creature looks like a walking armored toadstool. It has a round shell of some black shiny substance supported by at least a dozen clattering legs. It doesn't appear to have any sort of mouth or sensory organs.* Init +1; Atk ram +8 melee (1d6+2); AC 20; HD 2d8+2; hp 11 each; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP half-damage from non-magical attacks (including fire, cold, acid, etc.); SV Fort +6, Ref +1, Will +4; AL C.

Eyestalk Devils (1d4+1): *This top-heavy creature has four small legs, a narrow body, and a tall, stout neck. Set into the neck are four eyes facing forward. Each eye glows a different color...then begin shooting beams at you!* Init +2; Atk eyebeam +5 missile fire (100' range; 2d4 or paralysis (DC 16 Fort or duration 48 hours) or fire (1d6 plus on fire for additional 1d6 until spend entire round beating out flames)); AC 14; HD 3d8+3; hp 17 each; MV 30'; Act 4d20; SP half-damage from non-magical attacks (including fire, cold, acid, etc.), eyebeams (as noted above: damage, paralysis, or fire); SV Fort +5, Ref +2, Will +4; AL C.

Area 1-4F – Corpse Pile: The pile of corpses is not immediately visible from the other side of the river until a character closely scans the opposite bank, at which point it becomes obvious.

At this place in the cave is a pile of rotting corpses. There appear to be four of them. Three are in peasant farmer garb. The fourth wears the black cloak and hood of an executioner.

The Silver Skull can take possession of bodies for a limited time, but doing so usually kills the host. This is a pile of recently possessed corpses. There is nothing of value on them. Note that the Silver Skull may choose to take possession of these corpses during combat (see area 1-7). If so, use the stats below.

Silver Skull-possessed zombie (4): Init -4; Atk bite +3 melee (1d4); AC 9; HD 3d6; hp 10 each; MV 40'; Act 1d20; SP undead; SV Fort +4, Ref -4, Will +2; AL C.

Area 1-5 – The Room of Planes: It was in this magical chamber that Duke Magnussen I first made contact with his infernal patron. The *Book of Planes* is a powerful magical artifact that the first duke crafted. It is unfinished and could potentially be put to use by an ambitious wizard. Show the players Handout A and read the following:

The walls of this room are made from hammered sheets of polished brass, so bright they blind you with the reflection of your torch-light. In the center of the room is a brass pedestal supporting a massive tome with metal plates for pages. In two of the room's corners are 10-foot-tall statues of armored fighting men.

This room exists on multiple planes at once and normal modes of navigation (such as a compass or lodestone) cease to work here.

Book of Planes: This massive book is made of an alien metal and weighs 300 lbs. It is nearly invulnerable, being harder than iron and having a 95% chance to resist all magic of less than caster level 7. Wizards have a 25% chance of knowing its legend. The *Book* has 64 pages divided into two-page spreads. A wizard who properly carves an image onto a given spread and also creates a corresponding statue can use the *Book* to transport himself to that place – whether it is intra-planar teleporting or cross-planar travel. Turning the page and activating the magic are simultaneous; a character cannot look at a page before activating it.

When the characters first look at the book – which is opened to the halfway point – they find a scene showing the very room they are in. Many of the book's pages are not yet inscribed and are blank. As the characters decide to explore the book, it is recommended that the judge have them encounter area 1-5A (plane of water) then area 1-5B (417th level of Hell), in that order, no matter how they declare they are exploring the book. If they pursue a third location, the judge can either create one or rule that the remaining pages are blank and have no effect.

The stone statues are alive on other planes of existence. When a character moves to a certain plane, one of the stone statues turns into a living automaton on that plane made of an appropriate material (e.g., water for the plane of water). Because the *Book of Planes* exists in multiple planes at once, the statues act as guardians to ensure extraplanar interlopers don't start flipping pages and move themselves onto this plane.

Area 1-5A – Plane of Water: *As you turn the book's page, the room disappears and you are now on a sandy beach. The book and brass pedestal are still before you, with the page now depicting a scene of roiling oceans with deadly fish, strange fish-men, and living water-creatures. Looking around, you realize you're now in a place that fits that description! The small island on which you are standing is less than half a mile wide, and the ocean that surrounds it as far as the eye can see is alive with strange creatures. One of the statues has also transported with you, and on this world you can see it is actually a well-muscled giant with a huge axe in his hand. However, instead of being a stone statue, the giant seems to be made of solid water.*

There is no map for this area – it is simply a sandy beach, as described. This is the elemental plane of water. The characters see various fish-men, sea serpents, and whales swimming in the distance. Shells litter the beach, and characters that think to search for pearls find 1d6 of them worth 20 gp each.

The living statue is a guardian that prevents unauthorized access to the *Book of Planes*. It will not fight the characters (because they arrived here using the *Book*, it assumes they are innocuous). It does not communicate. Stats are provided here just in case they are needed.

Giant Water Warrior: Init -2; Atk large axe +5 melee (1d8+2); AC 18; HD 3d10; hp 20; MV 30'; Act 2d20; SV Fort +5, Ref +2, Will +2; AL N.

Allow the players a few minutes to explore the empty beach, then read the following:

One of the waves lapping at the beach somehow defies gravity to continue moving past the beachhead. The 6-foot-tall living wave halts in front of your party and undulates in a strange motion as a gurgling voice proclaims, "What word have you for the water lords?"

No matter how the players answer, the wave is dissatisfied. The characters are not yet powerful enough to placate the water lords who demand a price for entrance to their domain. After a few rounds of haggling, the living wave sounds a loud roar, like the crash of a wave, and dozens more living waves advance on the characters. They push the party back toward the perimeter of the *Book of Planes*. If the characters resist, grant them an opposed Strength check against the +20 Strength modifier of the waves. The waves then hold the characters near the book until they depart.

The characters can use the *Book of Planes* to return at a later date (with this adventure hook being left to the discretion of the judge).

Area 1-5B – The 417th Level of Hell: *As you turn the book's page, the room disappears and you are now in a dark, sweltering cave. The air is extremely hot, still, and oppressive; the walls are coal and other dark stones; and the low ceiling seems to go on for miles in every direction. The book and squat pedestal are still before you, and one of the statues has also transported with you. On this world you can see it is actually an enormous fighting man made of coal. But your attention is quickly diverted by the screaming nearby. Looking in that direction, you see the duke's daughter bound in the midst of a pentagram, while a spindly, barbed devil approaches her with a wicked dagger in its hand!*

There is no map for this area; it is simply an open space as described. This is the 417th level of Hell. After the Silver Skull kidnapped the duke's daughter, his patron sent a minion to conceal her in this place. He has been preparing the ritual to slay her and contribute her skull to the revivification circle at area 1-4A.

As soon as the barbed devil sees the characters, it advances to attack. It wields *Abathon*, a magical dagger. However, the devil does not hesitate to use its barbed burst (which will probably kill the girl, too). The devil would prefer to kill her in a significant ritual but will certainly not defer from the most efficient means of self-defense on her account. Unless the characters think to immediately protect the girl somehow (which, in playtests, they generally didn't), she will most likely perish in combat. (Assume she has 1d4 hp as a level 0 character.)

Note: In most playtest sessions, the duke's daughter died in this engagement. However, in a few, the daughter *did* survive. The characters must act decisively to save her. Don't be afraid to let her die if the characters do not quickly prevent the barbed devil from slaying her, either directly or via its barbed burst.





The statue has stats as in area 1-5A, but it will not engage in combat.

The air is extremely hot. For every round of combat, every character loses 1 hp from heat exhaustion.

The girl squirms in her bindings and screams for help. She probably won't survive the combat, but if she does, she knows nothing about the Silver Skull or any other lore. She was kidnapped, brought here, then bound while the devil began drawing the circle. When the characters break the circle (by stepping through to reach her), they disrupt the preparation of a ritual but cause no other great harm.

Should the characters decide to explore this area in spite of the heat, they find it is simply an endless expanse of low-ceilinged, super-heated wasteland. The judge is welcome to expand further should he wish.

Abathon, ceremonial +1 dagger (athame): Int 5; AL C; bane: men (19-20 crit threat range); communication: simple urges; special purpose: harvest souls for its master; special powers: improved vampiric touch (wielder heals 1 hp on any hit that causes 5+ damage); *detect magic* 1/day, *detect invisible* (ongoing); wielder speaks Infernal.

Barbed devil: *This spindly humanoid must be over 8 feet tall if it stands upright, but it bends over like a hunchback. It has long, skinny limbs that move as if they're double-jointed. Its entire body is covered with short hooked barbs. Its beady eyes look upon you with malice as it raises a ceremonial dagger to attack!* Init +4; Atk Abathon +7 melee (1d4+4 (includes Str modifier) plus special traits as noted above) or claws +6 melee (1d4+4) or barbed burst (see below); AC 16; HD 4d8+8; hp 26; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP half-damage from non-magical attacks (including fire, cold, acid, etc.), barbed burst (explosive discharge of sharp barbs from its skin; 1d6+2 damage to all creatures within 30'; usable 1/day); SV Fort +6, Ref +4, Will +6; AL C.

Area 1-6 - The Aerie: This cave is hidden by the curve of the column. It is clearly visible only if the characters walk around the column to the waterfall. If the characters somehow scale the cliff to enter the aerie, read the following:

This low-ceilinged natural cave stinks of guano. It is filled with bones, bits of hair, and rotting remains that look like they've been gnawed repeatedly.

A pterodactyl lairs here. The Silver Skull's patron makes use of it on occasion. The pterodactyl stays in its lair unless provoked or urged forth by the Silver Skull.

Pterodactyl: Init +2; Atk bite +8 melee (1d10) or claw +2 melee (1d4); AC 15; HD 6d8; hp 26; MV 10' or fly 50'; Act 1d20; SV Fort +6, Ref +5, Will +2; AL N.

Area 1-7 - Diabolic Circle of the Silver Skull: The characters can explore this area directly after 1-3 or after climbing up from 1-4. The text below assumes they enter from area 1-3; adjust as needed:

You open the door and see before you a large cave. There is no floor, just an abrupt drop-off into darkness past the doorway. In the middle of this large open space, level with you, is the top of a 50-foot-wide column, which leans at a slight angle. The edge of this column is about 10 feet away from the door's threshold. At the center of the circular top of the column is a gleaming silver skull, surrounded by a white powder arranged in a wide circle around it.

This is the Silver Skull, also known as Duke Magnussen I. When he died, his natural skull was removed to area 1-4 while his soul was transferred to this solid-silver magic artifact. There it has remained for nearly 300 years, methodically influencing the world around it. The Silver Skull has many of the spellcasting abilities that the duke possessed when he was alive, and is, in effect, a level 6 wizard. Its primary abilities relate to invoking its patron, which it can do far more often than normal wizards as a result of the special ritual that sent its soul here. In the past, the Silver Skull's patron has aided it in fairly significant ways. The patron allowed it to change the face of the beheaded man at the start of the adventure and send the pterodactyl to retrieve the transformed executioner.

The white powder is salt; it forms a magic circle that limits the powers of the Silver Skull. The Silver Skull is currently able to use its spells *only* in area 1-7 and the cave at 1-4. It can take possession of other creatures and send them out on errands (particularly with its patron's aid) but that is all. If the characters break the magic circle—either by setting foot within it or by physically disrupting it—the Silver Skull can send its soul back into a mortal vessel, either to forcibly take possession of another body or to inhabit a corpse or skeleton. Unlike its normal possession attack, this soul transfer is permanent.

The Silver Skull weighs only a few pounds and is easy to hurl. In two separate playtests, the characters disposed of it by hurling it into the river below (using a lasso in one game and the *ropework* spell in another). When thrown, it is magically sucked into the pit at area 1-4E. No matter which direction the Silver Skull is hurled it re-orientates itself to aim toward the pit and vanishes in a cloud of brimstone.

Tactics: The Silver Skull lashes out the moment it sees a target. It casts spells silently with no motions or materials. It makes no noise but glows intermittently, especially when launching attacks.

In the first round, it will use one action to possess the four zombies at area 1-4F and send them rushing up the stairs to 1-2 in order to attack the heroes from behind. No control check is necessary for these mindless un-dead. They will arrive at the beginning of the fourth round. Note that while possessed the zombies' heads turn into silver skulls! (If the characters have not yet discovered area 1-4, they probably will now, as the zombies must push the stone coffin lid aside to emerge in area 1-2).

In the second round, the Silver Skull possesses the pterodactyl and sends it swooping up to harry and attack the characters. It then launches spells constantly, including multiple *lightning bolts* and powerful *magic missiles*.

Note that the doorway to area 1-7 only has enough space to allow a maximum of three characters to attack at once.

The Silver Skull, a.k.a. Duke Magnussen I (unique living artifact, formerly a level 6 wizard): Init +5; Atk spells or possession; AC 14; HD 4d10+4; hp 28; MV – (cannot move); SP spellcasting (spell check +8, spells known: (level 1) *cantrip*, *charm shield*, *magic missile* (appears as barrage of glowing skulls), *patron bond*, *sleep*, (level 2) *ESP*, *forget*, (level 3) *lightning bolt*); possession (see below), patron (see below), half damage from nonmagical attack forms; Act 2d20 (one spell plus one possession); SV Fort +6, Ref +0, Will +10; AL C.

Possession: The Silver Skull can possess creatures within areas 1-4 and 1-7. A possessed creature acts under the complete control of the Silver Skull. It can possess the zombies automatically; once possessed, their heads turn into silver skulls. It can also possess the pterodactyl automatically (no change in appearance). The Silver Skull can also attempt to possess one of the characters. In this case, the character receives a Will save against the Silver Skull's spell check. Possession attempts require one action, and once creatures are possessed, the Silver Skull must use one action each round to maintain control of them. Possessed heroes appear to have their heads transform into silver skulls while they are possessed. Up to ten creatures can be controlled in this way. When the Silver Skull is killed, the possession ends.

Invoke patron: The Silver Skull has a very direct relationship with its patron as a result of the special ritual that created it. Generally speaking, it receives direct intervention from the patron almost immediately as it is requested.

CONCLUSION



In playtest sessions, the Duke's daughter died more often than not. Clever, quick-thinking players *have* managed to save her—but most playtests ended with her death. The characters may or may not decide to present their faces to the current Duke Magnussen after they fail to save his daughter. He obviously offers no reward for her corpse, and lashes out at the characters for their failure. But the characters did destroy the Silver Skull and end the prophecy of the Thirteenth Skull, and they now have access to some interesting portals to other planes. It is recommended that the Judge seal the Stinking Pit (area 1-4E) after the Silver Skull passes through it, but the *Book of Planes* remains a powerful artifact that could send the characters on many future adventures...

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AREA I-5

AREA I-6

AREA I-8

I-6

I-7

from I-7

TO I-2

I-4 I-5

I-3

TO AREA I-2

I-2

THE LANCE
THE BLADE

□ = 10'

I-1

TO I-5

AREA I-5

I-5

I-7

I-4

I-4A

I-4A

I-4B

I-4C

THE 13TH SKULL



□ = 10'

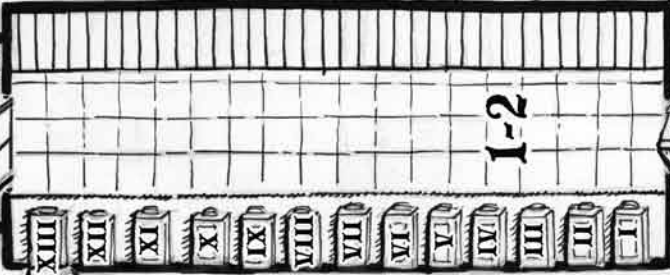
I-7

I-3

I-2

I-1B

I-1



TO I-4

□ = 100 FEET

SCALE CHANGE



THE BALANCE BLADE

A Level 2 Adventure

By Joseph Goodman

Playtesters: (GaryCon 2011) several fun gamers whose names I neglected to record; (San Diego Playtest Group) Karina Benish, Kevin Cousineau, Sam Carter, Steven Thivierge; (FCB Games) Patrick Anderson, Amy Jordan, Wayne Jordan, Amy Klinner, Brendan LaSalle, Cameron Martinez, Billy Watford

INTRODUCTION

The *Balance Blade* is a short adventure for a party of level 2 characters. It should take about one four-hour session to complete. This adventure is best played as a one-shot since the conclusion involves intra-party combat. The plot is predicated on the relationship between a wizard and his patron: the basic hook is a patron's request, and the adventure concludes with the patron tempting the wizard with power. However, this is definitely *not* an innocent romp through the planes. The conclusion involves double-crossing and treachery, and the wizard discovers he has been duped by his patron and then sent to slay his fellow adventurers!

There are three important things to note about this adventure:

- A wizard with a patron is absolutely required to play this adventure. It's the basic hook and a core part of the adventure's conclusion.
- Character alignment is important. A party of mixed alignments is required to pass through areas 1-3, 1-4, and 1-5, and mixed alignments make area 1-7 more entertaining.
- The adventure requires preparation, particularly for the illusions created by the succubus and demons in area 1-7. Be sure to have index cards and colored stickers handy, and follow the preparation instructions before play.

BACKGROUND STORY

There is a powerful artifact known as the *Balance Blade*. It is a weapon of neutrality and cannot be manipulated by the Lords of Law or the Chaos Lords. It resides in a strange dimension where is buried the mummy of the last Colossus, a race of enormous giants long since vanished from the universe. Several extradimensional shifts are required to reach the Tomb of the Last Colossus, and due to the unique nature of the *Blade's* temporal neutrality, those shifts can no longer be navigated by gods, demigods, demons, or supernatural beings.

The party wizard's patron requires the use of the *Balance Blade*, but because he cannot reach it—and he cannot send his supernatural servants to acquire it—he must work with his mortal ally. He thus sends the wizard on this important errand. But the patron is not honest in his request...

PLAYER BEGINNING

Begin the adventure by reading the following. Insert the wizard character's name and patron where appropriate. Note this is all a dishonest ruse, as explained below.

[Wizard], you have had a long and fruitful relationship with your supernatural patron, [patron name]. You have called for his aid many times and he has helped you out of some difficult spots. Now he has called in his favors and asked for something in return.

Last night you were visited by one of his minor servitors, who explained to you the existence of a thing called the Balance Blade. Your patron has safeguarded the Balance Blade for eons, but now this powerful artifact has been stolen by a nefarious wizard known only as the "Necron." The Balance Blade is important in maintaining the cosmic balance between Law and Chaos, and should the Necron succeed in using it inappropriately, the entire balance of the cosmos could be disrupted.

Your patron has asked you to retrieve the Blade and defeat the Necron in the process. The Necron was last seen entering the extradimensional caves that lead to the Tomb of the Last Colossus. The Colossi were a race of cosmic giants that have been dead for a hundred million years, and the Tomb of the Last Colossus has floated between the planes for that entire time.

In a swirling, flashing explosion, your patron transports you and your friends to an extradimensional place at the entrance to the Tomb of the Last Colossus. Your task: catch up to the Necron and retrieve the Balance Blade before it is too late!

JUDGE'S NOTE

There is no Necron; he is a fiction created by the patron to appeal to the characters' sense of heroism. Characters will not know any history, rumors, or lore associated with the name, since it is fictitious. The Tomb of the Last Colossus does exist, and the characters are sent there because the patron and his minions cannot directly enter themselves. No wizard in the party has ever heard of the *Balance Blade* before; it is such an ancient weapon, so removed from human history that only wizards of level 6 or higher may have encountered lore associated with it.

Because the wizard's patron has specifically asked him to pursue this mission—and the patron wants the wizard to succeed—the wizard has an improved ability to *invoke patron*. Give him a +4 bonus to all *invoke patron* spell checks on this adventure, and allow for other "special requests" of the patron as well, as the character may attempt.

Encourage the inter-party dynamic where the players "blame" the wizard player for "getting them into this mess." It should be clearly understood that the only reason they're on this mission is because the wizard's patron told him to participate!



PREPARATION BEFORE PLAY



The judge must prepare properly or this adventure will not work well. Before the game begins, do the following things.

First, purchase some index cards and colored stickers. Index cards should be easy to find. For colored stickers, the author recommends color-coding labels, such as those manufactured by Avery and available at office supply stores.

Second, label your players' character sheets by alignment. *Don't tell the players what the colored labels mean!* Choose a simple code (i.e., blue = lawful, green = neutral, red = chaotic, depending on the colored stickers you have available). Place a label in a visible corner of each character sheet. Again, don't tell the players what the labels mean. If you have extra colors (such as yellow or orange in the example above), add a few of these meaningless extra colors to the character sheets as well to throw the players off.

Third, write out messages on the index cards per the description of area 1-7. You'll need one index card per character, and the message varies according to the character's alignment, as noted in area 1-7.

AREAS OF THE MAP

Area 1-1 – The Looping Caves: *You suffer a moment of disorientation, then you and your friends are transported to a strange place. You stand just inside the entrance to a rocky passage. Behind you is the cave mouth, which opens out to a strange red sky filled with alien constellations. Before you, the cave stretches ahead then branches into two passages.*

The characters cannot exit; any attempt to do simply results in them re-appearing back in the passage where they started.

Of the two passages ahead, one slopes upward and one downward. After about 200 yards, *they both lead to the same place*, which is area 1-2. Do not question this geographic magic; it is simply so. In game terms, a character who reaches area 1-2, then returns to area 1-1 and takes the other fork arrives back in area 1-2! Characters do not "replicate" or create "doubles," but travel between the forks will allow a "separated" party to reunite by traveling in different directions.

In playtests, the players typically spend 10-15 minutes sending messengers back and forth between the two tunnels before they finally satisfy their curiosity.

Area 1-2 – The Obelisk: *The passage opens into a wide cavern. Another cave mouth can be seen on the far wall. A rough-carved obelisk of red stone occupies the center of the room. There are symbols carved on the obelisk.*

Three faces of the obelisk are blank, and the fourth is inscribed with five runes. They can be understood only via magic (e.g., *comprehend languages*) or a character who speaks the Chaos tongue. They read, from top to bottom:

- Chaos
- Annihilate
- Transport
- Walk
- Kill



The runes are "normal stone" to the touch and do not trigger or activate if disturbed. As the characters explore the rooms that follow, the runes will disappear, one by one, as noted below.

- Chaos: fades when the chaos changeling is defeated in area 1-3
- Annihilate: fades when the *rune of annihilation* is triggered in area 1-4
- Transport: fades when the *rune of transport* is triggered in area 1-5
- Walk: fades when a character walks through the wall at area 1-6
- Kill: fades when the succubus is killed at area 1-7

In playtests, the players typically are stumped by the obelisk, then return after exploring past it. When they return they note the faded runes and that often leads them back to 1-1 to see if "both obelisks" (in the "upper passage" to 1-2 and the "lower passage" to 1-2) are affected. Usually it is that observation which finally convinces them that area 1-1 has two passages to the "same" 1-2.

Area 1-3 – The Chaos Beast: *The passage opens into a small rocky cavern. You can smell the bitter tang of Chaos in the air. On the far side, you see thick iron bars blocking the only other exit. As you move cautiously forward, something stirs in the darkness. A bulky form rises from the cavern floor. It is like a gigantic crocodile but with the legs of a stork or rooster. The bizarre monster has the eight-armed sign of Chaos inscribed on its forehead. With a bellow it charges!*

Roll for initiative!

Taint of Chaos: The taint of Chaos is strong in these caves. Chaotic characters feel it in their bones; lawful characters feel nervous and jittery. There was a time eons ago, when the Tomb of the Last Colossus was accessible to deities, when the Lords of Chaos visited and made this place holy. But they were not able to pass the bars to area 1-4, and so they never traveled further.

The chaos changeling: The chaos changeling charges, but it will only attack lawful or neutral characters. As it fights, it mutates constantly. Each round of combat, roll 1d4 twice and cross-reference on the table below to determine which part of its body changes. Use the record-keeper on page 14 to track the changes and their effects on its stats. Roll 1d4 for each body part to determine the changeling's initial appearance, and record it on the record keeper.

When the changeling is killed, its body turns to an oily liquid, swirls into a single spot on the ground, and "drains" into the floor, leaving behind a sign of chaos charred into the cave. The sign is burning hot (1d4 damage if touched). It will re-form to another changeling when sparked by the right chaos spell.

Chaos changeling: Init +2; Atk bite +4 melee (1d8+2); AC 14; HD 6d10; hp 40; MV 20'; Act 1d20; SV Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +4; AL C.

The Barred Exit, or the Gate of Law: The thick iron bars are unbelievably tough. They are set directly into the cavern floor and ceiling, and are placed so close together that even a halfling cannot pass through. Characters can see beyond to area 1-4.

These bars are known as The Gate of Law and *can only be bent by a character of lawful alignment*. Characters of chaotic or neutral alignment cannot bend them, no matter how great their Strength, how successfully they roll, or what magic or weapons they bring to bear.

However, a character of lawful alignment, no matter how weak or disabled, can bend the bars as if he were Hercules! The lawful character finds the bars simply part with his tiniest effort. Allow them a Strength check but the bars bend no matter how bad (or good) the roll.

Once a lawful character has bent aside the bars, everyone else can easily step through the hole he creates, no matter what their alignments.

Use the colored labels on the character sheets to easily note the alignment of a character who attempts to bend the bars. This should make it easy for you to tell when a character of the right alignment has made an attempt.

This gate usually stumps the players for some time until they "get lucky" and a character of lawful alignment tries to bend the bars. If the players are stumped for too long, the judge should feel free to offer hints.

Area 1-4 – The First Rune: *The bars open to a narrow cave that extends 40 feet to yet another set of bars.*

Inscribed in the rocky floor, hidden under a layer of dirt, is a *rune of annihilation*. It is halfway down the corridor. The first character in line triggers it when it is disturbed, and a black globe of death flashes out in a 5-foot radius: DC 12 Ref save or the character is instantly annihilated. A thief who finds traps will notice an impression of the symbol under the dirt and can disable the trap by breaking the lines of power.

The Barred Exit, or the Gate of Neutrality: These thick iron bars are unbelievably tough and once again are triggered by alignment. As at area 1-3, they will prove invulnerable to all attempts to pass by chaotic or lawful characters but open with the slightest effort to a character of neutral alignment.

Area 1-5 – The Second Rune: *The bars open to another narrow cave that extends 30 feet to another barred gate.*

Like the last corridor, this one features a trap: a *rune of transport*, inscribed in the rocky floor, hidden under a layer of dirt halfway down the corridor. The first character in line triggers it when it is disturbed, and a flash of white light transports the character one million years into the past: DC 13 Will save or gone forever. The trap can be detected and disabled by a thief just like the one in area 1-4.

The Barred Exit, or the Gate of Chaos: These thick iron bars are like the previous two sets, though they respond only to the touch of chaotic characters and resist all efforts to pass by characters of other alignments.

Chaos changeling: 1d4 each round to determine which part of body...	...then 1d4 to determine what it changes to.			
	1	2	3	4
1 Head	Rooster (Atk bite +2)	Dragon (Atk breathe fire +10 missile fire (range 100', dmg. 2d8))	Goat (Atk gore +4)	Snake (Dmg 1d6 + poison (Fort DC 10 or 1d4 Stamina))
2 Legs	Dog	Horse (MV 30')	Lion (Atk claw +2, dmg 1d4+2)	Ostrich
3 Body	Bull (additional +2 to dmg)	Toad	Ostrich	Bear (additional +2 to dmg)
4 Tail	Scorpion (Atk sting +6 melee, dmg 1d6 + poison (Fort DC 12 or 1d4 Agility))	Lizard	Peacock	Stingray (Atk sting +4 melee, dmg 1d8+4)

CHAOS CHANGELING BODY TRACKER

Body Part	Start	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4
Head	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Legs	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Body	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Tail	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____



Area 1-6 – The Illusionary Wall: *The passage opens up into another rocky cave. It veers around to the north, forming a rough “L” shape. There does not appear to be any exit.*

Searching the cave reveals an unusually flat wall face to the north. About 10 feet of wall is smooth and regular, as if it had been carved.

This is in fact an illusionary wall. A character who walks directly into it will pass right through and arrive at area 1-7. In order to walk through it, the character must search it thoroughly and accidentally discover its illusionary nature by pushing his hand through (DC 10 Luck check) or take some action that reveals its illusionary nature (throwing a pebble through, for example). In playtests, groups that paid close attention to the runes in area 1-2 typically concluded they should “walk” through the north wall, per the fourth rune, and discovered the illusion.

Through the wall: Walking through the wall leads the character into total blackness and then to area 1-7.

Area 1-7 – The Succubus: This room requires preparation. Prepare sets of index cards. You’ll need three kinds—for lawful, neutral, and chaotic characters. Each character should get a separate card (so if you have three lawful characters in the party, you’ll need three cards for them). Inscribe the following text onto each card:

- For lawful characters: *On the bed sits a beautiful woman in a white gown.*
- For neutral characters: *On the bed sits a beautiful woman in a white gown. Beside her is a child about ten years of age.*
- For chaotic characters: *On the bed sits a beautiful succubus: like a naked woman but with fangs and bat wings. Beside her is a spider-like creature that is only a few feet tall and walks on two of its legs.*

Once the cards are prepared, begin the room description. The characters enter this room magically, simply appearing simultaneously at multiple entrance points from the illusory wall at area 1-6. There is no return. When the characters enter, read the following:

You arrive at different points around the edge of this circular room. It is brightly lit from an unseen source. There are no visible exits and the room is completely empty except for a sumptuous bed at the center of the room.

Now hand the index cards out with the secondary messages, telling the players that the cards describe the rest of what they see. Use the colored stickers to know which characters get which cards. Don’t reveal to the characters that the trigger is alignment! Ask the players behave based on what their PCs see, and instruct them to “role-play and remain in character” as much as possible. Character should *act* like they see what they are being told they see!

What’s really in the room? In reality, the room holds a minor succubus and her demon-child—only chaotic creatures see truthfully here. All other characters see an illusion. But do not reveal what is the “truth.” The succubus fell out of favor eons ago and was assigned as the guard to this place.

Let the scene play out as follows:

Act 1, the conversation: The woman asks the characters why they have come. She offers her “hospitality” and says they should stay with her for a while. If questioned, she explains that she was trapped here against her will, eons ago, and can be freed only by the kiss of a “true man.” She needs no sustenance, she says. She avoids questions about characters seeing different things, dismissing them with a coy wave and saying, “Are you being silly?” If asked about the Necron, she says that a mortal wizard *did* pass through here not long ago and that “he left.”

Act 2, the combat: At some point a character will attempt to kiss her or attempt to attack (after being convinced by another character that she’s a demon). *Once combat begins, the illusion is maintained.* Characters that *cannot see* the spider-creature/child *cannot attack it.* Lawful characters never see the succubus’ true form. And so on. Encourage the characters to maintain their alignment visions. For example, when chaotic creatures attack the spider-demon, neutral characters will see their allies striking a child and should react accordingly!

Act 3, the passage revealed: When the demons are killed, their bodies transform to an oily substance and drain to form a chaos symbol on the floor, as in area 1-3. When both chaos symbols have appeared, the two eight-pointed chaos symbols then merge into a single point on the floor, which reveals a black pit.

Into the Pit: It leads to the Tomb of the Colossus. It drops down into darkness as far as the eye can see; objects dropped into the pit disappear at its bottom and never send up a sound. However, about 40 feet down the pit is a small hole flush against the wall. It cannot be seen from above due to the angle, but a character who descends (on rope or via *spider climb*) will detect the hole. It leads into a narrow horizontal crawlspace several hundred feet long, which finally leads to area 1-8.

Combat: The succubus attempts to claw or kiss a mortal. If she succeeds in a kiss, she drains part of the target’s soul. She targets lawful characters, then neutrals, then chaotics. These soul drains are her only sustenance in this prison. The kiss is effective (as reflected in the high attack bonus) because it need not penetrate armor—she simply needs to contact flesh. The spider-demon uses its silk to tie up fighter-types, then uses its bite attack.

Minor Succubus: Init +4; Atk 2 claws +4 melee (1d6) or demon kiss +8 melee (1d3 permanent Personality drain); AC 10; HD 3d10; hp 25; MV 30’ or fly 30’; Act 2d20; SP type I demon traits (speak Infernal and Common; infravision; *darkness* (+4 check); half damage from non-magical weapons and fire), demon kiss (drains soul in form of permanent loss of 1d3 Personality); SV Fort +8, Ref +8, Will +10; AL C.

Spider-demon: Init +3; Atk bite +6 melee (1d6 plus poison) or silk +8 missile fire (special); AC 15; HD 4d10; hp 20; MV 30’ or climb 30’; Act 1d20; SP type I demon traits (speak Infernal and Common; infravision; *darkness* (+4 check), half damage from non-magical weapons and fire), silk (projects string of sticky silk; characters that are hit are restrained until they succeed in a DC 14 Str or Agi check), poison (DC 13 Fort save, 1d4 temporary Strength); SV Fort +4, Ref +5, Will +3; AL C.



Area 1-8 –The Tomb of the Last Colossus: The passage from area 1-7 goes several hundred feet before opening into the vast Tomb of the Last Colossus.

You emerge from the small passage to stand in a vast space far larger than you can comprehend. It is a cave made of the utmost craftsmanship, extending to the limit of your eyesight. A faint light from far above illuminates the entire space. A half-mile in the distance is a massive mummy seated on a giant stone throne. Even from here it seems enormous – this is a mummy that is larger than anything you have ever seen before. As a beetle is to a man, you are to this mummy: it is hundreds or thousands of feet tall.

Emphasize the sense of scale as the characters explore this room. The author usually lifts up his foot and holds a finger to the sole of his shoe, saying, “You are this tall compared to the mummy.”

After several hours of walking the long circuit around the mummy, allow the characters to find the single door in the base of its giant stone throne. At the side of the throne an unlocked man-sized door leads to a long hall beneath the throne.

Around this point, the players will probably be questioning the existence of the Necron...

Area 1-9 – Betrayal at the Balance Blade: This encounter is not depicted on the map:

ou advance down the long hallway. At the end you find a round room lit by a supernatural glow. In the center of the room is a narrow stone pyramid, only a foot wide at its base and rising to a point three feet above the ground. Balanced atop the point of the pyramid, standing in perfect balance, is a gray longsword inscribed with powerful mystic symbols.

As soon as the characters enter this room, take the wizard player aside privately and have this conversation with him:

His patron now reveals the truth to him. In a flash of insight, the character understands that his patron deliberately deceived him. There is no Necron. The patron cannot explain the reason for the deception, but reveals that the *Balance Blade* is an incredible artifact of extraordinary power – and it must be his. The *Balance Blade* will shift the balance of power in the Courts of Chaos! If the wizard will claim it for his own and return it to his patron, he can rule beside his patron in the distant Courts of Chaos! It is the right hand of ultimate power: will he refuse? There is but one small test required: the wizard must first whet the *Blade's* thirst by slaying his allies!

If the character complies willingly, the patron smiles in glee and encourages him to think of the power they will share together! If the character doesn't agree, have him make a DC 30 Will save. Failure (which is probable) means he is compelled to take the blade as the patron dominates his will.

Once the wizard takes the blade (voluntarily or not), these things happen:

- His facial appearance changes to that of his patron.
- The patron offers immediate assistance in the form of *two* immediate and free castings of *invoke patron* at the wizard's normal spell check plus an additional +4 bonus. These do not count against the wizard if they fail; i.e., the wizard can't lose the spell for the day due to these castings.
- The *Balance Blade* grants the wizard special powers (see below).
- Then the wizard shouts, “I claim this blade for my master! Let all who stand in my way be destroyed!” He is then compelled to slay his allies and whet the *Blade's* thirst! Let the player-versus-player combat begin!

The Balance Blade, artifact, +4 longsword: Int 16; AL N; bane: creatures of lawful or chaotic alignment (defender: wielder takes half damage from attacks from banes); communication: telepathy; special purpose: harvest an even mix of lawful and chaotic souls to maintain balance in the cosmos; special powers: shock blade (additional 1d4 damage on hit, increased to 2d4 if target has metal armor or is in water), *banish* (as cleric spell at +10 spell check) 3/day, *detect lawful* or *detect chaotic* at will; wielder speaks all alignment tongues.

CONCLUSION



In the final combat, the wizard is typically slain by his allies. As he expires, there is a loud crack of thunder and the *Balance Blade* falls to the ground, point-first.

Where it lands, an enormous rift opens in the ground, swallowing the remaining characters. They “fall” into a confusing, swirling maelstrom within the ground, then suddenly appear back where they started from. The *Blade* and their wizard ally are gone. Somewhere in the nighttime sky above them, a falling star blazes away into the cosmos, and they sense the soul of their wizard ally has gone to its last reward.

SEVEN STRANGE SKULLS

By Daniel J. Bishop



You will buy many a tankard of watered ale in the most obscure drinking houses Punjar has to offer before you find anyone willing to speak of the dead wizard Psylobius. There is always someone whose craving for drink is stronger than his fear of the dark.

Called the Cerebelliant for his obsession with the skulls, heads, and preserved brains of creatures common and arcane, Psylobius lived long ago. He collected many strange items in the centuries he dwelt among men. Seven of these are described below. The judge may place them where he will. Some are treasures worth seeking, and others offer deadly peril to the foolhardy or inexperienced.

In his youth, centuries ago, the wizard Edward Magnussen was apprenticed to the Cerebelliant. It was through Psylobius that Magnussen first encountered the devil who granted him the power to become the Silver Skull – the younger wizard assisting the older in his summoning. Decades later, after Psylobius died or disappeared, Magnussen raided a cache of his former master's occult lore. Perhaps Magnussen murdered the older wizard. Such occurrences are common enough among those who seek hidden knowledge, and neither man was known for his scruples.

Be careful, though, how deeply you pry into the Cerebelliant's secrets. Bodies are found in Punjar's alleys every dawn, and not all of them are complete. When headless bodies are found, whispers of "Psylobius' take" surface again amongst those who know. Do old wizards ever truly die? Or do they just wait in the Outer Dark, stepping back into human affairs when the stars align?



CRYSTAL SKULL OF THE ALIEN JUGGERNAUT

This is a crystalline skull, somewhat marred by deep cracks and bubbles, which combines the features of a whale and one of the great carnivorous dinosaurs. It is violet-white in color, and glows softly with its own inner radiance. Fully 14 feet long, the alien skull came from a creature Psylobius and his associates bested on some distant world. The wizard thereafter kept this artifact suspended by heavy iron chains in a hidden vault beneath the City of the Dead, although it has since disappeared, despite weighing over 40 tons.

The eerie radiance of the skull extends for a distance of 20'. A wizard or elf standing within the skull's radiant light can cast spells with a +1d bonus. The player chooses which die to roll, but each point of bonus creates new cracks and bubbles within the skull's crystalline material. There is a percentage chance equal to the bonus rolled that the skull will shatter, doing 5d10 damage to everyone within 50' (DC 15 Ref save for half). After the skull shatters, its shards transform into dull lead.

The skull could be replaced by tracing the alien juggernaut back to its planet of origin, where it hunts in a world-spanning ocean speckled with a few small islands. The native humanoids have learned to sail the skies in order to avoid the most dangerous creatures.

GRANDMOTHER'S SKULL

There is magic in bloodlines. The skull of a matrilineal ancestor can be used to tap into ancestral magic. This doesn't have to be literally the skull of one's grandmother; any female ancestor will do, so long as the user can trace the lineage from that ancestor to his own birth. These items are often obtained in grisly ways, but some are passed down from generation to generation. Any character can make a spell check, so any character can gain the benefits of a Grandmother Skull.

The skull itself must be kept in a household shrine, or the equivalent, to be of any value. A portable shrine is also possible, but is encumbering enough that a travelling adventurer requires a hireling to carry and care for it. To use the skull, the character must make a sacrifice and pray to it. Sacrifices can be anything from the blood of a chicken, to burning incense, to the smoking heart of a sentient being.

Depending upon the nature of the ancestor, and the value of the sacrifice, the judge determines a bonus to the spell check, varying from +0 (minimal sacrifice) to +7 (extreme sacrifice). A +3 bonus is average, representing a sacrifice valued at 5 gp. If the judge is unsure, roll 1d6-1.

The character then makes a special spell check, using 1d20 or 1d10 (as appropriate for class; thieves may use their "cast spell from scroll" die) + Personality modifier + level. Wizards and elves gain no bonus for Intelligence. Spellburn *per se* is not possible, but a character could use spellburn as his sacrifice, gaining no more than a +4 bonus for doing so. A natural "1" on the spell check is always treated as a result of "1". Only one such check can be made during any 24 hour period.

Spell Check	Result
1	The ancestor is offended and her true nature is revealed! Roll 1d7: (1) domineering matron; (2) peaceful haunt; (3) bloodthirsty harridan; (4) match-making matriarch; (5) aloof granddame; (6) lonely widow; or (7) vampire. The true nature of your ancestor does not change once determined. See below for details.
2-3	The ancestor is offended by the petition, causing a minor curse resulting in a -1 penalty to Luck which lasts for a single day.
4-10	No effect.
11-15	The ancestor receives the sacrifice. Gain a +2 bonus to a single die roll of your choice during the next 24 hours.
16-17	The ancestor receives the sacrifice. Gain a number of +1 bonuses to your die rolls equal to your level. These may be used on a single die roll, or spread out among multiple rolls. Any bonus left unused after 24 hours is lost.
18-21	The ancestor receives the sacrifice with pleasure. Over the next 24 hours, she guards you, granting a +1 bonus to all saves, and a -1 reduction to any damage you take.
22-23	The ancestor receives the sacrifice. During the next 24 hours, you may ask your ancestor for a minor favor, which manifests itself in a non-magical way if you succeed in a Luck check.
24-26	The ancestor receives the sacrifice with pleasure. Gain the combined benefits of spell check results 11-15 and 22-23.
27-31	The ancestor receives the sacrifice with pleasure. During the next 24 hours, you gain 2d3 temporary Luck points. These are always the first Luck spent. Regardless of the total, your Luck modifier may not exceed +3.
32-33	The ancestor receives the sacrifice with great pleasure. During the next 24 hours, whenever you are able to make a save to reduce damage taken, you instead automatically take only half damage and save to reduce damage to 0. In addition, you gain a +2 bonus to all saving throws and AC.
34+	The ancestor receives the sacrifice with extreme pleasure. In addition to the effects of 32-33, you gain the ability to ask your ancestor for one favor over the next 24 hours. If a Luck check succeeds, the favor will be granted in a non-magical way. If the favor is minor, no Luck check is needed.

Effects of Maternal Ancestor's True Nature:

(1) **Domineering matron:** The ancestral spirit wants to interfere with the world of the living. Specifically, she wants to control the lives of her decedents. To this end, she can lay a *geas* on the user of the skull that requires the character perform, or refrain from, certain specific actions. When a "1" is rolled, and on a 1% cumulative chance each time the skull is used hereafter, the skull makes a demand of the character. After each demand, the

chance for a new *geas* resets. If the character fails to meet the demands of a *geas* to the judge's satisfaction, his Luck is permanently reduced by 1, and the Grandmother Skull will no longer work for him. To determine the *geas*, roll 1d7, or create a *geas* relevant to your campaign: (1) visit your mother; (2) eat more green vegetables; (3) clean up your language; (4) be more considerate to your elders; (5) stop drinking alcohol; (6) try to look more presentable; or (7) give 10% of your wealth to the church.

(2) **Peaceful haunt:** The ancestral spirit is easygoing. For the next 1d5 days, there is a 25% chance that a minor haunting will occur each day (roll 1d5): (1) item is mysteriously misplaced; (2) faint scent of perfume; (3) woman's voice whispers advice, 75% chance of being useful; (4) footsteps are heard; (5) windows are opened/closed, or a candle/lantern is blown out in the dark.

(3) **Bloodthirsty harridan:** The ancestral spirit demands blood! The Grandmother Skull must be soaked in the blood of enemies (whose HD must initially be equal to or greater than the character's level) before it will respond again. Each time a natural "1" is rolled to use the skull, the demands double.

(4) **Match-making matriarch:** The ancestral spirit wishes you to marry and have children. The first time this is rolled, the PC must merely endure ghostly nagging. The second time, the skull demands that the character become engaged. Then the character must marry. Then the spirit demands the character have a child. In each case, the skull cannot be used until the demand is met.

(5) **Aloof granddame:** Once a natural "1" is rolled, the spirit refuses to respond for 1d5 days. Thereafter, each natural "1" applies a permanent and cumulative -2 to spell checks to use the skull.

(6) **Lonely widow:** The first time a natural "1" is rolled, roll 1d3 x 10. From now on, the character must spend this many minutes chatting with his maternal ancestor before making a spell check to use the skull. Each time another "1" is rolled, roll 1d4 x 10, then 1d5 x 10, 1d6 x 10, and so on up the dice chain. If a higher number is rolled, it replaces the current demands of the skull.

(7) **Vampire:** The skull immediately drains the user of 1d3 Strength, Agility, and Stamina. From now on, each time the skull is used, the character must take 1 point of Spellburn, which does not add to the spell check or count as the skull's normal sacrifice.

LEAD SKULL OF THE LOST

This is a stylized skull made of heavy lead, the cranial remnant of some strange humanoid creature from the dawn of time. When applied to the neck of a decapitated humanoid - even if no more remains than a mere skeleton - it causes the flesh to reknit and regrow, restoring the body to life. The Lead Skull remains in place as the skull, and contains the mind of the restored creature. Only after the death of the restored creature can the Lead Skull be used again.

The Lead Skull has been used countless times over the ages, and slivers of the minds of each creature it restored remain trapped within. A restored creature automatically loses 1d3 Personality, and must then succeed in a DC 10 Will save or lose 1d3 Intelligence as well.

Finally, a restored character must roll 1d30 on the following chart 1d3 times:



1d30	Result
1	Lose a random extra language (if any).
2	Gain a random language. Roll d% on the chart in Appendix L of the DCC RPG core rulebook. Roll 1d8 to determine which column to use.
3	You have a tendency to steal things from random people, making unconscious Pick Pockets attempts using 1d14.
4	Gain a single, randomly determined, thief skill as a level 1d4 thief.
5	All knowledge of your current occupation is forgotten. Nothing replaces it.
6	Gain knowledge of an additional random occupation.
7	Reroll your occupation. You are convinced that this has always been your occupation.
8	Gain partial knowledge of a random 1 st -level wizard spell. You can make spell checks for this spell using 1d14.
9	Change your class to a random class. If a demi-human, you retain your 0-level traits. If human, and you gain a demi-human class, you do not gain these traits. Your level remains the same.
10	Gain partial knowledge of a random 1 st -level cleric spell. You can make spell checks for this spell using 1d14. Use 1d20 to determine who is granting the spell from the list of deities (DCC RPG pg. 32). If a "20" comes up, invent a new deity or roll again.
11	Some mind-shard's blasphemous knowledge grants all cleric spell checks against you a +2 bonus, and all cleric spell checks to aid you (including <i>lay on hands</i> attempts) take a -2 penalty.

12	Roll <i>two</i> additional occupations. You gain partial knowledge of each, and can make skill checks related to them using 1d14.
13	Once per game session, the judge can require a DC 15 Will save. If you fail, you take no actions for 1d3 rounds as you attempt to sort out who you are.
14	You know where spell knowledge for a random wizard spell may be found (level 1d3). See Table 7-1 (DCC RPG, pg. 315).
15	If you are a spell caster, you have reduced knowledge of one random spell you know. From now on, you cast that spell at -1d on the dice chain.
16	You have vague contact with a patron (random or chosen by judge). Treat as a <i>patron bond</i> result of 12-13, using the "When Cast on Other" column.
17	A patron (random or chosen by judge) is the enemy of a previous user of the Lead Skull, and by extension, your enemy. There is a 1 in 20 chance during any adventure that an agent of the patron attempts to do you harm.
18	You permanently gain 1d3 hit points.
19	You permanently lose 1 hit point per level. This cannot drop your maximum hit points below 1.
20	If not a warrior or dwarf, you gain a 1d3 deed die. If a warrior or dwarf, you gain 1d12 hit points.
21	It is hard to concentrate with all the voices in your head. You always take a -2 penalty to checks involving concentration (including spell checks). Worse, you have a 1 in 7 chance of being surprised during the first round of any encounter, even when your companions are not.
22	If a wizard, the mercurial effect for one of your spells may change. Determine which spell randomly, and select the better of the two effects.
23	Once per game session, the judge may have the voices in your head tell you to do something foolish, but not automatically fatal. Will save DC 10 to resist.
24	The voices in your head sometimes give you warning, allowing you to negate surprise on a 1 in 7 chance.
25	You now only answer to a random name from Appendix S of the DCC RPG rulebook.
26	You now roll skill checks related to your starting occupation with a +1d bonus on the dice chain.
27	You find yourself strangely obsessed with something. You may make a Will save (DC 15) to resist in any given instance where a chance to indulge your obsession arises. Roll 1d7: (1) classical music from a bygone era, which no one knows of now; (2) identifying and recording every bird you see; (3) spiders; (4) fancy cheeses; (5) collecting the works of an obscure artist or writer; (6) gambling; or (7) skinny-dipping.
28	Having extra bits of mind floating around in your head pays off – you gain a permanent +2 bonus to Will saves.
29	You are truly numbered among the Lost. Reroll Intelligence, Personality, Luck, starting occupation, and birth auger. Reduce your level by 1d3 (minimum 0), and select an appropriate class. You are effectively a new character.
30	By searching the memories of the previous users of the Lead Skull, you can effectively cast <i>second sight</i> once per day.



LIVING SKULL OF THE EMERALD ENCHANTER

Living Skull: Init +3; Atk bite +4 melee (1d5 plus poison); AC 18; HD 3d12; MV 30' or climb 20'; Act 1d20; SP infravision 90', poisonous bite, death throes, immune to mind-affecting spells, construct; SV Fort +6, Ref +3, Will +0; AL N.

For a wizard willing to pay the price, even time can be bent to the will. Although Psylobius lived long before the Emerald Enchanter, he was able to meet with his brother wizard at a great Conclave. There he commissioned the creation of the living skulls – constructs meant to guard the Cerebelliant's treasures. PCs who locate such a cache may well face such a creature. At least a dozen were constructed.

The living skulls are constructs of green jade, appearing like fanged human skulls 4' in height. Six many-jointed legs grow from the top of the skull, ending in soft pad-like fingers. The skull attacks with a poisonous bite. Victims take 1d3 points of temporary Stamina damage and must succeed in a DC 15 Fort save or take an additional 1d3 points of permanent Stamina damage. A reservoir in the skull contains enough poison for 2d6 bites.

When reduced to 0 hp, the living skull explodes into shards of jade. All within 30' take 1d8 damage (DC 10 Ref save for half). 1d100 shards of jade worth 1d30 gp each may be recovered.

SCRYING BONE

This item is actually the frontal bone of a human skull, brown with age and worn smooth by fingers rubbing across its surface. Three times per day, a user may take 1 point of spellburn to scry on a point within 30'. Once per day, a user may take 3 points of spellburn to scry on any point on the same plane. The user must be able to identify the area to be seen, visions of which appear as colorless moving shadows upon the bone. Sound is not conveyed.

SKULL OF THE JABBERING MONKEY

This monkey skull is mounted upon a staff of dark wood. It jabbers and screams nearly constantly, making surprise impossible and drawing creatures to its location (as determined by the judge). Every once in a while – at least once during every adventure – the skull says something remarkably useful about the situation at hand. Adventurers must decide whether this advantage is worth the problems caused by carrying the thing. This item is impervious to all damage.

THE IRON STAG

A stag's skull, expanded and partially encased in ironwork, this item is worn like a helmet. The wearer can speak the language of deer, moose, and elk so long as the helm is worn. Once per week, the wearer may transform into a stag (including equipment), returning to normal form at will. There is a cumulative 1% chance per transformation that the wearer cannot return to his natural form, except on the advent of his death. As a stag, the wearer uses the following statistics:

Iron Stag: Init +5; Atk hooves +2 melee (1d5) or antlers +4 melee (2d5); AC 17; HD as character; MV 60'; Act 2d20; SV Fort +8, Ref +10, Will as character; AL as character.



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DCC RPG

DUNGEON CRAWL CLASSICS

The 13th Skull

#71: A LEVEL 4 ADVENTURE
BY JOSEPH GOODMAN

Thirteen generations ago, the ambitious first Duke of Magnussen made a fell pact with an unknown power, who asked for but one thing in return: the thirteenth daughter born to a Magnussen duke. Now, generations hence, the daughter of Duke Magnussen XIII is stolen away by a hooded executioner riding a leathery beast. As it wings back across the city walls to drop behind the Duke's mountain-top keep, all who watch know it alights in the Magnussen family crypts, where the devilish secrets of thirteen generations have been buried and forgotten – until now...

This adventure module also includes The Balance Blade, a short level 2 adventure in which a wizard's patron makes a simple request: travel to another plane to retrieve a legendary blade of neutrality. But once the journey is in motion, the wizard finds that not all is as it seems!



2nd printing, sketch variant cover