

# THE SKELETONS

*A game by* JASON MORNINGSTAR



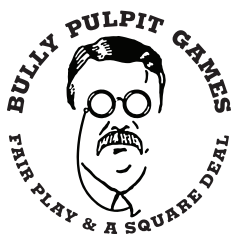


# THE SKELETONS

*A game by* **JASON MORNINGSTAR**

Years fly by like dead leaves. Everything is darkness. Everything is silence. You stand vigilant before the sarcophagus without thought or breath—such is your compulsion. You do not remember your name and still you watch. The flesh has fallen off your bones and still you watch.

And then one day there is light and motion and you weigh your bearded axe and raise your shield, lusting for the fray, eager to measure your skill against these tomb-robbing children so full of blood. You'll never be alive again, but in this moment—in the chaos between violation and destruction—you truly live, and you remember what you once were, and you taste the sun.



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Skeleton Art CC-A The Wellcome Collection, James Ward, Eduard Weber, Marcin Białek, sjwells53

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# PREPARING TO PLAY

## WHAT THIS IS

*The Skeletons* is a meditative structured freeform game. It flips the script on the classic dungeon crawl—here you play not the intruders, but the guardians, cursed to spend all of eternity defending a tomb.

## GATHER THE STUFF YOU NEED

- One to six players with one or more hours to spend together.
- A quiet place to play that can be darkened. If you have neither quiet or darkness, close your eyes instead.
- Printouts of these rules and the skeletons, a large sheet of blank paper, pencils or pens, a six-sided die, and a timer of some sort.
- Optionally: Sounds of the tomb to be played as the years grind past.

## CHOOSE YOUR SKELETONS

Let each player choose a skeleton to play. There are eight; each has specific questions that you may answer during the game. When the game begins you know nothing, just as they remember nothing, and each skeleton is a cypher. Over time you will learn more.

## DRAW A MAP

Work together to sketch the outlines of the tomb. It can be any general shape or size. It needs to be built around a central sarcophagus and have north, south, east and west walls. It's fine to make the tomb visually interesting but don't add any elaborate details. Use a large sheet of paper—letter sized or bigger—and leave plenty of room for added information as you play.

Draw on the map where your skeletons each stand silent watch in the darkness while the tomb remains undisturbed.

## TALK ABOUT WORKING TOGETHER

Unless you are playing alone, you will need to cooperate to reveal the skeleton's past and future. The game will ask you to make choices, so decide in advance how they will be made. Taking turns? By consensus?

Sometimes, something will happen to a single skeleton. The actions of intruders require similar cooperation. Consider giving a different player responsibility for each group of intruders and let them make all the decisions for that brief slice of time. Their skeleton can be strangely still.

## TAKE A MOMENT

When you have skeletons and a map, turn out the lights and take a moment to breathe. Feel the silence. Imagine the weight of countless years.

- When you are ready, turn on the lights and say “Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!”—an intruder is breaking into the tomb

# PLAYING THE GAME

## INTRUDERS

When an intruder violates the tomb, the skeletons spring into action. They are cursed to defend the tomb against all comers with as much ferocity as they can muster, forever. It is the only time when they can move, think and feel. All else is darkness. During an encounter the skeletons can communicate with each other telepathically, discuss matters, make plans, and otherwise exhibit a limited form of agency. They must always act to remove threats to the tomb, and are incapable of any action that contravenes this goal. They can be clever—remaining still to orchestrate an ambush, for example—but they cannot ignore or aid an intruder.

While an intruder is present, skeletons may also remember bits of their past. Their minds are their own for the duration of the encounter, provided they are busy removing threats. Once the threat is removed they must immediately return to their watch-posts and be still.

Skeletons win encounters with intruders. Tomb robbers, wandering beasts and other pests are driven away or killed until, finally, they are not. The rules change when you reach the third part of the game, *The Desecration*, and it is there that the skeletons will likely be defeated.

When it is time for your first encounter, choose one from *The Unsealed Tomb* and mark it off. Do whatever the instructions say.

## TIME

After each encounter, choose a length of time on the associated *Time Passes* table. Always do whatever the instructions say.

# ENDING THE GAME

The game ends when a seasoned group of intruders manages to scatter the skeleton's bones, or when you are content to leave your skeletons in a cold, dark place forever.

Take a final moment to sit in silence in the dark, and then turn the lights back on, have a snack and talk about the experience you've just shared.

# I. THE UNSEALED TOMB

## INTRUDERS

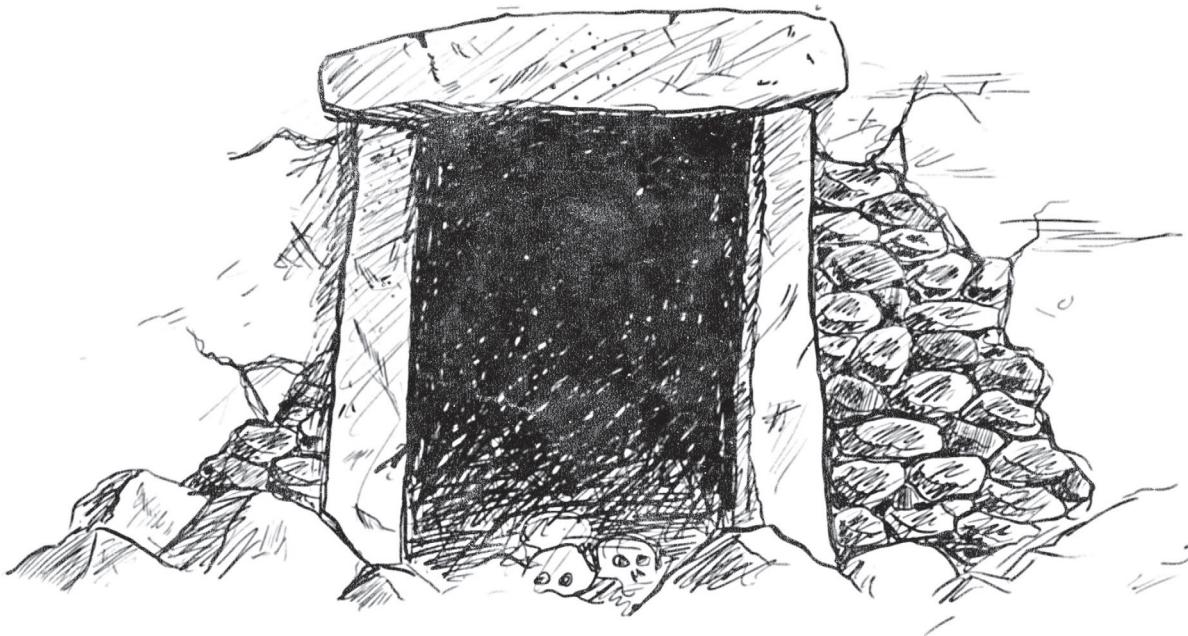
Choose an Intruder, mark it, and follow the instructions. When two intruders have been checked off and dealt with, go to *The Time of Dust*.

- ☐ **Grave rats.** How do you drive away such small, agile creatures and prevent their return? Everyone can answer one question if they wish. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.
- ☐ **An amateur tomb robber.** Describe this person. Well-prepared or in rags? Confident or frightened? Who among you slays the tomb robber, and how? Everyone must answer one question; the killer or killers may answer two. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.
- ☐ **A spirit of place, disturbed by the newly-built tomb.** How do you drive away such an ancient and immaterial presence? Everyone can answer one question if they wish. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.

## TIME PASSES

After each Intruder is driven away or killed, choose one of the options, mark it off, and sit in darkness as indicated. Think about the endless silence and unfathomable darkness.

- ☐ **No time at all.** Immediately begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A day.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for five seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A week.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for ten seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A month.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for twenty seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A year.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for forty seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A decade.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for one minute, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.



# II. THE TIME OF DUST

## INTRUDERS

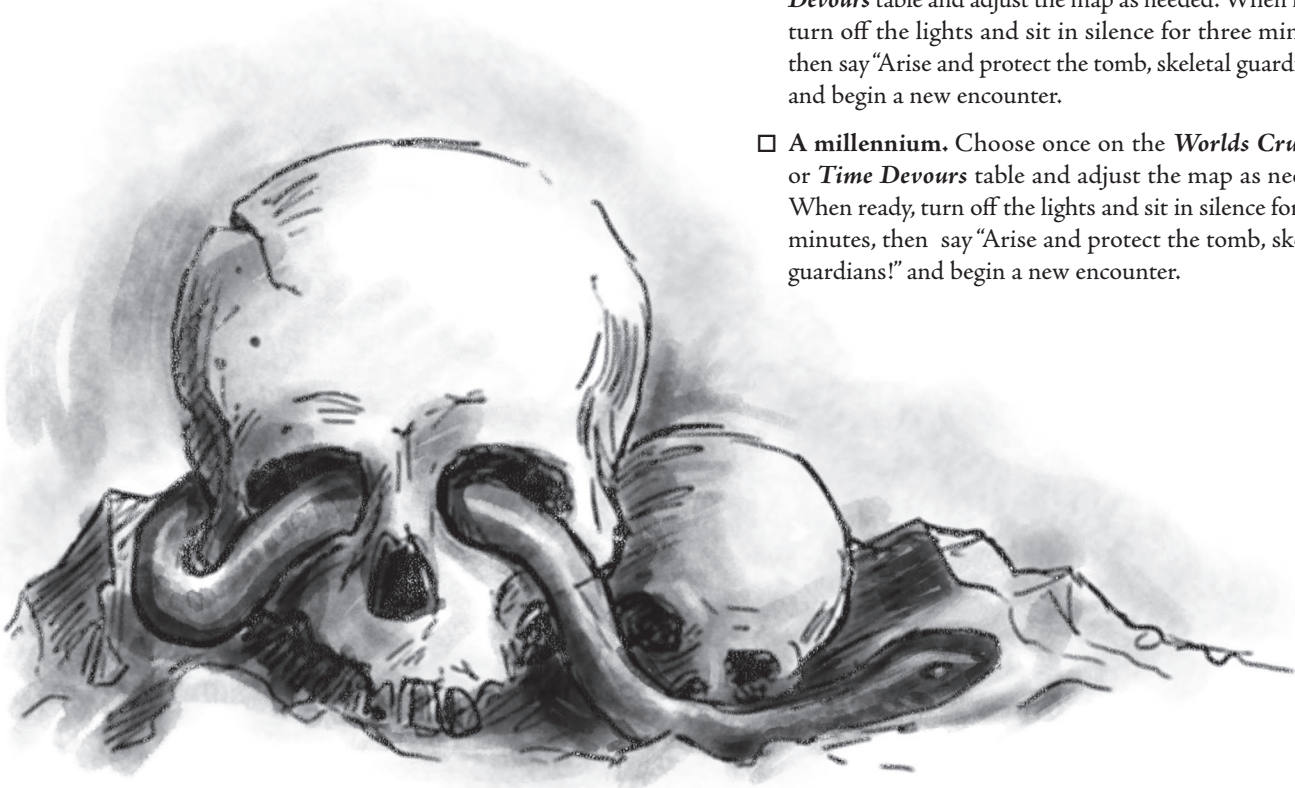
Choose an Intruder, mark it, and follow the instructions. When two intruders have been checked off and dealt with, go to *The Desecration*.

- ☐ **A family seeking shelter.** Are they refugees? Are they monsters? Everyone answers one question if they wish; if someone slays the matriarch they may answer two. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.
- ☐ **A pair of professional tomb robbers.** Describe them, illustrating how they work as a team. What object immediately attracts their attention? Can they fight? Everyone answers one question; the killer or killers may answer two. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.
- ☐ **Giant tomb spiders.** Intelligent and graceful, they are stubborn, clever and hard to dislodge. Do you destroy them? Do you reach an understanding? How? Everyone can answer one question if they wish. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.

## TIME PASSES

After each Intruder is driven away or killed, choose one of the options, mark it off, and sit in darkness as indicated. Think about the awful grinding passage of time.

- ☐ **A month.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for twenty seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A year.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for forty seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A decade.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for one minute, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A century.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for two minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **Centuries.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for three minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A millennium.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for four minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.





# III. THE DESECRATION

## INTRUDERS

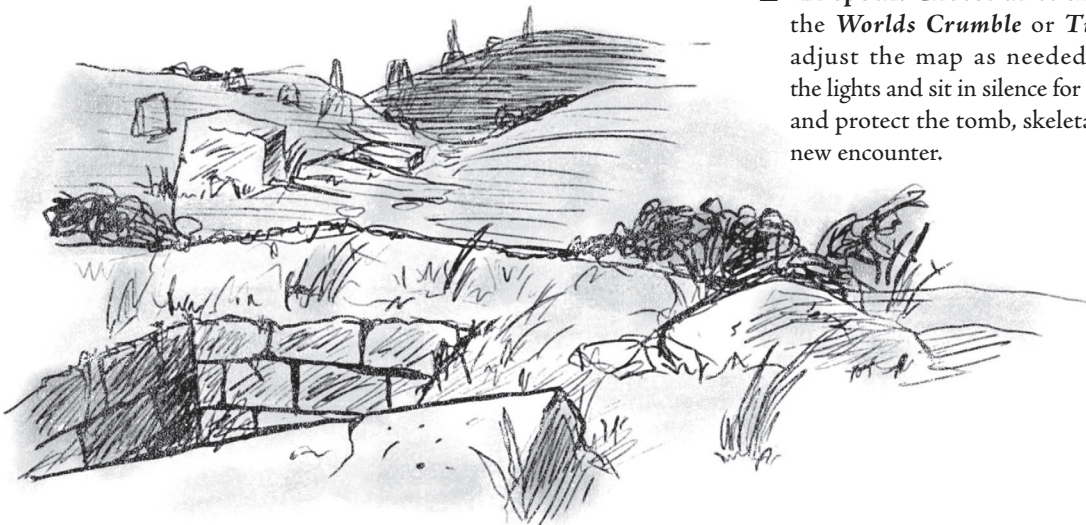
Choose an Intruder, mark it, and follow the instructions. When you feel that you've spent ten or more minutes in the dark across the entire game, the next Intruders will defeat you. Regardless, if you check off the third group of Intruders here, they will surely defeat you.

- ☐ **An army of plunderers**—dozens of bandits with shovels, picks and axes. Describe them, illustrating how they barely work together, obsessed with greed. What catches their chief's eye? Did they bring magic or science to aid them? Will they overwhelm you, laughing with delight? Everyone answers none, one or two questions as they prefer. Choose once each on the *Glory Fades* and *Gods Laugh* tables.
- ☐ **Some of your descendants.** They follow an ancient treasure map penned by your own children. Describe how you see yourself in them. Who among you will be the first to strike them down? Can you even bear it? Everyone answers none, one or two questions as they prefer. Choose once each on the *Glory Fades* and *Gods Laugh* tables.
- ☐ **A necromancer and some mercenaries.** Describe them, illustrating how much more interested the necromancer is in you than in the treasure. Surely this person will use their knowledge to try to control you all. Will they succeed? Everyone answers none, one or two questions as they prefer. Choose once each on the *Glory Fades* and *Gods Laugh* tables.

## TIME PASSES

After each Intruder is driven away or killed, choose one of the options, mark it off, and sit in darkness as indicated. Think about all that has gone before, and how it came to be.

- ☐ **A decade.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for one minute, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A century.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for two minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **Centuries.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for three minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A millennium.** Choose once each on the *Worlds Crumble* and *Time Devours* tables and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for four minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **An age.** Choose once each on the *Worlds Crumble* and *Time Devours* tables and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for five minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **An epoch.** Choose three times on either or both of the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* tables and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for six minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.



# TOMB TABLES

## GLORY FADES

Choose and mark. For anything affecting a single skeleton, choose which however you like.

- ☐ The magic compelling one of the skeletons to service—but not its undead energy—is beginning to fade.
- ☐ Something the skeletons are protecting is lost—stolen or simply missing. What was it?
- ☐ A memory that a skeleton had previously regained is false, and the truth asserts itself. Which memory, and what truth?
- ☐ The place where a skeleton stands watch is covered in debris and impassable.
- ☐ A skeleton loses some bones permanently. What body part is missing? Note it on the character sheet.
- ☐ Something the skeletons are protecting is damaged. What, and how?

## GODS LAUGH

Choose and mark. For anything affecting a single skeleton, choose which however you like.

- ☐ A skeleton's weapon is broken, bent or rendered useless. What will they do? Note it on the character sheet.
- ☐ A skeleton's appearance is altered in some way. Perhaps they are marked by fire or magic.
- ☐ A memory that a skeleton had previously regained slips away and is lost forever. Which one?
- ☐ Something the skeletons are protecting is destroyed. What is it?
- ☐ Something from a skeleton's past has been accidentally revealed. What was it, and why was it hidden? Note this on the map.
- ☐ The magic animating one of the skeletons—but not its compulsion to service—is beginning to fade.

## WORLDS CRUMBLE

Choose and mark. For anything affecting the tomb itself, note it on the map and adjust accordingly.

- ☐ A wall comes down, blocking part of the tomb. Which part? Adjust the map.
- ☐ A tomb-robber is successful. What object did they steal? Choose from among those already introduced if you are able. Adjust the map.
- ☐ The great sarcophagus splits open, spilling out its contents. What was within? Adjust the map.
- ☐ The tomb is flooded. What is ruined, mold covered, or decayed after the waters recede? Adjust the map.
- ☐ Gold and silver dull. Iron rusts. Colors fade to a sepulchral grey. Note this on the map.
- ☐ A thick layer of dust covers every surface. Note this on the map.

## TIME DEVOURS

Choose and mark. For anything affecting the tomb itself, note it on the map and adjust accordingly.

- ☐ The webs of tomb spiders form an intricate filigree over the walls and ceiling. Note this on the map.
- ☐ The tomb is infested. What signs of vermin remain long after the infestation ends? Adjust the map.
- ☐ A crack develops, creating an opening for robbers and other vermin. Where? Adjust the map.
- ☐ Something collapses, leaving a large pile of debris. What has failed? Adjust the map.
- ☐ Wood, cloth, hide, horn and un-enchanted bone all turn to powder. Note this on the map.
- ☐ An earthquake rocks the tomb, drastically altering its shape and utility. Many things are destroyed. Adjust the map.

# BONUS MATERIAL

## THINGS TO TRY

### PLAY WITH A FACILITATOR

Let one player—probably you—serve as facilitator, portraying all the adversity that arises and painting every scene. The facilitator keeps track of time, pushes skeletons to answer questions, and acts on what is revealed.

It's a fun way to play.

### ROTATE THE SPOTLIGHT

Choose a different player to answer each question and introduce each new intruder. A simple way to accomplish this is to take turns, rotating clockwise every time the game asks for a creative prompt. Make sure everyone gets to introduce an intruder!

### PLAY ALONE

There's nothing preventing you from experiencing *The Skeletons* solo—in fact, this will drive home the game's themes of loneliness, isolation and melancholy.

### PLAY WITH DISTANT FRIENDS

*The Skeletons* works great in synchronous-but-distributed mode, via Hangout, Skype, or your preferred conferencing application. Just be sure you have access to collaborative drawing tools.

### CHOOSE A MAPMAKER

Let one player—perhaps your friend who is a brilliant artist—lovingly embellish the shared map, with input from everyone.

You should still illustrate your own skeletons, though.

### SURPRISE YOURSELVES

Every category has six options. You can roll a six-sided die instead of choosing, using the next-closest item in the event of a repeat roll.

### MAKE SOMETHING UP

The category items need not be the final word on the saga of the skeletons. Before you play, collectively author six new items for Glory Fades, Gods Laugh, Time Devours and Worlds Crumble.

Once you know how intruders work, invent your own, hopefully presenting your fellow skeletons with some unpleasant and difficult decisions to make.

### PLAY WITH TIME

The moments when the skeletons have agency—when the sanctity of the tomb is violated—can stretch out for them. They can include flashbacks, soliloquies, and thunderous telepathic arguments stretching into both past and future.

### CONNECT THE DOTS

By the end of the game, your tomb is well-realized and filled with tragic history, incredible treasure, and the scattered bones of its defeated defenders. It is a wonderful set piece to drop into another game, either as-is or with a different ending and some still-active skeletons for bold adventurers to senselessly bludgeon.

### USE A VARIANT

Try using Sara Williamson's excellent Echoes of War variant (p.8), which provides completely different intruders and imbues the game with a different tone. You could also swap out a single era, using Sara's Time of Dust and the original Unsealed Tomb and Desecration, for example.

### CREATE YOUR OWN VARIANT

An extension of "Making Something Up" allows you to create a completely new variant set of tables. If you keep track of original contributions as you play, soon enough you'll have your own variant. Make sure you have something that ties the three eras together thematically, albeit loosely.

If you create your own variant, let us know!



# I. THE UNSEALED TOMB

ECHOES OF WAR VARIANT by SARA WILLIAMSON

## INTRUDERS

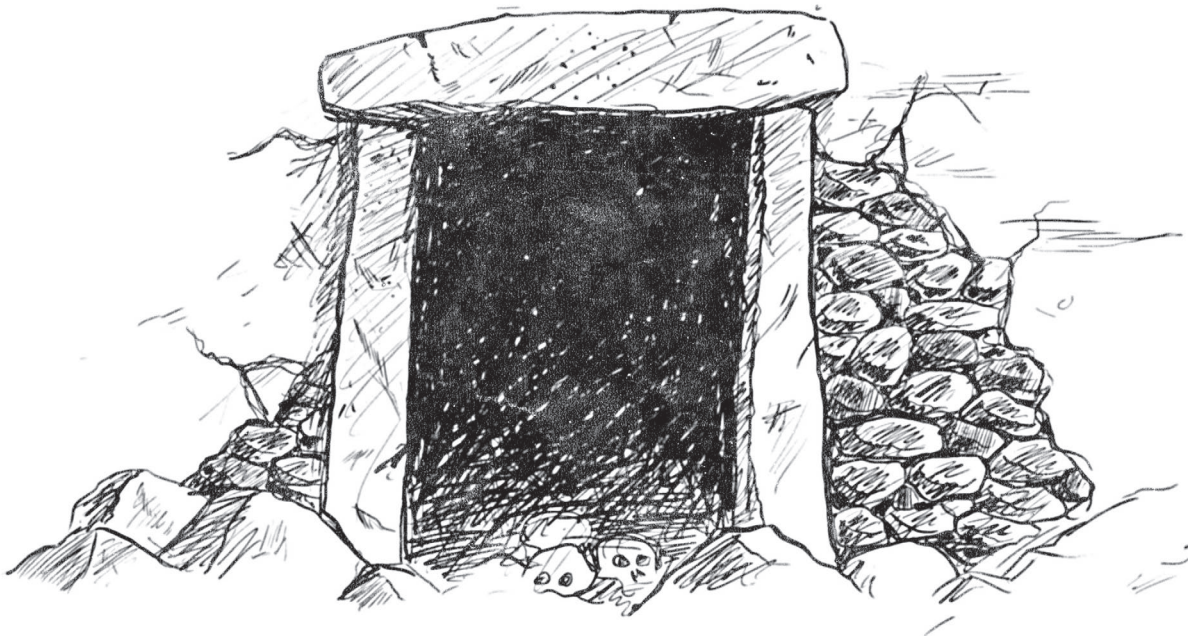
Choose an Intruder, mark it, and follow the instructions. When two intruders have been checked off and dealt with, go to *The Time of Dust*.

- ☐ **A wounded soldier.** Describe the insignia they bear. Which part of their body are they protecting? Who among you delivers the killing blow? Everyone can answer one question if they wish. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.
- ☐ **A swarm of corpse beetles.** Describe their tell-tale sound. What in the tomb are they most attracted to? How do you end the infestation once and for all? Everyone can answer one question if they wish. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.
- ☐ **A wizened elder.** Describe how they are dressed and what they are carrying. What about them is familiar? Do they defend themselves or embrace death? Everyone can answer one question if they wish. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.

## TIME PASSES

After each Intruder is driven away or killed, choose one of the options, mark it off, and sit in darkness as indicated. Think about the endless silence and unfathomable darkness.

- ☐ **No time at all.** Immediately begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A day.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for five seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A week.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for ten seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A month.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for twenty seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A year.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for forty seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A decade.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for one minute, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.



# II. THE TIME OF DUST

## ECHOES OF WAR VARIANT by SARA WILLIAMSON

### INTRUDERS

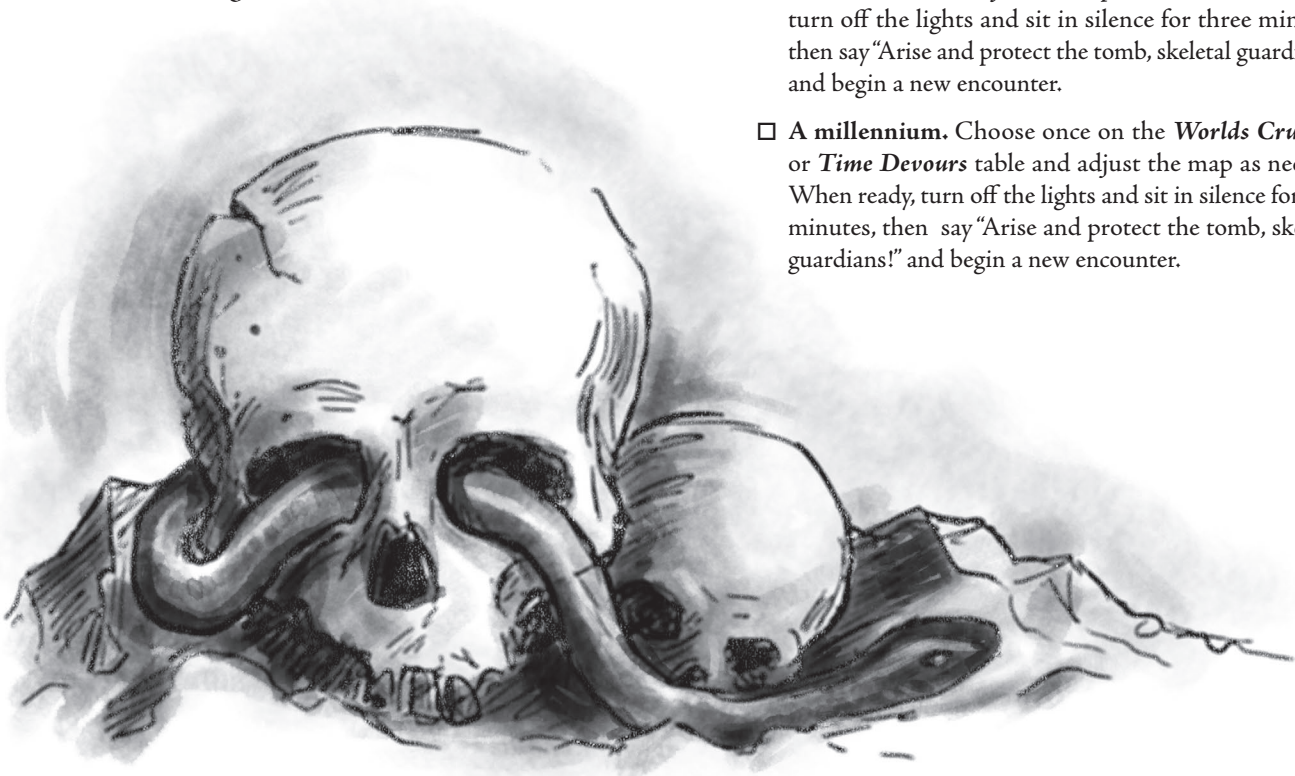
Choose an Intruder, mark it, and follow the instructions. When two intruders have been checked off and dealt with, go to *The Desecration*.

- ☐ **A ghostly commander.** Describe its arms and armor. What about it is broken? What about it is out of place? How do you eradicate such an insubstantial foe? Everyone answers one question if they wish. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.
- ☐ **Young lovers, their carefree laughter echoing across the tomb.** Do they notice when you begin to move? Do they abandon one another, or stand together against your wrath? Everyone answers one question if they wish; the killer or killers may answer two. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.
- ☐ **A fleshy cave beast and its pups.** Describe its skin and mouth. What in the tomb lured it here? How does it move to protect its young? Everyone answers one question if they wish; the killer of the pups may answer two. Choose once on either the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* table.

### TIME PASSES

After each Intruder is driven away or killed, choose one of the options, mark it off, and sit in darkness as indicated. Think about the awful grinding passage of time.

- ☐ **A month.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for twenty seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A year.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for forty seconds, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A decade.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for one minute, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A century.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for two minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **Centuries.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for three minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A millennium.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for four minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.





# III. THE DESECRATION

## ECHOES OF WAR VARIANT by SARA WILLIAMSON

### INTRUDERS

Choose an Intruder, mark it, and follow the instructions. When you feel that you've spent ten or more minutes in the dark across the entire game, the next Intruders will defeat you. Regardless, if you check off the third group of Intruders here, they will surely defeat you.

- ☐ **A conquering army.** What symbol in their uniform do you recognize? Are they loud and triumphant, or grim and exhausted? Describe how their presence befouls the tomb. What precious item do they destroy? Will they grind your bones to dust? Everyone answers none, one or two questions as they prefer. Choose once each on the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* tables.
- ☐ **A team of scientificans, soft and weak.** Describe their clothing and tools. What relic do they plunder? What advanced technology or magic do they reveal? Will their trickery defeat you? Everyone answers none, one or two questions as they prefer. Choose once each on the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* tables.
- ☐ **An automaton.** Describe how it violates the tomb. Which parts of its body appear to be human? Which parts of its body reveal the terrible difference? Does it bother to fight? What is its purpose? Everyone answers none, one or two questions as they prefer. Choose once each on the *Glory Fades* or *Gods Laugh* tables.

### TIME PASSES

After each Intruder is driven away or killed, choose one of the options, mark it off, and sit in darkness as indicated. Think about all that has gone before, and how it came to be.

- ☐ **A decade.** Turn off the lights and sit in silence for one minute, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A century.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for two minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **Centuries.** Choose once on the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* table and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for three minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **A millennium.** Choose once each on the *Worlds Crumble* and *Time Devours* tables and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for four minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **An age.** Choose once each on the *Worlds Crumble* and *Time Devours* tables and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for five minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.
- ☐ **An epoch.** Choose three times on either or both of the *Worlds Crumble* or *Time Devours* tables and adjust the map as needed. When ready, turn off the lights and sit in silence for six minutes, then say "Arise and protect the tomb, skeletal guardians!" and begin a new encounter.

