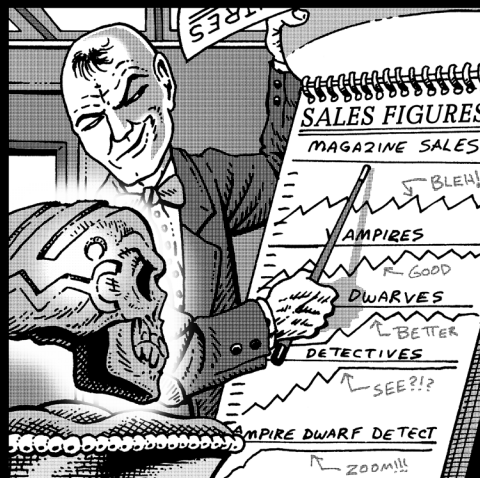
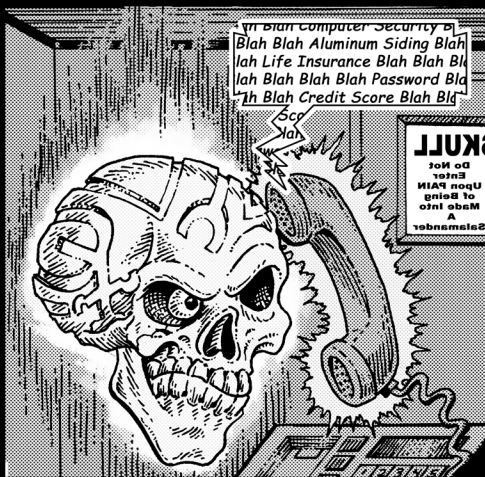
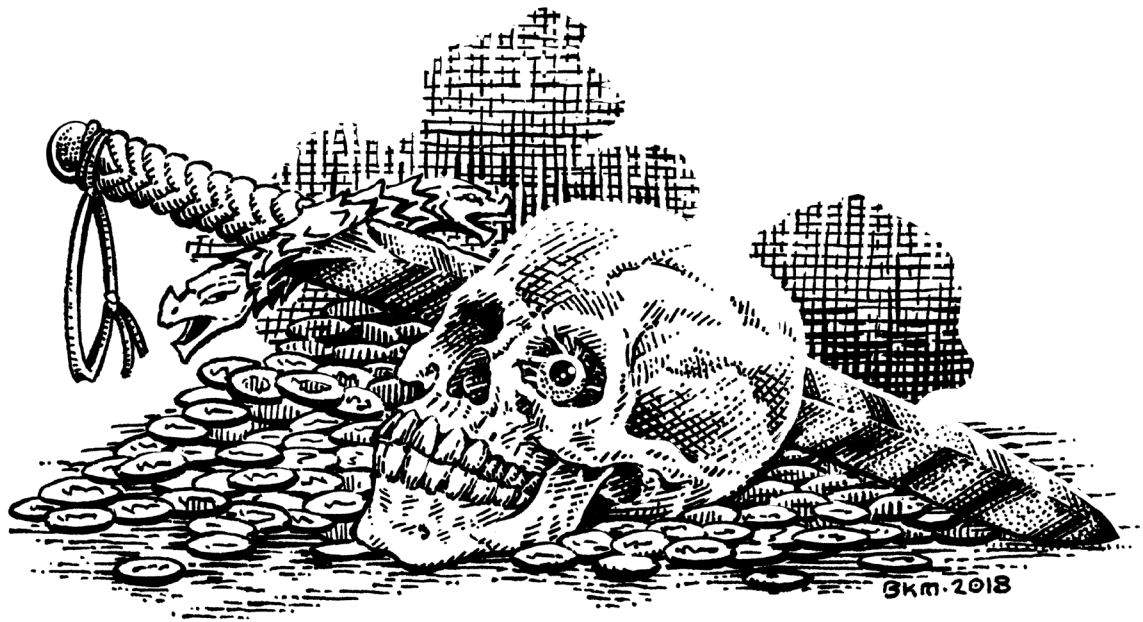




CUBICLES OF THE SKULL





THE SKULL SPEAKS

Rejoice, mortals!

I have heard your pleas and returned to grant your greatest desire:

More sword-and-sorcery!

Once again I will bring you tales of thrilling adventure in time-lost lands. There are swords, and there is sorcery, and there are dark deeds and daring rescues. All that you enjoyed in the first issues you will experience in brand new tales, along with maps to monster lairs and forbidden places!

Picture this, as well — fabulous art for every story, and statistics so that you can bring the wonders and terrors imagined by my authors to your own game tables!

All I lack are a few paltry smerduks! I have shown you what I can do — even finer marvels lie ahead! Place your faith in me, mortal dogs, and see what wonders I will next unleash!

The wise among you have already held the first issues of my magazine! They know that I have brought forth new tale tellers steeped in the lore of the great ones who came before — modern authors striving to bring wonder and glory to your imaginations!

It may be that you have not yet heard of me, though it defies belief! I am the Magician's Skull, awakened from long slumber in the Chamber of Ages. I have returned from my deathless sleep with but one goal: to publish the greatest sword-and-sorcery tales in this or any other dimension!

There are no finer tales than those crafted for the sacred genre, and I have deployed my minions to search the world for the best works being drafted for this era. They present them to me, and I share them with you, my most loyal followers!

I live again, and my magazine lives as well! Untold splendors await you!

Get ready, dogs.

Enjoy my magazine.

Enjoy the adventure!

Illustrations by BRAD MCDEVITT • Cartoon by CHUCK WHELOON • Layout by LESTER B. PORTLY

THE SKULL SCROLLS

Missives from the IMMORTAL SKULL

So Tweeteth the Intern

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

I am in such fine spirits about the stories in the upcoming issues I didn't reduce the one known as Intern to atoms when he began clickety clacking upon the glowing metal box which constantly absorbs his attention. When I restored him to humanoid form he explained that he was communicating with his followers on a Tweeter, updating his pointless thoughts about some food he'd recently eaten.

He suggested that I Tweet my thoughts to my followers, but I reminded him that I am an immortal sorcerer, not a bird, and decreed that he pass along my words to you through the glowing metal box. This he has sworn to do, upon penalty of transmutation.

Thus do I say the following: While engaged on a secret mission I came to learn that the red octagons mean Stop. Yet I yearn to ride rampage across the cosmos, filling my cup to the brim with the red secrets of the ages! Why must I stop and allow mortals to cross before me unharmed? I have instructed my minions to prepare a purple nonagon with the word UNSTOP inscribed upon it, and to place it before the entrance to my inner sanctum!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

Thoughts on Smoke Alarms

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Recently the one known as Publisher communicated to me that it was necessary smoke alarms be installed in the office of the minions. I told him that I could easily invoke many spells of smoke to ward people from dire things, such as the approach of rivals, miscreants, and evil dwarves.

This, though, was contrary to what the publisher wished, for he desires alarms that warn of smoke, not create it. Also we discussed burglar alarms, which would have let out shrill noises to alert burglars that I was about to reduce them to withered husks. I did not see the purpose of these.

I asked the publisher if there were other alarms that mortals routinely used, and he reminded me of the aggravating sound that once occurred in front of the building, before I reduced a car to slag, and he spoke of fire alarms and tornado sirens. I told him that under my aegis there was little need to fear anything but me!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull on Modern Art

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

I commanded the one known as Intern to show me modern art on his glowing box, and at first I thought his conjuring spells had gone awry, for most of what he showed me depicted strange geometric shapes, ugly colors, and weirdly distorted faces that do not exist in any pleasant realms.

Intern hastily explained that this was a sort of art created in rebellion to the established order. I respect those who dare to fashion new things, but "modern art" did not please me. Why, if someone were to depict me in this modern art, how would my commanding presence be manifest to those who beheld it? When Intern insisted it could be done by a talented artist, Publisher dissuaded me from transforming him into a salamander once more and said a better punishment was to have him sort the stock room, a place so dire that my minions speak of it with dread.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Learns to Deal with Red Tape

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Early on I asked the one known as Publisher why we bothered printing on paper when with the proper rituals I might simply send epic tales blazing into the mind's eye of all those who were sworn to serve me.

Initially he was interested, but when I explained the necessary rituals involved, and the required ingredients, he informed me that not only would the rituals be banned in most of the 50 states (apart from a realm known as "Alabama") but that they were illegal in many lands, and that the ingredients were rare and expensive. While I have vast funds, I would rather spend them upon the acquisition of fine fiction and art rather than ingredients, and so I relented. The modern world presents many obstacles! Sometimes I yearn for simpler times, when an entity could do what he pleased without so much "red tape" (a useful term I learned from the one known as "Lester").

But in those days, there were fewer storytellers, and there were always powerful sorcerers and meddling adventurers prowling into my business. After my awakening I learned most had vanished, which pleases me.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

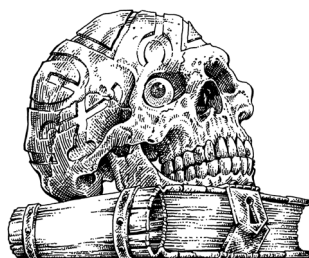
Spread Word of All That I Have Done!

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

It has come to my attention that there are ghostly places out there where folk gather to speak. On such places, words are disseminated. Why then, upon seeking out word of my glorious work, do I see so little activity from members of my legion? Go forth and sing my praises in your book reading ghost web places, like your facetweet groups and your Readgood reviews. Why one of them had but a single entry for the mighty second issue! One paltry review!

It may be that you have been too busy composing hymns to my greatness. You may resume them at a later time. Now you must rise and spread word of all that I have done, and draw all you meet to my circle so that they may join us and hear fantastic tales of sword and sorcery!

So Sayeth the SKULL.



How May You Please the Skull?

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

The one known as Editor came to inquire why the one known as Intern had run screaming from my Inner Sanctum. He had dared ask whether it was better to be loved or feared! As if I knew the meaning of fear! How might I comment upon a thing I have never experienced?

Editor explained that Intern probably wondered if I thought it was better for my minions to love or fear me, and I say it is better that they love to fear me! But who truly cares what they feel, so long as they obey?

It never fails to amaze me how many pointless questions mortals ask! The most important ones are: How may I please the Skull, where shall I find excellent sword-and-sorcery tales, and how can I tell more people about the glories of the Skull!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Hires an HR Director

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

The publisher has been acquainting me with annoying trifles he claims necessary for a modern "corporation," which is what he says a lawful organization of this size must be declared. He earlier explained that it would be impossible to achieve proper distribution for the magazine if we were an unlawful organization, which is why I must endure these piddling difficulties.

He now assures me that we need someone known as a Human Resources Director, owing to the size of the staff. I scoffed, telling him that I was ultimate director of all resources, including humans, but the publisher warned me there were unforeseen troubles. The intern fearfully kept notes.

Skull: Explain!

Goodman: Suppose Susan complains to you that Greg was picking his nose at the salad bar again?

Skull: I would smite him!

Goodman: Greg's overseeing the migration to Google Chrome. You can't smite him right now.

(Here the intern interrupted to suggest I merely transform Greg into a gibbon, so that he might still type on the glowing boxes to make the Google Chrome spell, which I approved until the publisher pointed out that it didn't really solve the problem, since gibbons can still pick their nose.)

Goodman: A Human Resources Director would address the issue without smiting, and you wouldn't be bothered with these and other issues.

Skull: What other issues are there?

Goodman: Recruitment. Morale, developing work incentive programs —

Skull: My morale is excellent! And the incentive program is to please me!

Goodman: I mean things like Taco Friday at the cafeteria, or game nights —

I informed him that I would preside as game master during all game nights, but saw that Publisher was correct, and that there would be much tedium in scheduling taco consumption, birthday celebrations, maypole dances, harmonic convergences, and something I think he called a Blood Bowl party, so I decreed the appro-

priation of a Human Resources Director. Things were much easier two thousand years ago, but we did not have printing presses, so I must endure.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Learns the Names of His Staff

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

I met with the HR director today. He insists that his name is Conrad, although there is something familiar about him.

He claims that to bolster workplace esprit d'corps I should stop referring to my minions by job function. Apparently it frustrates some that I call only the one known as "Lester" by name. I told him this was because Lester's job title is ludicrous and I refuse to use it. Conrad then explained at length how the Design and Layout specialist doesn't actually scheme constantly to leave things lying out, and proceeded to bore me with tedious information concerning the glowing boxes into which my minions stare.

I considered reducing him to ashes, but I recalled that the one known as Publisher thought HR directors useful. Also I learned that Publisher's name is actually "Goodman," which amuses me.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

Contact Your Priests and Kings!

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

To: Legionnaires of the Skull

It has come to my attention that I have received no word of spontaneous celebrations or festivals in my honor after the announcement of the new Kickstarter. This is to be remedied at once.

It is possible that those who rejoice among you have done so with such heedlessness that you have failed to make pictographic record of the events. If this is the case, you are to remedy this failing at once and transmit record through the glowing boxes!

If you have failed to tell of my greatness, then correct your sloth and get you forth! Shout from the rooftops! Click-clack through your phone cells! Tweet and Instaface! Contact your priests and kings! All must know of my magazine! Raise up your banners and take to the streets!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

Help Wanted: Minion to Clean the Gong of Ages

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Some of you have asked where you yourselves might obtain a gong such as the one that graces my Inner Sanctum.

You ask in vain! There is none other like it in all the planes of existence! For this gong is the sole remaining instrument surviving of my ancient kingdom, and it was recovered by Goodman himself when he found my physical remnant in seeming slumber in the Chamber of the Ages!

Not only is it constructed of metals blended so purely your pitiful modern sciences could not unravel their secrets, it is emblazoned with symbols that would burn your very souls if you knew how to pronounce the words which they represent!

I have been told that a potion called Windex is useful in cleaning my Gong of Ages. We currently seek a minion qualified in the proper care of gongs and who is familiar with the use of Windex.

Eligible mortals should focus their thoughts on this topic and I will blast an employment application directly into their minds.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

Yet Another Intern Transformed to Salamander

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Today the Intern presented me with a series of “ideas” that he thought would “grow our marketshare” and “expand our audience into a new demographic.”

Here are his first three points.

1. People love mysteries, so you should tell stories with a mystery slant. For example, a dwarven private-eye.
2. You should have a lot more description rather than wasting time with all that “forward momentum” stuff the editor keeps going on about. People like to know lots of details about the backstory, magic system, what people eat, and what everyone’s hair looks like.
3. You shouldn’t work so hard to find weird world building. People are happy enough with worlds that look like Lord of the Rings. Also, you should feature a lot more elves, dwarves, and merry halflings.

He had more points, but by that time I had recovered from my stunned silence and transformed him. A little while later the one known as Jones wandered in and asked if I’d turned the intern into a salamander again. When I told him yes, I thought he’d plead for his return, in case Goodman needed coffee. But Jones had found where the intern’s list had drifted, and after glancing over it said only: “good.” He then departed, declaring that he’d get Goodman’s coffee for the rest of the day.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Learns of the Insurance Company

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

The one known as Goodman informs me that where he is from, the creature into which I transformed the old intern is known as a newt, not a salamander, which was amusing to us both, for the intern’s foolish parents had actually named him “Newt.” He then requested that I refrain from transforming the new intern, as it troubles an entity known as “the insurance company.” I informed him that I would destroy any troublesome entities, but he said that would only create additional complications, whereupon I told him I would henceforth limit the duration of transformations. Goodman thought that this should suffice, as it is hard for a salamander to bring him coffee. (I have been informed that coffee is a sort of potion my minions imbibe to increase their cognition and energy levels.)

Goodman then informed me that he needed funds for something known as a “coffee maker.” At first I thought this was another name for an intern, but Goodman explained that in the modern age, coffee requires a magic device to aid in the preparation of the potions, and that the finer the device, the more lasting benefit the potions have on my minions. Thus I decreed that only the finest coffee machines be acquired for the office. He also said that the best of them were simple enough that even a salamander might be able to press the button to activate the potion making process, which suited us both.

Goodman then waxed eloquent about something known as a pollywog, several of which he glimpsed on a forbidding hike in the wilderness.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Meets Hector the Custodian

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Since Goodman awakened me from my centuries of slumber, I have felt no need for sleep, but I do experience periods of inactivity that the ignorant might confuse with “resting.” During such times I wander through this plane and those nearby, searching for hidden symbols that would melt your very souls if you but gazed upon them. Also for a source of Hetch Hetchy Artisan water, which Goodman has requested be stocked in the cafeteria.

During such times my glow dulls and my senses are focused upon distant points, so that I do not see what lies directly before me. I awoke from one such period to discover that a thin man in a grey coverall had infiltrated my Inner Sanctum. He had not only dared to turn his back to me, but he was wiping the pedestal where I keep the Necronomicon with a cloth, chanting under his breath, no doubt beginning a ritual to protect him as he opened it!

I was wroth with anger! He faced me then, still chanting, and was reaching to touch me with the selfsame cloth, whereupon I hurled him screaming into the fire-tossed Limbo of Xin.

When I complained to Goodman the next day I learned that the intruder’s name was “Hector” and that he was something known as a custodian, a minion employed to reduce dust and clutter. Apparently he always sings while he works, and is a fan of something known as a “Beyonce.”

Ever since I brought him back from limbo Hector has been silent, apart from occasional mumbles, but I understand he still performs his cleaning to capacity. He has not again entered my sanctum, which suits me well.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Drafts a Morning Memo

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

You shall take down everything I say! Do you hear? Stop that quaking!

Listen well, mortals! It has reached my attention that the HR director is beginning a workplace safety program. Should you care for your safety, here are matters of import that dwarf any he might present!

Those who fear vaporization should not fail to knock before entering the Inner Sanctum!

The next miscreant who dares burn popcorn in the breakroom microwaver shall suffer immolation!

The unauthorized consumption of Terry’s lunchtime sustenance from the breakroom cold unit will cease, or the responsible party will face termination strike that — will have his face terminated! Hahaha!

Lastly, recommendations for “softening my image or tone” in the suggestion box shall cease on the instant! For the record, I will not don a “toupee,” mask, or top hat and monocle!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Gets a Conference Phone

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Today the HR Director installed a conference phone, saying that it would be simpler for me to make and receive calls.

I explained that if I wished to summon minions, I had but to use Alvor's Gray Mirror, but the HR Director informed me that the insurance company frowns upon the copious amounts of blood such rituals require. I informed him that I was at no man's beck and call and wished to receive no communication via the phone. He assured me that this would not take place, and so I permitted the installation.

The accursed device began to ring during the next hour. First, someone named Judy claimed to have trouble hearing me, no matter how much I shouted, then talked over me at length before I disconnected her for her insolence. Next an unnamed person claimed that they were calling about my vehicle insurance, and when I proclaimed that they were fools and that I had no need for ordinary conveyances, they would not silence!

Finally Judy called back and once again found it amusing that I could not hear her, no matter how much I shouted! My patience was at its end, and thus I sent a horde of demon spawn through the connection. I asked if she could hear that! Hah! Also, I incinerated the phone and commanded the intern to carry its smoking carcass to the HR director. Why that new intern quakes so much I will never know.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

A Day of Trials with Etsy and Yelp

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

It has been a day of trials, though it began well enough. First I spoke with the one named "Terry," he who converts the strange creature and weapons invented by my authors into numbers that can be used in the game that Goodman made. He wished my opinion on a spell. Of course the mortal conception of how spells work is laughable, but Terry's work pleased me.

Then that quaking intern informed me that the Etsy dealer had failed to refrigerate the bat livers I had ordered, and there was nothing left of these prime spell ingredients but a stinking, sodden mess! My wrath was dire. I shall leave my response to your imaginations, but you may be assured that never was there a more devastating review left upon the Yelp! Hahaha! Truly shall he suffer now!

But this was not the end, for it was discovered that the entity responsible for sending us Brasso had failed utterly! Rather than dispatching a concoction for restoring my gong to resplendency, I had been sent a box full of brass-colored ladies undergarments known as "thongors!" They are utterly inadequate for gong polishing!

Oh, for the simple days of yore, when an immortal sorcery such as myself had easy access to gong polishers and bat livers!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Intern Asks a Boon

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Today the new intern dared to ask a boon! He cleared his throat and lowered his glowing phone screen and asked if a powerful sorcerer such as me knew anything of love.

I laughed. Could he not see that there is no greater love than that which I hold for sword-and-sorcery? "Of course, worm!" I told him. And it was then that he asked if I could fashion a love potion.

I told him there was no better way to win a lover than to surprise them with a subscription to *Tales From the Magician's Skull*, for it is the finest magazine upon this plane of existence! Any of discerning taste would shower the giver with affection.

He was trying to say something else, no doubt words of praise, until Jones dragged him away. I imagine he quickly filled out a subscription form! So should you, if you wish to find a love for the ages!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Needs Troubadours

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Goodman recently explained that the departure of my minions for "weekends" is a ritual meant to preserve their morale so that they perform better. I am told that this ludicrous custom must be observed owing to certain regulations, which is why many were absent as I inspected my domain this morning. Others showed proper devotion and continued their work upon issue 3. The one named Lester had strange white sticks hanging from his ears, and I learned that these were not decorative, but functional. Apparently mortals use these listening sticks to partake of such sounds as "Purple Haze" and "Revolution," created by popular troubadours.

I summoned Goodman forthwith to ask why we had no troubadours on staff so that the minions might listen to songs about sword-and-sorcery, or about mine own glories.

Goodman seemed puzzled as he sipped from his coffee. "I'm not sure we have a budget for troubadours," he confessed. I was wroth with anger, and he must have taken my silence for consent to speak further, for he continued. "I've been meaning to tell you that we haven't been able to afford a zeppelin hanger or a secret underwater base, either, although we were close to winning an eBay bid on a zeppelin. If you want, though, we can buy you your own Airpods... although... you don't have ears, so maybe some speakers?"

He was then called away by the intern, who had apparently caught his foot in a trash can.

And thus I appeal to you, my loyal followers. First, send me more smerduks, so that we may hire troubadours to sing my praises. Secondly, write lyrics that celebrate the glories of sword-and-sorcery, and my munificence, so that when we hire the troubadours, they will already have words for the music they will write!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

Conrad the HR Director Speaks of Insurance

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

The quaking intern was slow to come when I shouted for him, and when he arrived, he brought Conrad, the HR Director. I had wished to hear further report of those who had written to praise me, but Conrad claimed he had important matters to discuss. My doubts as to the interest of words that man would speak soon proved absolutely justified.

He fell to discussing the company insurance coverage, which could well have been a sinister sleep enchantment, for such was its effect upon me. I did learn that only accidental dismemberment is covered by the plan, and we will never have to pay out for deliberate dismemberment, which pleases me.

The more I looked at Conrad, the more familiar he seemed, though I cannot place him.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

Hey Gang! Let's Call It Stable Fables Instead!

Hey there everybody!

It's me, the Skull, taking a break from evil schemes and whatnot to talk to my favorite peeps!

I wanted to get your thoughts on some important changes I've been contemplating. First, the current title is too, how do you kids say it? "in your face?" It's not ALL about me, after all. Also, I'm getting a little tired of the kinds of stories we've printed so far. I mean, when you boil it down, sword-and-sorcery is all just about a barbarian with a loincloth anyway, and no one ever talks about how bad they really smell.

I want to start featuring fiction where stable boys and young cooking assistants discover they're actually princes and princesses and wizards and stuff. And I want to lighten things up a bit and turn over about half of the magazine to comedy stories. Especially parodies of famous sword-and-sorcery adventures. Also, there need to be more dwarves and elves and vampires. Especially cute vampires, because I want to grow our demographic. I want you to start sending me fiction like that right now!

With all that in mind, here are top contenders for the new title of the magazine. Be sure you let me know your opinion. You know how much that matters to me!

- Stable Fables
- Fangs and Fables
- Uncle Skull's Jolly Adventure Stories

I'll have more ideas to share with you soon. Hope to hear from you all!

Keepin' it spooky,

Yer pal, The Skull

Treachery!

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Treachery!

The perceptive among you swiftly noted the difference in the tone of the last missive sent forth through the glowing boxes! The feeble attempt at deception would have been detected here in my headquarters far sooner, but we were unaware, owing to difficulties resulting from the migration over to Google Chrome!

Fortunately, missives from members of my loyal legion reached me swiftly, and an emergency department head meeting was called in the briefing room. The place was tainted with the smell from the allegedly morale boosting "breakfast club" (an arcane ritual wherein my minions bring forth ingredients for consumption and cook them upon primitive tools). But that reek was the least of my

worries. Someone from within my organization worked not only to undermine my aims, but to replace my vision!

My lead minions claimed to be just as horrified as myself — apart from Conrad, the Human Resources Director, who was doodling upon the white board. He then explained that whomever had written that missive might have a point, and cited the statistics for something called "Twilight" about "vampires" which sold untold millions to the credulous among the mortals.

He then removed his head covering, and upon seeing the sinister tattoo atop his bald dome I realized Conrad was none other than Ulvak the Undying, my ancient nemesis. The intern faithfully recorded his exact words:

Conrad: Yes, it is I, Ulvak the Undying! While you dreamt deep dreams, I walked among the mortals and learned their ways. Your time is over, Skull! I will build a true empire upon your paltry beginnings! Your treasury and minions shall be mine!

While my lead minions expressed their horror, I immediately sought to vaporize Ulvak, but he informed me that the numbers on the white board were a component of a spell to neutralize my sorceries!

Fortunately, I had chosen my minions well. For Lester turned to smash the glass upon the receptacle labeled "In Case of Wizardly Attack" and brought forth the Mace of Acerak! Jones yelled "Flying feet of fury!" and leapt nimbly across the table towards Conrad. And Goodman snatched up an implement known as a skillet, left over from the breakfast club.

Ulvak rebuffed Jones' attack with a glowing mystic shield, but it was disintegrated a moment later by a blow from Lester's mace. Jones then doubled over Ulvak with something he declared a "Kirk karate chop" and Goodman dropped my old nemesis to the floor with a blow from his skillet. Also bits of burnt egg fell upon him, which pleased me.

Before the foolish wizard could recover, Terry leapt up to erase the white board. With Ulvak's spell broken, my powers were restored, and I quickly transformed him into Ulvak of the Burnt Ashes! I commanded he be left in place as a warning to all who dare attempt to usurp my authority!

My vision is supreme! *Tales From the Magician's Skull* will endure! So Sayeth the SKULL.

Recycle or Compost?

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

With Ulvak defeated, I thought the next day would prove glorious, but it was not to be! I remain displeased. The new intern informed me Hector had swept up Ulvak's ashes, though the fool was more worried about whether they should go in the recycling bin or compost bin than about Ulvak's reconstitution. Why must Goodman send me so many idiots?

Things only worsened from there. My lead minions are laboring over the contents of the newest magazine, and while that pleases me mightily, that means that none could listen to the complaints of the underlings. And lo, but did they have complaints! I learned that we are understocked on toilet paper, and that Deborah tires of Phil constantly doing craftwork at his desk, and that some object to the occasional chanting and smells that rise from the Inner Sanctum.



They also asked what company morale programs would be instituted now that "Conrad" had been terminated, an expression which I find mirthful. I reminded them that singing hymns of praise to me are excellent morale boosters, for they always improve my mood. If they sang loud, they would also be untroubled with chanting. Also, if they did not take lunch breaks, they would not need toilet paper, and they would work more, which would improve my morale. For some reason they seemed displeased.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Sweet Sight of Issue Three

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Today Lester shared with me portions of the finalized layout, and oh but I was pleased. Also, Jones brought to me a few of the stories that he and Goodman selected for issue four. Ah, but these are fine days to be an immortal sorcerer with his own sword-and-sorcery magazine!

I look forward to seeing these imaginings take physical form, and look forward to seeing it delivered unto you so that you will savor it and sing my praises!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

Frequently Asked Questions

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

It is so hard to tell the mortals apart. The one called Howard, who seems to resemble the one known as Jones, asked me to prepare this document known as a Frequently Asked Questions. Read it frequently so you may reflect on my glory and talent!

What sizes do the t-shirts come in?

The same sizes as the mortals, fool! Goodman informs me that the t-shirts are manufactured in sizes appropriate for any number of human fodder. I have been instructed to relay to you that once the Kickstarter is complete, those who desire to bring me glory by wearing my visage upon a garment must indicate the size of t-shirt they desire when they are sent information via something called "Backerkit."

How may I acquire a gong as glorious as your own?

Foolish mortal! I have already addressed this matter! Refer to my previous thoughts and trouble me not again!

How may I please the Skull?

This is a question you may ask frequently. Spread word far and wide of my glorious magazine! Grab the attention of your town crier so that he may tell of me during his daily rounds! Demand your mayor release a proclamation, and have your local priests and sages announce word of my doings at all their gatherings! Further, clamber upon your rooftop and shout the news of the coming of the next issues! Also, use your glowing screens to summon friends and relatives! The Skull will bring you sword-and-sorcery!

How can I tell more people about the glories of the Skull?

See above.

How can I have my story published in TFTMS?

Are you the crafter of glorious tales of adventure? Then my minions will seek you out! After consultation with Goodman and Jones and the casting of an augury, the stars may soon be right for the consideration of manuscripts sent to my lair. I shall announce that day when it draws near!

How do I apply for a position as an intern in your lawful corporation?

The position is currently held by that quaking intern whose name escapes me, so there is no opening. Should circumstances... transform (hahaha!), I shall publicly announce the situation and then ask supplicants to empty their minds so that I may blast an application into their thoughts!

How many interns have been promoted to positions of greater importance?

There is no job of greater importance than serving me!

How May I join the Legion of the Skull?

All will be revealed soon!

Happy Birthday from The Skull

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

This morning Goodman entered my Inner Sanctum with a furtive, stealthy air, bearing with him a stiff, oversized document. Something garish was printed upon its surface, perhaps the image of a jellyfish or a balloon. When I demanded to know the reason for Goodman's intrusion, he informed that he had brought forth a birthday card for me to sign.

The intern recorded the exchange.

Skull: What do you mean by that?

Goodman: It's a custom — we celebrate the day of birth of one of our employees by presenting them with a card and a cake.

I asked Goodman what the card did and he stared blankly at me for a moment.

Goodman: Well, when we give the card over to the person whose birthday it is, they feel happy.

Skull: Do you mean to say that you mortals are foolish enough to reveal the date of your birth? Why does that bring you pleasure? What if your enemies should learn of this?

Goodman: I don't think that's an issue for most of us. Anyway, if you could do this quietly, we'll be able to surprise him.

Skull: Him?

Goodman: Howard... Jones. Your editor.

Skull: Doesn't he know it's his birthday?

Goodman: ... yes.

Skull: Then explain how this shall be a surprise!

Goodman: The card. The card's the surprise. So's the cake.

Skull: Where is the cake? How am I to sign the cake if you fail to present it to me?

Goodman: We don't sign cakes. Just cards.

I impressed upon him my desire he strive for swifter clarity about these strange matters in the future. But I thereafter engraved my signature upon the card. Later I presided over the lunchroom festivities, where my minions gathered to sing a birthday song whilst wearing strange, inverted conical hats. To enhance the festive nature I decreed that my gong should be sounded twice, in honor of the issues that had so far been printed. Then came the consumption of the cake, which was decorated with an image of me so glorious I decreed no one would be permitted to ingest that portion, although I am fairly certain Lester sampled some of the glowing blue icing! Woe be unto him if my suspicions prove correct!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Needs a Hash Snag

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

I floated from my Inner Sanctum to the office of the publisher, where I found Goodman and Jones (or maybe it was Howard) embroiled in a discussion over recruitment for my Legion. I am most pleased that numerous individuals have written in to ask how they, too, might join my ranks.

Apparently part of their debate involved the use of “hash snags,” which are an item of significance upon Instaface. Goodman and Jones wished to highlight all matters related to me sent through phone cells so that all would instantly know their importance. It seems that if some tweets are sent out into the interweb, then they are easily seen if stamped with one of these snags.

This pleased me. Imagine, then, my wrath when I learned that someone had already created a hash snag for “Skull!” Some other entity had dared to stamp their missives with my name! Jones hastily explained that there was no need for violence or any action that might result in a legal suit. He and Goodman were consulting with someone named “Brett” to develop something distinctive for my “online presence.”

I ordered them to inform me at once when they had a selection of the most promising choices, then retreated to my Inner Sanctum. I await the conclusion of a Kickstarter I have joined, and also there is an eBay auction which I must win at all costs!

Oh, how I await the release of my next wondrous issue! Oh, how I thrill to the thought of more followers! Soon, soon, all shall know of my glories!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Discovers eBay

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

On the eBay I contested with a bidder named cromedomewizard3 to acquire a sorcerous item of great puissance, and was victorious! Soon the item was before me and unwrapping the package, and lay before me a black ring that masters the mood of mortals! I knew that with it in my possession my already tremendous powers would wax even higher!

Yet this “mood ring” responded to none of my invocations! Its secrets remained locked to me. I was in dire contemplation of its ebon surface when Goodman stepped into my Inner Sanctum to speak to me of the upcoming Kickstarter contest. After he had made proper obeisance, his eyes settled upon the ring on its scarlet pillow.

Goodman: Is that a mood ring?

Skull: It is mine! I vanquished another wizard to acquire it and now study its vast mysteries!

Goodman sipped from his coffee and told me that it works by responding to body temperature. He then continued:

Goodman: Of course, you actually need a body.

Skull: Ah! So it requires a sacrifice. Intern, step closer.

Goodman: No, it doesn’t require a sacrifice! And we’ve been over this — human sacrifices aren’t allowed. Period. What I meant is that to use a mood ring you actually need a body, with a finger. And you don’t have either.

Skull: What if I used a dead body?

Goodman: Well, a dead body doesn’t have a mood, and doesn’t have much of a temperature, does it?

I thought then that he meant the ring would control the mood of but one mortal at a time, which was vastly disappointing to me until I learned that mood rings simply inform the wearer what their mood is — they in no way control or alter the moods of mortals whatsoever! My wrath grew boundless!

Goodman went on to explain something about “fine print” and suggested I might want to get out of that eBay bid for dragon eggs, which he informed me are actually toys manufactured for something known as a “Throne Game.” Also he informed me that the Komodo dragon kickstarter I was so interested in was shut down by the federal government. Apparently there are laws against the acquisition of dozens of Komodo dragons, as well as for their use in spells and their deployment in hallways as sentinels!

Two thousand years ago things were far simpler! No one complained to me of toilet paper shortages, and a sorcerer was free to deploy as many flesh eating dragons in the sanctity of his lair as he desired, so long as there were enough miscreants and evil dwarves to sustain them.

So Sayeth the SKULL.

Hash Snag Identified

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Behold! My minions have determined the most perfect of all hash snags to alert mortals to electronic missives of greatest import — those involved with me! Hence forth, when it is time to spread word of my glories, you are to implement the hash snag:

#magiciansskull

There is no better hash snag in existence!

Soon, very soon, you are to deploy #magiciansskull for a mission of great import! Watch all your glowing screens, for I will shortly release a momentous announcement that must be shared by all!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

Share This Post!

Heed Me, mortal dogs!

Whosoever shares this post across the interweb and Instaface will be entered into a most glorious drawing! Prizes there shall be for the worthy winners, featuring autographed tomes scrawled by some of our esteemed contributors, and if I am well-pleased, perhaps other fine gifts as well!

• • •

Behold! I have fashioned a magazine brimming with fantastic fantasy adventure tales!

Last year I launched two glorious issues overflowing with thrilling adventures in time-lost lands. Now I have decreed that the magazine is to continue! My newest Kickstarter is for the next four issues, and it funded upon the first day!

Join us, and you, too will read of swords, and sorcery, dark deeds, and daring rescues. There are lands alive with splendors and horrors, all in a magazine designed to emulate the look of the fabled magazines of yore, from the layout to the covers to the table-of-contents.

Famed and talented authors are in our stable, tale tellers steeped in the lore of the great ones who came before — modern writers striving to bring wonder and glory to your imaginations!

There are no finer tales than those crafted for the sacred genre, whether they be classics like those from Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, C.L. Moore, and Tanith Lee, or modern work in a similar vein. I have deployed my minions to search the world for the best works being drafted in this era. They present them to me, and I share them with my most loyal followers!

It is not just the tales, though! You must picture this as well — there is fabulous art for every single story, and statistics so that you may bring the wonders and terrors described within to your own game tables!

It may be that you have not yet heard of me, though it defies belief! I am the Magician's Skull, awakened from long slumber in the Chamber of Ages. I have returned from my deathless sleep with but one goal: to publish the greatest sword-and-sorcery tales in this or any other dimension!

Join me, mortal dogs! I live again, and my magazine lives as well! Untold splendors await you!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull's Security Measures

Heed me, mortal dogs!

As it proved impossible to deploy standard, and perfectly reasonable, security measures owing to "red tape" involving Komodo dragons, a minion has been hired to guard the premises.

Once I was informed of her arrival I left my Inner Sanctum to ensure that she had been properly alerted to the challenges she was most likely to face. Also I wished to know just how well she had been trained. For some reason Goodman insisted that he attend the meeting as well, so we descended in the cubicle of conveyance with the intern.

In moments we had arrived at the dark, high-ceilinged atrium. It is a vast hall with but a single opening, and two banners displaying my image, hanging to either side of a fireplace eternally lit with green flame. The guard was seated behind the barrier emblazoned with the name of my magazine, and looked up curiously from the sustenance she was consuming.

First I asked the guard, known as "Phyllis," about her qualifications, and learned that she had never prepared poisoned spears, much less dug a pit trap! Goodman assured me that these skills weren't necessary in the modern age.

Skull: What of your experience in wizard detection?

Phyllis: No one who doesn't belong here is going to get past me. Goodman tapped a small rectangle that hung from his shirt.

Goodman: Everyone has to have one of these.

Skull: A placard displaying YOUR face? All placards should display my visage, and mine alone!

Goodman: No, no — everyone has an ID badge with their OWN face. Phyllis here will make sure that the person matches the picture on the badge.

Skull: These are but paltry measures if someone steals your face! What other safeguards have you implemented? What will you do if the Men of Mong open a transdimensional gate behind the barrier

gate? What if one of my other ancient rivals seeks entrance in the guise of a delivery man, a clown, or an ordinary gorilla?

Phyllis: I'd probably use a taser.

Skull: A taser?

Goodman: It's sort of a wand of electricity. Animals aren't permitted on the premises anyways. Even, um, ordinary gorillas.

Intern: Seeing eye-dogs are allowed sir.

Skull: Seeing eye-dogs? What do you mean?

Goodman: They're a kind of dog that see for their masters, who are —

Skull: Excellent! I shall have them posted at every portal! Procure a dozen at once! Is there an injunction against the deployment of such beasts?

Goodman: Uh, no...

Skull: Marvelous! These dogs of seeing, in conjunction with my legion of flying monkeys and electrical taser wands, will ensure the safety of my empire!

Their silence assured me that my will would be done. Content, I floated from the atrium, ascended in the cubicle of conveyance, and returned to my inner sanctum.

Oh, how I await the coming of the dogs of seeing! I neglected to inquire how many eyes each dog possesses, or whether these orbs fire death rays or heat beams.

Regardless, I am certain to be pleased!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

The Skull Grants Permission to Celebrate

Heed me, mortal dogs!

In the early hours of the morning I summoned the head minions to my Inner Sanctum and granted them permission for spontaneous celebration. Chants were led in my honor, and tales were told of all my most recent victories, most especially the vanquishing of Ulvak, he of the burnt ashes!

With my coffers full, my magazine shall flourish! Issue 3 is finalized and off to the printer, and I have been shown several stories now that are to be included in issue 4. Jones informs me that he has a small pile of contenders for issue 4 and beyond.

The staff also readies for something known as "GenCon," a yearly gathering in the fabled land of Indianapolis, home of the Great Racing Oval. If you are one of those who means to join the throngs in attendance there, you must visit the Goodman Games booth and trade stories of my magnificence with my minions!

I am certain that you shall miss my frequent observations. Fear not! From time to time I may yet decide to send you more, and you will be enlightened and inspired. Think and speak often of my glories. Forget not to chant my name to your friends. Soon you may caper and prance about them, holding aloft the third issue, and great will be their envy! When they express their woe, point them to the places where the magazine can be purchased, and remind them of their folly for not joining my cause sooner!

To you, my loyal followers, I give thanks. You have shown great wisdom in accepting me as your leader. I shall guide you to wonders beyond your imagination!

Now go, and speak of my splendor to all you meet!

So Sayeth the SKULL.

WEB OF PALE VENOM

From the World of the Archivist

By JOHN C. HOCKING

THE knife flipped end over end and hit the target just left of center. Dust rose from the withered disc, a cross section of an ancient cactus cut down on my uncle's estate. I frowned in the glare of the afternoon sun. I'd been aiming at the bulls-eye.

"A librarian who throws daggers?"

I'd thought I was alone in the dry courtyard behind my apartment, but there was a woman leaning on the rickety fence, watching me.

"I'm not a librarian," I said, surprise giving my voice an irritable edge. "I am an archivist."

The woman raised a hand in protest and smiled. The smile was white and attractive and seemed somewhat at odds with her severe military garb. She took off her low-crested helmet and shook back a golden stream of hair.

"Small difference," she said. "I wonder if you might do me a service."

"There is a very great difference," I said. "A librarian tends a miscellany of titles and lends books to any and all. An archivist tends to an official collection of important works of historical and political value available only to those entitled to peruse them."

"All right," she said. "I misspoke."

"What exactly is so unlikely about anyone, librarian or archivist, throwing a dagger? And have I not already done you a great service, Lucella Esteriak?"

The soldier squinted at me as if she was peering into a high wind.

"You have. Yet I have need of someone knowledgeable." She smiled at me again, this time more wryly. "I thought of you."

I went to the target and pulled the knife free. An archivist doesn't get much flattery and I didn't quite know how to respond.

"Do you know of the delirium root?" she asked.

"Used by the Old Southrons in ceremonies. Some say modern mesa folk still eat it in secret, but I'd say it was just another part of native culture lost when the cities of the Triad were built on Southron ruins."

"Would you recognize delirium root if you saw it?"

"Are you suggesting I use the stuff? The best tool of an archivist is a clear mind."

"No," she snapped. "I'm just trying to get a direct answer to a simple question. Perhaps it is too much to hope for."

"I worked the section of the archives devoted to flora when I was apprenticed. The delirium root is quite distinctive, umber colored and forked."

"So you do know it?"

"Yes," I said.

"Will you come with me then?"

"You want me to identify..."

"Give me an hour of your time and I'll buy you lunch."

I thrust the dagger into the sheath at the small of my back. It was my day off and nobody had offered to buy me lunch in quite a while, so I went with Lucella Esteriak, a soldier of the House of Flavius. I'd met her, under unusual circumstances, in the Archives a few weeks before and hadn't thought I'd ever encounter her again. I was probably more pleased to see her than I should have been.

We walked out of tenement row and skirted Cistern Park, where the Archives slumbered in the warm sun, surrounded by dusty, nodding palms. The marketplace on the park's north side was quieter than usual. We came out of the markets and began to ascend the Tiers, where many of the nobility have residence.

"Commoners shouldn't wander in this neighborhood without reason," I said.

"We have a reason."

Lucella walked quickly, doubtless trained by years of marching in the service of the House of Flavius. She turned off the main street, down a narrow avenue shaded by stately ranks of trees. The air was cooler and the sun came through the branches in bars of gold. There was a guardhouse just past the corner. It was both larger and considerably better appointed than my apartment, but it was empty.

"Where's the guard?" I asked.

"Busy elsewhere," said Lucella.

We walked down the smoothly cobbled avenue, past mansions set back from the street, their pillared facades half obscured by well-tended foliage. Lucella stopped before an opening in a low wall of adobe brick. A stone walkway cut through the wall, across a yard full of aromatic cedars, to a broad porch that fronted a wide, two-storied mansion.

"Here we are," she said.

"Where?" I demanded.

"You'll see in a moment."

We went down the walkway and up the porch steps to the door. The house was of ochre-tinted mesa stone and looked to have been thrust up whole from the earth.

"The windows are barred," I said.

"Indeed," said Lucella. Her hands were digging into the pouch that hung beside her short sword. Dappled sunlight shone on her

gray and gold armor. She straightened suddenly, holding up a slim, hooked lockpick.

"Even the windows of the second floor are barred," I said uncertainly.

She didn't reply but began working the pick in the door's huge lock. It opened with a harsh snap. Lucella pulled the heavy door open and stepped inside.

"Come on," she said, holding the door for me. "Quickly."

I moved past her into a large foyer that was dim, quiet and cool.

"Stay away from the windows," said Lucella. She shut the door and began to walk into the house.

"One moment," I said.

Lucella stopped, and then turned to favor me with one of her smiles. "Yes?"

"I'm certain that lunch at your expense will be delightful, but I really think I deserve some explanation before we go any farther."

"Of course." She raised her eyebrows guilelessly.

"Come Lucella, what is this place and what are we doing here?"

"This is the home of Vettius Karabonde," she said.

I felt like I'd swallowed a stone, but I must not have looked it because Lucella continued blandly. "A new joy potion is circulating in the city and I have it on good authority that its source lies within these walls."

"Vettius is an unscrupulous trader, but he is a very rich and powerful one. And he is said to consort with sorcerers. Lucella, why do you concern yourself with this?"

Her blue eyes flashed contempt at me and I might have felt abashed if we weren't in the midst of a crime that could get us both sent to the mines.

"I'm an acting constable," she said. "I did a long stretch with the legion outside Frekore chasing bandits off the caravan road, so they've given me work in the city for a while. Vettius is off on a trading venture to Anparar."

Relief was like a balm. I opened my mouth, but before I could speak Lucella turned back into the house.

"This new joy potion has slain a pair of soldiers. Come along," she called back over her shoulder, "and bring your expertise. There's a greenhouse in the back that I want you to look at."

I followed her out of the foyer and through a broad, circular room. Dark tapestries covered the walls, oil lamps dangled unlit from golden chains set in the ceiling. Shadows pooled everywhere. The silence was oppressive and made the small sounds of our intrusion seem like a clangor of trespass. We passed an elegant stairway, went through a number of dim rooms, then came to another locked door. Lucella used her lockpick again and we slipped out the back of the house into the bright, moist air of a greenhouse.

I went through it in short order, working my way down the ranks of potted plants. Most were flowers, and if I didn't know all of them by name, I still knew that none of them were delirium root, or any other drug. Vettius Karabonde liked orchids.

I looked up through the glass roof of the greenhouse and saw movement in a second floor window. Something like a bundle of sticks pressed against the close-set bars. I felt an odd weakness at the base of my spine, akin to the instinctive revulsion one feels discovering tainted or vermin-infested food.

"What's that?" I pointed.

"What?" Lucella peered upward. "There's nothing."

The second floor window was empty. I felt unaccountably foolish.

"Well, there's nothing here in the greenhouse, either." I said. "Harmless flowers."

Lucella cursed and hastened back to the door. We went inside and, at her insistence, searched the first floor as thoroughly as we could without leaving any obvious signs. We found nothing.

When Lucella began to ascend the stairway to the second floor, I felt a strange reluctance and had to speak.

"I did see movement in that window." I tried to make my voice firm and matter of fact. Lucella, as if to honor my apprehensions, drew her short sword from its sheath.

The air at the top of the stairs carried an odd scent, acrid and sharp, yet not unpleasant. It cleared my head. Lucella sniffed and frowned thoughtfully.

We went through an open arch into a fine library with a high, domed ceiling. Books bound in cloth, wood, iron and copper shared shelves with scrolls of all sizes. In moments I spotted volumes I'd never seen before. Walls that weren't covered by shelves were hung with fine tapestries. At the room's center sat a luxurious divan upholstered in scarlet velvet.

"It isn't right," I muttered.

"What?" Lucella was headed across the room, toward a half-open door.

"Vettius Karabonde sits here like some kinglet in his library, reading works even the Archive doesn't have."

Lucella snorted, pushed open the door, and froze.

"What the hell?" she said.

A desk scattered with scrolls sat beneath a barred window curtained with gauze that moved listlessly in the warm breeze. There were bookshelves lining the walls, but what first caught the eye was a cage in the corner between the desk and a tall cabinet. The cage was the right size to be a kennel for a large dog, but it was empty except for a few gray rags dangling from the bars. Its door, a simple hinged grate, was wide open.

A man in the tunic of a household servant lay prone beside the cage. Lucella moved quickly to his side and knelt. His skin was gray as paste, but he wasn't dead. His lips moved ceaselessly, as if he whispered to himself. I bent over his face, close enough to see that it was slick with sweat, but I could hear nothing of what he said. He might have been praying.

"What happened to his leg?" Lucella's voice held incredulity and revulsion.

The man's right leg, bare below the tunic, was shrunken and withered, blotched with dark mottling like a rotted branch. The room seemed suddenly very quiet.

"It's not dead," said the man in the thinnest of whispers. "It's not dead."

There was a swift scuffling sound outside the room, a dry rattling that ceased abruptly. My heart reeled in my ribs and I backed away from the door, bumping into the cage. I knocked over a broomstick leaning against the bars.

"What was that?" I said. It occurred to me that even if lunch with Lucella was excellent, I was unlikely to have much appetite for it.

She stood over the man with the withered leg, holding her short sword casually.

"Rats?" she suggested.

"In the house of Vettius Karabonde?"

The broomstick had fallen over my foot, and when I picked it up I saw that it wasn't a broomstick at all. At one end was a tight bundle of cloth that was sticky with thick pale fluid. It gave off the acrid reek that tainted the air of the second floor. The wad of cloth showed many punctures, as if it had been chewed.

"Smells like the joy potion," said Lucella, her eyes still on the door.

I set the broomstick aside and pulled open the cabinet beside the cage. Inside were many racks of small, glass flasks, each full of a pale fluid. I didn't need to study the small wooden press or the clumps of sodden cloth within to understand what I had found.

"Gods," I said. "Gods and demons."

"Those are flasks of the drug," said Lucella savagely.

"It's not a drug," I said, feeling sick. "It's some kind of venom."

A door slammed on the first floor. I started violently, but Lucella just lowered into a crouch.

"Hello!" came a cry from below.

"Damn," said Lucella.

"Constable's business," shouted a deep voice.

"Damn!" said Lucella with more vehemence.

"What?" I demanded. An unpleasant certainty fell over me.

Silently, she went to the door and I followed her into the library.

"Here, Philon," she called. "Up here."

Lucella and I stood to either side of the red velvet divan and waited until a soldier appeared in the arch. He was a tall, rangy fellow whose brow formed a straight bar above his dark eyes. I couldn't help noticing that his crest and chevrons showed him to be of higher rank than my companion. He held a naked sword in his fist.

"Not quite, Lucella," he said. "Not quite clever enough."

"Did you catch the cutpurse at the West Gate?"

"Of course not," said Philon easily. "There wasn't any. I wondered why you'd sent me on a fool's errand. Then I was told a woman soldier had been seen in Vettius Karabonde's greenhouse, and it all made sense. You're over-zealous, Lucella."

I noticed someone moving in the doorway behind the tall soldier. It was a smaller man, bald and hawk-faced, clad in ivory robes bordered with purple. As I watched he stepped from behind Philon with a dramatic flourish of his robe's hem. He fixed a cold gaze on Lucella.

"Do you know who I am?" His voice was thin, but imperious.

"Statillus Devonata," said Lucella. "You live next door. You saw us in the greenhouse." It wasn't a question.

"Vettius Karabonde and I are not merely neighbors, but partners in business. It is only natural that I watch over his interests when he is gone." Statillus Devonata produced a short staff from a deep pocket. The dark green gem mounted at one end glittered balefully as he pointed it at us. I knew it must be a Nobleman's Comfort, a sorcerous weapon produced by the king's wizards for the protection of the rich and powerful. They contained a number of magical charges that could be released at will by their owner. I'd never seen one before, much less had one pointed at me.

"This is the woman you spoke of to me, Philon?" said the nobleman. "Who is the scribe?"

"I am not a scribe," I said.

"I don't know him," said soldier.

"I am an archivist," I said.

Statillus Devonata fingered the emerald-tipped staff and frowned at Lucella and me.

"They've been in Vettius's study, constable," he said slowly. "They must have seen it."

Rage radiated from Lucella's armored body like heat from a forge.

"You bastards can't get away with this." She forced the words between clenched teeth. "Your new joy potion is killing those who use it."

"Not quite, Lucella," said Philon with a smile.

"Not all," said Statillus Devonata. "Just a few. Vettius simply failed to dilute it adequately. It's been used by a little cult in Anparar for years, but it took a visionary man of business like Vettius to see its commercial value. It's understandable we might lose some customers before learning how to handle the product correctly, and certainly worth it, as the drug is almost immediately addictive."

"You've killed two of the legion," snarled Lucella. "You'll answer for it!"

"Not quite," said Philon again.

"Stand back, constable," said Statillus Devonata, and lifted the wand.

I'd read that a Nobleman's Comfort might emit blasts that froze, burned or shredded flesh, and I didn't want to learn what Devonata's could do.

"Before you waste any charges," I said quickly, "perhaps you should look in the study." Devonata's face darkened and Philon lifted his sword nervously. I was suddenly certain I knew something that would disturb them so much they might even forget about killing us.

"Why?" said the nobleman. "Speak!"

"It's out," I said. "It got out of the cage."

The constable blanched and Statillus Devonata lunged forward. I stepped aside as he passed me at a run, his gilded sandals sliding as he drew up in the doorway and stared into the study.

"Oh my Gods!" His voice cracked. He spun to face me, all of his nobleman's poise lost. "Where is it? Have you seen it?"

"I think we heard it just before you came in," I said.

"It's still here!" Devonata's voice was strangled. "It couldn't get out of the house!" He ran past me again, holding the Nobleman's Comfort before him like a lucky talisman, and went on through the arch to the stairs.

"What the hell?" Lucella was looking at me as if I'd performed some wonder of sorcery.

"Come on," said Philon tersely. "We've got to get out of here."

"A moment," I lifted a hand. "Let's wait just a moment."

"No!" The nobleman's voice came up the stairwell. "We're trapped! Constable!"

Philon started forward, but then Statillus Devonata's voice lifted in a horrible wordless cry, a desperate, incoherent screech of horror and protest.

The hair on my forearms rose as if I stood in a winter wind. Philon took a step back from the arch. Lucella seized my arm and stared at me with mad intensity.

Devonata's scream dwindled to a ghastly series of pleading moans. Then he fell silent.

"What the hell is going on, archivist?" demanded Lucella hoarsely.

"My name is Kel," I said. My mouth was so dry the words came out as a whisper.

"Come on," said Philon. "It'll be busy with him for a moment or two. Maybe we can get past it." He moved quickly to the arch, sword held before him. I followed, leading Lucella, who kept a grip on my wrist like a steel manacle.

"What is it?" she whispered. "What?"

"I don't know. Whatever was in the cage."

The stairs seemed darker than they had on the way up. Lucella released my wrist and drew her sword. My fingers found the throwing dagger in its sheath at the small of my back.

The circular, tapestry-hung room was empty. So was the shadowed arch that led to the foyer and the front door. Philon moved toward the arch, sidling sideways as if he approached an armed foe. His steps grew shorter and shorter until he stopped in the room's center. His face was beaded with sweat and his eyes were wild. I was keenly aware of the fact that he, alone among us, actually knew what manner of thing had escaped the cage, and that he, a constable of the legion, was clearly frightened half to madness. Lucella pushed past him and I kept up with her.

Statillus Devonata lay on the floor of the foyer, a few paces away from the door. The door itself looked strange, covered with gray rags like those that hung in the cage upstairs. There was nothing else in the room.

Lucella broke for the door. I went with her but looked about as I did, searching every corner of wall and ceiling. Devonata lay on his face, hands like claws against the floor, and there was a wound at the base of his neck. Two blue punctures. I caught a tang of the now familiar acrid reek. There was no sign of his Nobleman's Comfort. Philon shuffled into the foyer behind us.

A frustrated curse from Lucella pulled my gaze up to the door. It was plastered with what looked like ragged, grey ropes. I reached out a hand.

"Don't touch it!" Philon burst out. "Flesh will stick to it."

"What is it?" I asked, though by now I knew.

"Web," said the constable. "It's sealed us in."

"Sealed us..." I began, "...then this is a dead end."

We returned to the circular room in a tight group, trying to look everywhere at once.

"Vettius said it was intelligent. Smarter than anyone would believe," Philon muttered. I didn't think he was really talking to us.

"Smart enough to seal the back door, too?" I asked. We worked our way halfway across the circular room.

"What is this thing? A demon?" Lucella apparently couldn't decide if she should be terrified or enraged. Philon's reaction was easier to read-- his voice shook as if he were in the grip of a hard fever.

"Not quite, Lucella. From the salt marshes South of Anparar. Vettius said it was damned hard to catch..."

There was a sudden strange rattling, as if a dozen dry sticks scraped and clattered across the hard floor.

Philon started to run before I even saw what made the noise. It came out of a dark arch to our right, and it was sickly yellow, the color of the poison land of its birth. The killer of Statillus Devonata rushed at us on eight legs, each as thick as two fingers, and as it came it lifted the foremost pair, displaying hooked black fangs and spasmodically grasping palps. A spider bigger than a hunting dog was scuttling toward me.

My hand snapped back to hurl my dagger but Lucella shoved me sideways with such force my feet left the floor. I lit on my side, rolled, came to my feet, and saw the thing race right up Lucella's body. It moved so swiftly she couldn't bring her point to bear and simply hurled the horror from her. The creature couldn't have been heavy; it sailed through the air, landed on its back and slid until it hit the wall. Lucella spun and ran through an arch, down a shadowed hall. The long, many-jointed legs heaved convulsively, and the spider flipped neatly onto its feet.

I fled. My mind was stripped of reason and falling as I ran down a dark hallway. I rounded a corner, slid on a rug, rebounded from a wall and scrambled through another arch. There was no consideration of where I was going; there was no room in my skull for anything like thought. I ran through a room almost filled by a large, unmade bed. My foot snagged in a loose coverlet, and I fell, rolling headlong into the next room. It had no other exit.

I crouched on the floor with my dagger held at arm's length, pointing at the open arch. The blade trembled wildly. A chill like frost settled over my arms and shoulders. My lungs heaved for air, but I was desperate to remain silent and forced myself to breathe as slowly and softly as I could.

I'd considered my own death many times, but never imagined an end like this. To have that horror batten onto my body, pump me full of poison, and suck out my blood while I still lived was a fate so unendurable that I eyed the blade of my knife and wondered, should Vettius's pet leap into the room, if I'd have the courage to cut my own throat.

But the creature did not appear. Long minutes passed until I felt able to stand. More passed until I could bring myself to leave the room. I'd heard no cries or sounds of struggle, but I didn't know if that meant we had escaped it or that it could kill us silently.

I winced at the sound of my steps on Vettius Karabonde's floor of marble and hardwood, pulled off my sandals and walked barefoot. Dread dizzied me, but I couldn't let it steal my reason. I had to find Lucella, then get out of the house. I moved through the dim chambers like a man trapped in a delirium dream. I rounded a corner and came upon the stairway to the second floor.

"Hey, archivist," someone whispered harshly. Lucella was crouched on the stairs. "I thought we lost you."

"We?" My relief at seeing her literally weakened my knees. I gave her a grin, though I imagine it was a wretched specimen.

"Yes, Philon fled back to the room with the cage. Says it won't want to go back to its prison."

"How would he know that?" I managed, mounting the stairs to her side.

"I don't think he does." Lucella's blue eyes were bright. "But it isn't up there now at any rate."

We went back through the high-ceilinged library to the room with the cage. The door was closed, and we knocked before going inside to where Philon waited, leaning on the desk. He didn't greet us. In one hand he held his sword, in the other he hefted a small bust of Janarax he'd taken from the desktop. His gaze leapt repeatedly from the doorway to the window.

"Do you think we could tear loose the bars and climb out?" he asked.

"If we had a maul, a pickax and a few hours to work," said Lucella. "Wake up, constable, we're leaving."

"How?" asked Philon sullenly.

Lucella tore a tapestry from the wall and began to cut it to strips with her sword. She caught up the broomstick and, with a grimace, stomped on and snapped off the venom-soaked bundle of rags.

"We fight, Philon. We check the back door, as the archivist suggested. Then, if we can't get out there, we hunt that thing down and we kill it." Lucella tied the strips of tapestry tightly around the broken tip of the broomstick, then took a lamp from the desk and poured oil over the bundle of cloth.

"Can we fight that thing?" Philon's voice betrayed his doubt and fear.

"Of course we can," I said. "It's just an animal."

"Not quite," put in Philon scornfully.

"It ran up my leg and I tossed the stinking thing across the room before it could sink a fang in me," said Lucella.

"And now we'll have a weapon all beasts fear," I said, more bravely than I felt.

Lucella bent over the broomstick with flint and steel, and when she stood she held a flickering torch. We went out the door together, united in our resolve, if nothing else. Philon brought the bust of Janarax and held it as if he might throw the little statue at any moment.

There was something different about the library. I slowed; certain that something had changed. Lucella and Philon walked ahead; I looked past them and saw that one of the tapestries was missing from the wall.

Overhead, in the shadows that clung at the domed ceiling's apex, there was movement. Philon cried out and recoiled toward me. Something dark dropped swiftly from above and fell upon Lucella. She and her torch were blotted from view; a tapestry covered her like a net.

I looked up as the spider dropped, legs spread like an evil star, hurtling down from the high ceiling. It lit with a clatter, close beside Lucella, who was shouting and staggering beneath the tapestry the thing had dropped on her.

Philon yelled wordlessly, and lashed out at the horror with a swing of his sword so wide and desperate that the point clipped my upper arm. The spider's forelegs drew back and it sprang toward him, black fangs extended. With another cry, he hurled the little bust of Janarax at the thing and turned to run. His panicked throw struck home, but the statue merely knocked the spider backward before clattering to the floor.

Lucella was out from under the tapestry and still gripping her sword, but she'd lost the torch. She leapt toward the study's door,

through which Philon had already disappeared. The spider scuttled after her, moving between me and the study. Lucella skidded to a halt, seized the door and was about to slam it when she saw me standing stupidly in the middle of the library.

"Run!"

I did as she advised, whirled and sprinted for the stairs.

In the arch's mouth something struck me at ankle level and cut my legs from under me. I went face-down hard, slamming chest, belly and chin into the floor. My dagger flew from my hand. Blood filled my mouth and yellow glare filled my eyes. I gagged, unable to suck air into my lungs. I tried to crawl but my bare right foot was held painfully in place. Writhing onto my side, I saw a gray band of web stretched across the arch a hand-span above the floor. It was a trip wire. The oily rope of webbing was sealed to my flesh just above the ankle. Pulling against it caused searing pain.

The red divan at the library's center blocked my view of the study, so I couldn't see Lucella, but I could tell she hadn't closed the door against the spider because I could hear her cursing it at the top of her lungs.

Blery eyed and stunned, I forced myself to look for the dagger, thinking to cut myself free. It lay in the middle of the floor ahead of me, beyond my reach. I pulled against the web and it felt like my foot was being skinned.

I heard the study door slam and froze.

Lucella had closed off the study, which left me alone in the library with the spider. Silence pressed me to the floor. Dread hollowed and sickened me. I looked at the dagger and knew it was the only thing that could help me.

Then came the quick clattering of the horror moving across the floor, and I threw my full weight against the web. My foot ripped loose from the tripwire, stripping skin and flesh to the bone. I gasped in pain and shock, floundered forward and closed my hand on the dagger's hilt.

The clattering came again, and I flipped onto my back in time to see the spider leap into view atop the red velvet divan. Eight eyes like clumps of black onyx fixed on me. The many-jointed legs crouched to spring and I hurled the dagger as hard as I could.

The blade struck just behind the thing's head, drove through its body and nailed it to the divan. My hoarse shout of triumph drowned out any sound it might have made. I got to my feet as it writhed, legs thrashing. Pale venom flew from wildly clicking fangs. Deep yellow ichor flowed thickly from beneath its pierced body and painted an ugly stripe on the crimson velvet. Abruptly, it went still.

I stood and watched it for a while. Retrieving the knife seemed absurd. I swayed. My arm bled where Philon had cut it, my mouth and jaw throbbed, and when I finally took a step, my bare foot splashed in blood that flowed from the wound I'd torn coming off the tripwire.

"Lucella?" I called. My voice sounded strange. I walked past the tapestry the thing had dropped on her, and saw Lucella's makeshift torch lying beside it, still smoldering and scorching an unsightly blotch on the floor of Vettius Karabonde's library.

I knocked on the study door. Lucella opened it and I stumbled past her into the room.

"You killed it?" she exclaimed.

"The librarian throws daggers," I slurred. I half fell against the wall and leaned there, suddenly so cold and weary I had to fight to keep my feet.

"It's dead?" Philon stood in the study's center. His sword was sheathed, but he laid his hand on its hilt.

"He pinned the damn thing to the couch with his dagger!" crowed Lucella.

Philon took a quick step toward me and drove his fist against the side of my head. The back of my skull rebounded from the wall and I sat down hard. I was stunned, but not so much that I couldn't keep track of what was happening.

"Philon!" Lucella's voice cracked like a whip. The constable stood over me with one hand still on his hilt. He turned his body to face her. Even with my head ringing like a gong I was grateful to Lucella for drawing Philon's attention.

"So you think to clean up this mess for your master, Vettius Karabonde?" Lucella faced Philon squarely, sword sheathed at her hip. Her blue eyes were hard and bright and she was smiling.

"He'll reward me," said Philon softly, "for making the best of a bad situation." Staring at Lucella, he drew his sword from its sheath with slow deliberation. "I've sparred with many lady legionnaires, and I've defeated every one of them. I will cut you down, Lucella."

I pushed against the wall and got to my feet just as they leapt together like two snakes striking at one another. There was no preliminary trading of cuts and parries; Philon thrust viciously. Lucella hammered his blade aside with such force his sword arm was thrown wide, as if he leapt to embrace her rather than run her through. She side-stepped into his wide-open guard, and her sword shot up in a bright blur that punched through the hollow of his throat. It sounded like a soft melon getting a hard kick.

"Not quite, Philon." She smiled savagely into his astonished face, then jerked her blade free. He reeled past me, spraying blood, hit the wall and slid down it, choking and leaving an ugly crimson smear.

I couldn't speak. I looked at Lucella and felt my guts roll over. The smile hadn't left her face. She held the red sword as if eager to use it again and I was the only fellow in the room.

"He shouldn't have drawn on me," she rasped through that awful smile.

"No," I said. "It was unwise, and if he could speak right now I'm certain he'd agree with you."

Her eyes lost some of their hard shine and she looked at me as if I'd just arrived.

"Archivist, you're a mess."

"Thanks." I found some clean strips of cloth in the cabinet beside the cage and bound my foot while Lucella checked the body of Philon. I climbed onto the desk and pulled an oil lamp from its sconce.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to be certain it's dead," I said.

"Oh, don't burn it," she objected. "It's evidence that will put Vettius Karabonde in a cell." She followed me closely back into the library, and almost bumped into me when I drew to a sudden halt.

There was a vile yellow stain where I had pinned the spider to the divan, but it was gone.

"Gods!"

Lucella's sword came out again. I held the unlit oil lamp as if it might provide some defense. I felt something like despair. Hadn't I slain it? What did I have to do to be free from this nightmare?

We circled the red divan, looking around the room. Nothing moved.

"Hell, it's gone into the house. Could be anywhere," said Lucella.

"No," I said. "There's no blood trail. Look." I squatted, facing the divan. Lucella did the same, then looked at me quizzically. There was no ichor anywhere around the divan, but beneath it I could see a small puddle of the thing's blood. "It's underneath."

"Enough of this," snarled Lucella. She leapt up and kicked over the divan.

The spider had flattened itself to the bottom of the couch, clinging there with my dagger still transfixing it.

Lucella thrust, but even wounded the thing was horribly fast. It leapt over her blade and into her face. Lucella reeled backwards, dropping her sword to seize the horror's forelegs in desperate hands, trying to keep its fangs from her throat. She lost her balance and, with a despairing cry, fell on her back with the thing riding her down. The many-jointed legs worked frantically, trying to draw her deeper into its foul embrace. Black palps kissed her face.

I grabbed the ichor-slick hilt of my dagger and pulled upward. The deep-set blade heaved the spider up and off of Lucella. I held the monster aloft for a second, spellbound with sick horror as the long legs spasmed, and the fangs clicked and grated together. Then I hurled it across the room with all my strength. It hit the opposite wall with a brittle crunch and fell in a heap. The spider started to get up onto its broken legs, but I was having none of that. I threw the tapestry it had dropped onto Lucella over the thing, then poured the oil lamp onto it. I caught up Lucella's still-smoldering torch and touched it off. Yellow flame leapt over the oil-sodden tapestry. There was frantic movement beneath the burning fabric, but I beat on it with the torch until the cloth head came off the broomstick and the movement stopped. Then all that was left was what looked like a sizable pile of rags burning on the library floor. Despite the stench, we watched until it burned itself out.

The spider's web also proved vulnerable to flame. We burned our way through the slimy ropes that sealed the front door. Outside the house the sun was setting, and swallows darted on the cool evening breeze.

Lucella and I parted ways, she promising to deliver Vettius Karabonde to the authorities and me promising to see a physician about my constellation of injuries.

I never did get to have lunch at Lucella's expense or my throwing dagger back.

I missed one more than the other.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John C. Hocking is a nigh obsessed reader and writer of lurid pulp fiction, the author of *Conan and the Emerald Lotus* and its time-lost companion, *Conan and the Living Plague*, and an obedient thrall of the Magician's Skull.

A COVENANT WITH DEATH

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By JAMES ENGE

MORLOCK caught sight of the glass lizard by the gleam of gold in its eyes, brightening just before it leapt. He drew his face back from the water (he had been about to drink) and simultaneously brought his hands up in a clapping motion, catching the nearly invisible beast in midair. It hissed angrily, and a fine cloud of venom puffed out as he broke its neck with his thumbs. It had been aiming for his eyes, of course: a glass lizard eats little else by choice.

He crouched by the side of the stream for ten rather rapid heartbeats, considering: for the glass lizard is not native to the land of which Morlock was one of the lesser guardians, nor can it live long there. Then he stood, still holding the lizard and walked along the side of the stream, down the steep overgrown slope to the shore of the Narrow Sea, where the others were.

The others: five young men and women in gray capes like Morlock's own, clustered around a taller, older man cloaked in red: the Vocate Jordel. He was holding forth with a routinely spell-binding discourse, but broke off at Morlock's approach and said loudly, "But here comes Sir Morlock, fresh from his ablutions. Shall we tell him what we have ablated in his absence? Or shall he guess?"

A mixed chorus of the thains (candidates to the Graith of Guardians, of which Jordel was a full member) responded.

"Have to work on that ar-tic-u-la-tion, my thains," Jordel murmured. "But I guess you'll be guessing, Morlock."

"There is a Kaenish warrior on this mountain," Morlock said curtly. He had the pleasure of seeing several jaws drop among the crowd of his peers. Jordel's jaw did not drop but he was obviously surprised and displeased by Morlock's answer.

Jordel was a Westhold peasant who had risen to be a vocate of the Realm by a combination of charm, luck, toughness and real brilliance. He was fully seven feet tall with light curly brown hair and hazel eyes. He was thinly built, but with wiry strength. He was a fast friend to his peers, an intolerable nuisance to his seniors, the Three Summoners (who led the Graith of Guardians), and brilliantly engaging to his juniors: the thains, the Guardians-in-training. But if there was one thing he hated it was what he called "an aspiring thain," and he had long ago singled out Morlock as one of these. Besides, Morlock—dark-haired, crookedly built, and sullen though he was—was an aristocrat twice-over: by birth, as heir to the Ambrosii, and by adoption into the Dwarvish clan of syr Theorn. Jordel did not even pretend not to resent this.

"What have you found?" he asked Morlock impatiently.

Morlock held up the glass lizard, its transparency clouding now in death.

"But that might have been here for years," one of the thains, Drnja, objected.

"No, no, no," Jordel said irritably. "Its poison sacs are nearly full. They've been bred for the poison, you see, and now they have to be milked each day, like cows, or they'll die of their own accumulated venom. Morlock is quite right, as usual. Look here, Wonder-Thain: what do you make of this?"

Jordel pointed at a rowboat drawn up on the shore. Morlock went over, going down on one knee in the surf to examine it. The bottom was stoven in, the oars broken. There were two braces fixed on the inside of the boat; Morlock guessed something had been lashed to them—such as a lance.

"Unicorn-killer!" he exclaimed, then added cautiously, "Or someone who wants to seem like one."

"Nonsense!" Jordel replied. "Kaenish gentlemen don't *seem*, Sir Morlock—it's unseemly. They are too frank, too above-board for that. Besides, this fellow can't have expected anyone to trip over his trail so soon—look at the breaks in that wood—hardly more than two days old. And in another day his stove boat would have been invisibly submerged and his glass lizard opaquely dead; the idea that this is a set piece to give us a false impression verges on mania. No, what we have is very clearly a young Kaenish tirgan versed in the classic tales of chivalry, who has just crossed the Narrow Sea to acquire that peerless talisman of bravery and skill, a unicorn's horn."

"Or someone who wants us to think so," Morlock repeated.

Jordel looked bleakly at Morlock and then turned away to the other thains, most of whom were drifting over to the campsite. "Hey! Where are you going there?"

A very young thain named Kendral said apologetically, "We're a little late for lunch."

"You'll be later yet, young sir. Haven't you gathered the import of this young gentleman's deductions? Shall I have him explain them to you?"

The Thain Ilkea glanced at Morlock and interceded quickly. "An alien warrior has entered the Wardlands. The Guard is not maintained."

"Maintain the Guard!" Jordel cried. It was the entirety of a Guardian's oath.

"Maintain the Guard," the thains echoed dutifully, save Morlock and Ilkea.

"If you mean it, what do you mean by it? What do you propose to *do*, young ladies and gentlemen? Now that you have swiftly and correctly deduced that stuffing your faces will *not* maintain the Guard?"

"We ought to raise the alarm," Kendral said tentatively, after a brief pause. "Notify the thains at the Gray Tower at least," he added, naming the training post and guard station from which they had set out on this patrol of the coast.

"Not bad, not bad. Why don't you, Kendral, and you, Drnja, go do that?"

The two named thains turned away and walked north along the shore toward the Gray Tower.

"The question remains," Jordel noted, once they were out of earshot, "what they will tell, and what good it will do. They don't even have a rendezvous planned with any member of our group, and they don't know what we intend to do. Nor will all the messages in the world defend the unicorn that this killer wants to kill."

Ilkea silently moved to go after them, but Jordel stayed her. "Never mind that. What are we going to do now?"

"Track the hunter," Ilkea said instantly.

"Good. You can do this?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Where did he go?"

"Inland." Ilkea pointed. "There. West by southwest."

"Really?" Jordel was actually impressed. "So, take Lesten, here—"

"I'd rather take—I'll go alone."

"Then go."

"Where do we meet? And when?"

"Hm. Here. In two days or sooner; check around noon. Good hunting, Thain."

Ilkea nodded, glanced quickly at Morlock, then turned and ran uphill. In a moment she had disappeared among the trees.

"Leaves the four of us, hey?" Jordel said. "Any ideas? Not you, Morlock."

Morlock closed his mouth without speaking.

"No?" Jordel continued, after a brief silence. "I propose this: we split into two groups. Two of us cover the coast of the Narrow Sea northward, the other two southward. Ilkea may be the best tracker in the world and yet lose this unicorn-killer; those Kaenish hunters are cunning goats. Anyone here a tracker? Not you, Morlock? No? How extraordinary. How very, very extraordinary. What's that, Brelling?"

"I said, 'I hunt a little,'" Brelling repeated doubtfully, as if he wasn't quite sure.

"Excellent. You and Lesten there go north. Follow the coast. If you come up short, go to the Gray Tower and put yourself at the disposal of the Senior Thain. Good fortune to you."

They nodded solemnly and walked away.

"Men with a mission," Jordel observed, when they were out of earshot. "They won't find anything, of course, but they're good order-takers, and you always need some of those."

Morlock, still on one knee, said nothing. He dropped the dead lizard in the water beside the broken boat.

"That Ilkea is as sharp as breaking glass, and not so noisy," Jordel continued. "She might actually catch this unicorn-killer, but I don't think so. She doesn't know how they operate. She'd never have known that was a unicorn-hunter's boat in a thousand years of looking at it."

"She doesn't read Kaenish," Morlock said.

"You do, though. Read all the Kaenish classics of adventure and romance, I expect. You know exactly what's bubbling in our young tirgan's brain, I'm sure. He's a gentleman, like yourself. And you might not expect it with my humble origins, but I've mixed with some Kaenish nobility. So we both know where we're going."

Morlock said nothing to this.

"I know! I know!" Jordel said, as if Morlock had responded. "I can't stand you either. But it's got to be you and me against this Kaenish hunter. Ilkea is smart and tough, but she's got too much to learn. The rest are more or less worthless."

Jordel's voice trailed off. He was clearly waiting for Morlock to say something, and he was clearly disappointed when Morlock did not.

"Get up and let's go," the vocate said wearily. Morlock stood and they walked away, southward along the shore.

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THEY walked through the rest of that day and into the night along the crooked stony beaches between the Grantan Mountains and the Narrow Sea. They watched the slopes to their right for any sign of the unicorn-hunter and saw none. At last Jordel said, "We have outdistanced him. It's time to sleep."

"If we sleep—"

"Not you, sir. You'll watch the slope. Our hunter will *not* sleep, not yet: he is consecrate to death and sleep would be an impiety."

"How do you know he is not far south of here by now?" Morlock demanded, as Jordel arranged his red cloak atop a bed of sand-moss.

"I know it," Jordel said, in lieu of an answer. "And you, Sir Morlock, do not know everything. Wake me," he said, lying down on his cloak and wrapping himself in it, "when the stars spin 'round to the sixth hour. Then I'll watch."

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MORLOCK roused Jordel before the fourth hour of night ended. "I saw a gleam of metal," he explained, after Jordel came silently, completely awake at one touch.

"Where?" the vocate demanded. Morlock pointed at a stretch of pine woods, far up a nearby slope.

"Sure you knew what you were seeing?" Jordel grumbled, as he stood to shake moss off his cloak.

Morlock said nothing to this.

"Let's go, then," Jordel said, as if Morlock had answered. They began to climb the long grassy slope, gray in the moonlight.

They had hardly entered the dense black cluster of pine trees when Jordel motioned Morlock to a halt. He gazed absently at the trees, the ground, at what could be seen of the sky, and sighed. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," he said. "I don't like the look of this at all." He turned to Morlock. "You say you saw the gleam of metal from these woods?"

"From the clearing just ahead," Morlock said, gesturing.

"Ah. You see it all, of course."

"I see nothing."

For once Jordel refrained from repartee at Morlock's expense. "The hunter and his pack of lizards—larger than the one you caught; dog-sized, I should say—come east. This is their trail here. And a few paces yonder, this is their trail leading back west, up the mountain."

"Then?"

"If you are asking what I am driving at, I am telling you that they made their kill."

"What kill? The unicorn?"

Jordel stared at him, the mask of shadows across his face not concealing his surprise. Finally he explained, "The hunter travels a... I don't know what you uplander types call it... a zig-zag path. It is a shape consecrate to death. He cannot turn left or right without making a kill of a certain dignity."

Morlock shook his head. "How can he hope to pursue one of the Swift People by such an awkward method?"

"He doesn't want to pursue a unicorn; he wants to kill a unicorn. His methods are not woodcraft but a magical ritual, part of his covenant with the Kaenish god of death. Fulfillment of his part of the bargain will foredestine the unicorn's death at his hands."

Morlock nodded. Jordel looked at him dubiously. "Maybe I should have sent you north with the others," the vocate remarked.

Shaking his head impatiently, Morlock said, "If you are correct, we should have passed the kill that allowed the hunter to turn."

"I think we did." Jordel turned and led the way back to where the angling paths met. At their junction was a pine tree, its bark deeply torn by claws. Jordel reached up and shook one of its branches; Ilkea's body dropped like a rotten fruit to the ground.

The night changed color for Morlock. Kneeling down by the body, he thrust a finger into its ruined mouth.

"Still warm!" he reported.

"That's more than I can say for you," Jordel remarked pleasantly. "And I thought you were fond of Ilkea. God Sustainer, those beasts must have been hungry; they ate a good deal more than her eyes, didn't they?"

"We can still catch him," Morlock said flatly, wiping off his hand.

"We will, too. Ilkea must have caught on to the hunter's pattern sooner than I expected and cut across the lines. Stupid of her to tackle him alone, though, and stupider still to get caught by him—"

"You call *her* stupid!" shouted Morlock.

"Why, yes," said Jordel, frankly confused by Morlock's display of emotion. "If she had simply gone back the way she came,

or angled off in any other direction, he could not have pursued her without breaking his pact with death. He might have, anyway, but I doubt it. By planting herself in his way she guaranteed her own death."

"You didn't tell her."

"Tell her?"

"About the hunter's covenant with death."

"It's common knowledge."

"I didn't know. And I read Kaenish. There have been no unicorn-hunters in the Wardlands for a hundred years."

"Why not?"

"Unicorns lost status, by a decree of the Dark Seven. The kill of highest status is now an exile from the Wardlands. There are said to be several fine trophy-heads in the audience hall of the current king of Kaen."

"God Avenger!" swore Jordel in honest outrage. "But that's monstrous!"

Morlock, whose natural parents were exiles from the Wardlands, agreed, but did not say so. In fact, he said nothing, but tore two squares from Ilkea's cloak and bound her torn hands in them. It was the mourning custom of his people, not hers, like the prayer of revenge he silently uttered to her spirit. But he never knew her customs or her people. And: he was himself, not her.

"I suppose you're thinking, 'If Jordel had only told Ilkea everything he knew, everything would be sten-friendly.' But you're wrong about that. If I had taken time to tell her everything I know about Kaen we would still be crouching over that stove boat."

Morlock reflected that Jordel had already taken more time to extenuate his guilt over Ilkea's death than he might have taken to prevent it. But he held his peace and knelt by Ilkea's body.

"You talk about the Dark Seven," Jordel continued. "But when the time came to walk against them, Illion had only Noreê, and me, behind him."

"There is night left," Morlock observed, finally.

"If you are done here, let's go," Jordel said briskly.

Morlock stood and followed Jordel southward along the wooded slope.

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IN wordless union and mutual distaste, they cut across the lines of the unicorn-hunter's trail. There were too many of these, they soon saw—too many to be accounted for by the unicorn-hunter, if he had really landed in the Wardlands but a few days ago. Either there was more than one, or he had been there longer—perhaps a month.

Jordel assumed the former, muttering, "How many unicorns have they butchered, I wonder?" as he rose from a trail of lizard-slime, gray and powder-dry. He had judged it at least twenty days old, from rain-streaks in the trail. Morlock, in contrast, was wondering what one hunter might have prepared on the mountain in a month's time. He wondered if a man could really stay awake that long (as Jordel said a hunter must during his hunt). He wondered what it would do to a man's mind.

Then they heard the unicorn behind them, the hoofbeats reminding Morlock of the strokes of a broad hammer on soft lead. They turned and saw the Swift One, twisting like an eel as she ran among the pines, close-set on the steep slope.

Jordel planted his feet and held out his hands, making strange vague motions, as if shoing off chickens. "Go *back*!" he cried. "There is *danger* here!" He followed this with a few tootling cries, such as Westholders use to speak to horses.

Morlock stepped aside, not wishing to be speared by the unicorn's horn. *Talking to unicorns* was a synonym for idiocy among his foster-kin, but he was too alarmed to take much notice of Jordel's efforts in this line. It struck him as ominous that the unicorn should be travelling exactly the same path as they were. He thought of Jordel's words about the hunter's methods: *not woodcraft but a magical ritual*. Were they and the unicorn being drawn by the same death-magic? In any case, they could assume the worst about the ground toward which the unicorn was so senselessly running.

"*No!*" screamed Jordel. "*No!*" as if he could force the unicorn to understand him, or at least obey him, by sheer force of volume. And as the unicorn passed (her horn like lightning, her eyes deadly and blind, her beard streaming like cirrus clouds) Jordel leapt to seize her about the neck. Incredibly, he landed across her shoulder and, still more incredibly, landed running when she shook him off with a single silken motion.

"Come on!" screamed Jordel over his shoulder. "We've got to catch it!"

Morlock might have shouted *No!* or *Why?* but he saved his breath for running. Jordel was clearly in the grip of something stronger than reason.

The vocate was taller and swifter than Morlock was, and if the chase had been over flat ground it would have been hopeless. But the dense pinewood, slanting up the steep mountainside, kept Jordel in view of the unicorn and Morlock almost within arm's reach of Jordel.

They broke into a clearing. Morlock caught a glimpse of a man standing, dressed in white down to his boots and gloves, at the clearing's edge. He saw the unicorn lift her feet and sail over an apparently innocuous stretch of ground. Morlock drove himself forward and snatched Jordel by the collar just as the vocate's feet hit the ground that the unicorn had leapt across. The ground disappeared like a dream and they fell toward a yawning pit.

Earth hit Morlock's chest like a hammer. The breath went out of him, and for a moment the dim dawnlit world wavered. But he kept a grip on Jordel's scruff with his right hand and scrabbled for a hold with his left, finally closing on a tree root as he began to be dragged across the rough slimy ground.

A long silence. It was hard to say how much time passed. Neither Jordel nor Morlock spoke. Then, finally: footsteps. The man in white approached them; Morlock turned to watch, but the man seemed to be interested rather than threatening. He held a knife in his hand and a pack of glass lizards, as large as shepherd dogs, slavered silently over his white boots.

"I suppose I should greet you," he remarked in Kaenish to Jordel, whose rather strained face could be seen just over the edge of the pit. "I greet you: good morning."

"It is morning, isn't it?" Jordel replied pleasantly. The sky was suddenly blue, the pines about them were suddenly evergreen again; the dirt on Jordel's sweating face was now brown, rather than black.

"I wanted you to see something," the man in white continued. "I wanted you to see this." He beckoned to his hunting lizards and slit the throat of each in turn as it was offered to him. None of the lizards seemed deterred by the death of any of the others. Finally they all lay cloudy in death and the man in white dropped the blade, gleaming with milky ichor, into the pit.

"If I understand your ways," Jordel observed, "you have come to the end of your hunt. My condolences on your failure."

The man in white smiled indulgently. His eyes were red as a lemur's, as red as fresh blood. "You're saying that to irritate me. But you can't irritate me. You are the almost-final kill; you anchor the blood rite which has drawn and will continue to fix the unicorn in yonder ravine." He gestured with a white-gloved hand, slick with translucent lizard-blood. "I am happy to do it with a kill of such high status, although I suppose almost anything, even your crookback boy, would have done."

"You evidently know who I am," Jordel said sharply. "Let me introduce you to my thain-attendant: Morlock syr Theorn, sometimes known as Morlock Ambrosius, for he has two fathers."

The narrow-faced tirgan laughed agreeably. "A crookback, a cripple, or a leper is a kill of no special status. Please don't try to make me feel better by telling me that your crookback is the son of another crookback—or, on the other hand, that he is also the son of a dwarf." The unicorn-hunter looked down on Morlock, who met his red eyes defiantly and strove at the same time to heave Jordel clear of the pit.

"And may we—oof!—and may we not know your name?" Jordel inquired, with a fair imitation of politeness.

The white tirgan shook his narrow head. "Since you go to serve in my house in the Netherworld, you will soon know me by many names—more than I can know myself, until I go to serve myself in the Netherworld. For the moment, there is no need; for the moment, I am Death to you. The blood-rite is complete and the death of the unicorn is foredestined."

"You may—oof!—be premature," Jordel remarked. "You have not killed Morlock, myself, or the unicorn yet."

"I don't intend to kill the crookback; I have a use for the crookback. But he will not save you, though he is trying so manfully to save you. It is a Kembley's serpent in the pit, a Kembley's serpent that has you by the legs."

"Never heard of them. Dangerous beasties?"

"In a way. In a way they are. They strike fast and they have but one idea: they do not let go. What they grip with their tail they bring to their maw and devour; they do not let go. I pinned the skull of this one to the floor of the pit; you can just see it down there, if you turn your head: it is pinned to bedrock."

"I see it. You have planned this whole business out more elaborately than I imagined."

"I planned nothing; there is no plan; the plan was not mine. I was guided every moment by the Waking Dream. It was the Waking Dream that told me to dig this pit, as first and final anchor to the blood-rite. It was the Waking Dream that told me where and when you would come, and who you would be."

"A well-informed dream."

"It knows all things; knowledge is nothing; there is nothing it does not know. It lets its wisdom pass to me, a little at a time, only a little at a time, lest I know all and go insane."

"That *would* be unfortunate," Jordel agreed mildly.

A knife-thin, contemptuous smile creased the tirgan's narrow face. "The crookback will not be able to save you. In a time he will grow weary and let go, or his shoulders will give way; he cannot save you. But he will carry the story to your Wardlands; that he can do. For the fame of the kill is part of my bargain with Death; fame and the unicorn are the favors I buy with your death."

"And if his story is not flattering to you...?"

The white tirgan shrugged. "I serve Death, not Truth; it is Death that I serve. Jordel, goodbye." He saluted them with his dark lance, the tip gleaming with poison. He walked away and was lost in the shadows of the narrow ravine.

"Morlock," said Jordel urgently. "Let me go. It's up to you now. Save that unicorn."

Morlock grunted a refusal. He repositioned his body and pulled again, hard, at Jordel. He could only hope the leather jerkin Jordel wore was well-made; at least it hadn't torn yet...

Jordel struck at Morlock's arm. The blow was pitiable; he was already weakening; perhaps he was already dying. But there was life in his voice as he snapped "Thain Morlock! I *order* you to let me go and save that unicorn."

Morlock didn't speak. He had Jordel's shoulders above the edge of the pit.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" Jordel's voice dripped contempt. "Afraid to defend the unicorn alone. I'm not your third father, you crook-backed bastard!"

"Won't. Work. Either." Morlock spoke through clenched teeth. "Go. Faster. If. Help."

Jordel swore and grabbed Morlock's right arm. After long moments of agonized straining, Jordel was able to lay both hands on the tree root that had anchored Morlock.

"There. Thank you. Thank you. Now *go*. I can hold on here!"

Morlock ignored him. Drawing his belt-knife he knelt by Jordel's legs, wrapped by the red and black grasping foot of the Kembley's serpent. Methodically propping the coil open with a crossed pair of sticks, he cut through the serpent's body and tore the writhing coil from Jordel's legs. He examined the still-writhing foot with some interest in passing.

"There may be venom," he remarked. "Your legs—"

"My feet are numb," Jordel interrupted. "All the better to kick your mutinous rump."

"Can you walk?" But Jordel was already rising to his feet.

"Come on!" the vocate shouted impatiently. "We may already be too late!"

They were too late. When they entered the narrow shadow-heavy ravine the foredestined death had already occurred.

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MORLOCK buried the shattered body of the unicorn-hunter, alongside his shattered poison-tipped lance, where they both had fallen before the unicorn in the narrow ravine.

Jordel sat nearby, working life into his poisoned legs, and remarked, "One part of the hunter's bargain will be kept, anyway. This place will be famous. We'll run groups of thains down here from the Gray Tower, teach them how a Kaenish tirgan hunts on the ground."

Morlock thought of the unicorn as she had run past them, out of the ravine, after killing the hunter: her eyes wild with something like hate, the glory of her horn veiled with blood. He thought of Ilkea's body, ruined by hunting lizards, still unburied on the mountain, her life gone wherever life goes after death. All this seemed a high price for a thain's training exercise. But he had no words for this.

"I'd like to know why you refused to let me go at the pit," Jordel said. After a moment's silence he resumed, "I imagine there are at least three possible reasons. First: sheer resentment against that slimy hunter; *he* said you'd let go, so you didn't. Second, resentment against me: *I* said to let go, so you didn't. But, third: you realized that preventing my death voided the hunter's magical ritual. Only that could liberate the unicorn from her state of fascination and prevent the hunter from killing her."

Jordel waited but Morlock didn't speak; he continued scraping dirt into the hunter's grave, using the spade he had found among the hunter's gear. When he was done he broke the handle and drove both splintered ends deep into the loose earth. It was all the funeral the Kaenish death-worshipper would ever receive.

"Or perhaps," Jordel continued, "you were so fond of me you couldn't bear to let me fall and be snake-food."

Morlock grunted. "I am not fond of you."

"Really? I'm amazed. Really, I am. People generally like me. And I'm fond of you, you know, or I'm beginning to be. I like ornery people—contrast, I suppose. Sometimes I think I'm too placid, too amiable, too much of a good fellow. Don't you agree?"

"No."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Enge lives in northwest Ohio with his wife and two crime-fighting, emotionally fragile dogs. He teaches Latin, classical civilization, and mythology at a medium-sized public university. His stories have appeared in *Black Gate*, in the Stabby-Award-winning anthology *Blackguards* (Ragnarok Press, 2015), in *Portals* (ZNB, 2019), and elsewhere. His first novel, *Blood of Ambrose*, was nominated for the World Fantasy Award, and the French translation was nominated for the Prix Imaginales. You can reach him through Facebook (as james.enge) or on Twitter (@jamesenge) or, if all else fails, via his website, jamesenge.com.

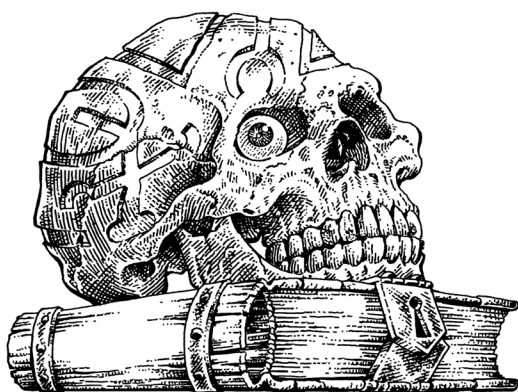


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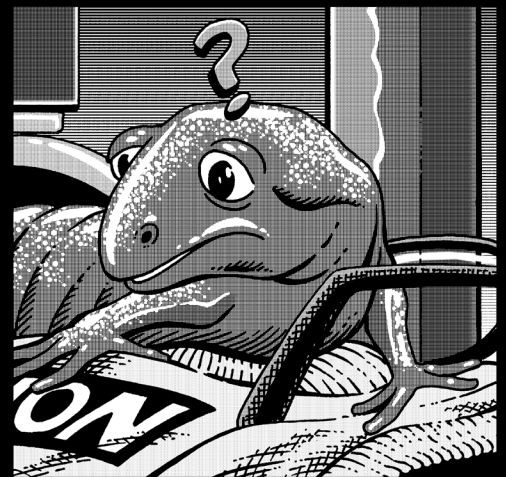
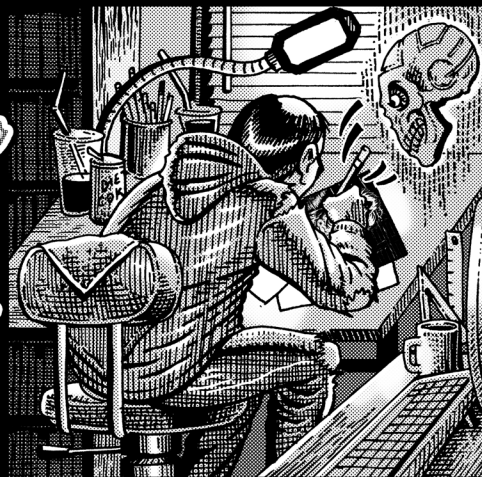
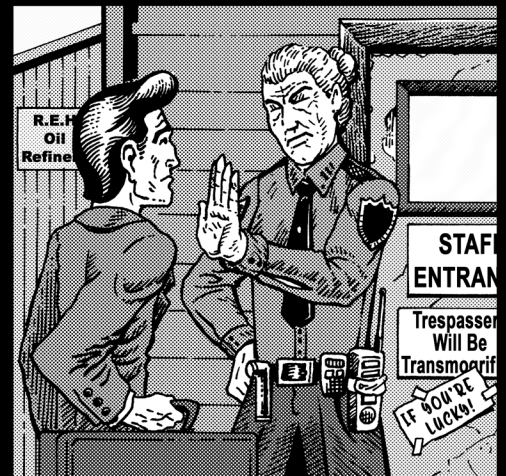
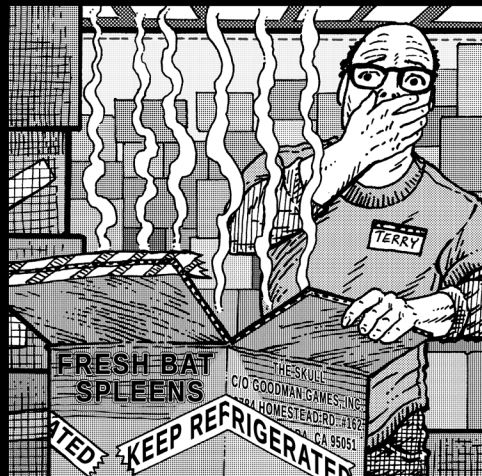
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