

a DOZEN UNDEAD SECRETS

BY PHILIP REED

In the darkest of campaign settings and the deepest of dungeons, the undead are waiting to strike. Skeletons guarding ancient tombs. Ghosts haunting abandoned houses. Ghouls crouching in wait in the dim alleys of the evil cities of the realms. Everywhere that there are good-aligned heroes, there are evil undead either working to support the will of their masters or to fulfill some wicked goal that prevents them from moving on to the next plane of existence.

What follows in these pages are twelve undead secrets, each one of which is presented as a rumor that the player characters may overhear in any tavern or inn in the campaign world.

As with other titles in this series, each of the undead secrets has been confined to a single page. This makes it easier to use each one; only print the page that you need for your next session and, if you wish, make notes on the reverse side of the printed page.

The undead are a common feature in many fantasy adventures, so I've tried to warp and stretch things just a tad in an attempt to make these unlike your usual undead creatures. I hope that you find all of these entries useful.



ANATOMY OF A RUMOR

1. A title, to help set the mood.
2. Flavor text appears in italics. You may use this text as read aloud text, or you may prefer to use it as inspiration and reword the flavor text in your own language.
3. Each rumor includes an overview of the general idea to get your creative muscles humming. Adapt as you see fit!
4. There are true and false options for each of the rumors, providing you with some ideas on how the rumors might play out. Whether or not a rumor is true or false is your call.
5. Each rumor includes an illustration to help spark your imagination as you think through how to best use the rumor in your campaign.

1 TALE OF THE MUMMY

"With one last blow of his warhammer, Olnir turned the door into splinters and reduced the final obstacle between us and what – we were certain – had to be the richest treasure in the lands. We had spent over an entire day in that subterranean maze, taking turns sleeping and combating everything from a giant spider to the animated remains of ratmen. Blood and sweat we had poured into the dungeon by the gallons, and now it were time for us to reap the rewards."

Glorirrin Bitterfury, dwarven warpriest, glances slowly around the room to make sure that everyone is listening as his tale nears the climax. The dwarf takes a swig of his drink, clears his throat, and returns to his story.

"In the treasure chamber, yes, but we knew not what terrible monster our actions had awakened. As many of us were gathering up what gemstones and coins as we could manage to fit into our packs, Olnir was enraptured by a wooden chest as big as he. Our thief were about to shout a cry of warning when the barbarian Olnir struck with his hammer, forcing the chest open."

Bitterfury's eyes go dark and his body slumps as he pauses.

"In an instant, that curved blade sliced through Olnir's skull, instantly killing the man. Whatever was in that chest was now loose, and I alone escaped as those around me were murdered with no chance of defense. And ever since that night, I swear something has been following me."

True. Bitterfury and his party disturbed the rest of a mummy, an ancient undead that would have been best left to its slumber. The monster is tracking the dwarf, yes, and if the party is in the same inn as the dwarf this night, they hear sounds of a struggle late at night. The mummy has finally caught up with the dwarf, and now the beast means to complete its revenge on those who dared to rob from its burial chamber.

False. It all happened as Bitterfury claims, except that it wasn't a creature that killed his friends. An animated sword was trapped in the chest, and it exists for one reason: To kill those who rob the chamber. Once the dwarf dies, the sword will lose its magic and fall to the ground, once again lifeless.



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USING THE RUMORS

The dozen rumors detailed on the following pages are first and foremost meant to get your imagination running. As the gamemaster, you're constantly under pressure to devise scenes and stories and to keep the action flowing, always entertaining the players and as much a playwright as you are a movie director.

Atmosphere. The rumor isn't intended to do anything more than add some depth to the campaign setting. You never intend for the players to act on the rumor; it is merely being used to make the campaign feel like there's more going on outside of the player characters' sphere of influence.

Breadcrumbs. Perhaps you're building to something, an encounter against a rival or a larger in-world event

that will shake the player characters and the NPCs. When used in this way, the rumors are leading to an adventure of your own design that, in some way or other, incorporates the rumors in such a way that the players get the feeling you've mapped things out in advance.

Adventure Seed. If you're feeling especially inspired and creative, you can select any rumor and expand it out into a full adventure. In the sample rumor, above, the party is promised an epic battle if they set out to engage the ogres, trolls, and orcs that are approaching the city. Expanding this rumor into an adventure will require you to map the surrounding area, provide statistics for the monsters, and perhaps toss in a few allies – other adventurers, city guards, thrillseekers – who join the party in seeking out and attacking the army.

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a MONSTROSITY WAITS

"It was unlike anything I've seen before, and I can assure you that I've seen a lot in my years as an explorer. Teeth and arms and legs and . . . I honestly cannot describe the beast clearly because it was dark and the only light came from our torches. Regardless of what it was, I know that I don't want to ever again meet such a monstrosity."

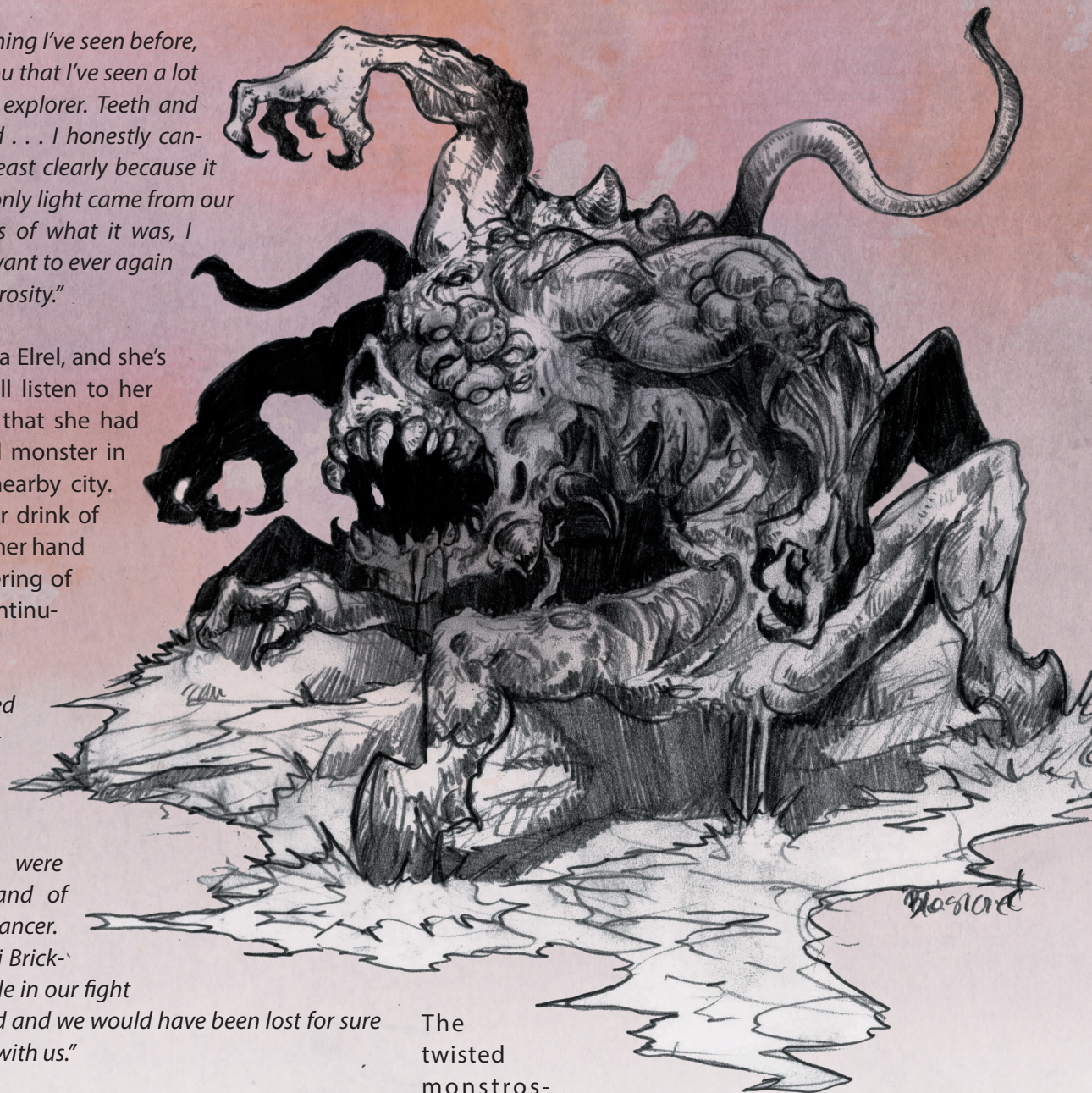
Her name is Enania Elrel, and she's telling all who will listen to her of the encounter that she had with an unnatural monster in the sewers of a nearby city. Elrel takes another drink of her ale and raises her hand to stop the chattering of others before continuing her story.

"We had defeated a handful of undead by the time we encountered the thing, mostly skeletons who were under the command of a human necromancer. Our cleric, Yonmuri Brickrock, was invaluable in our fight against the undead and we would have been lost for sure if he had not been with us."

Elrel tells how she and her companions were going to engage the beast when Brickrock yelled for them to flee. She says that the dwarven cleric identified the beast as undead, but he knew not what it was and would only say that it were a terrible, powerful creature and that his magic could not stop the monster.

"We ran, yes, and I'd run again if I had to do it again."

True. The necromantic abomination that the elf and her companions encountered was stitched together and brought to life by an evil wizard.



The twisted monstrosity is a flesh golem of sorts, created from the remains of many men, women, and monsters and activated through necromancy. The creature wanders the sewers of the nearby city and is guarding its creator's secret laboratory.

False. Elrel and her party met something, but it was nothing more than a half-eaten zombie that was crawling in the sewers. The light was playing tricks on them, and Brickrock became frightened and ran, encouraging his friends to flee. Regardless of what the PCs may find, Elrel will not back down from her story.

THE UNDEAD STALKER

"Every step that I took, no matter how fast I walked, that thing was right behind me. For hours that night, as I walked the woods and moved steadily toward home, it was there behind me and matching my every step. I swear that as the night wore on, the thing's pace quickened as my own slowed thanks to the onset of exhaustion. If not for those first rays of the dawn sun, I don't know if I would be here today."

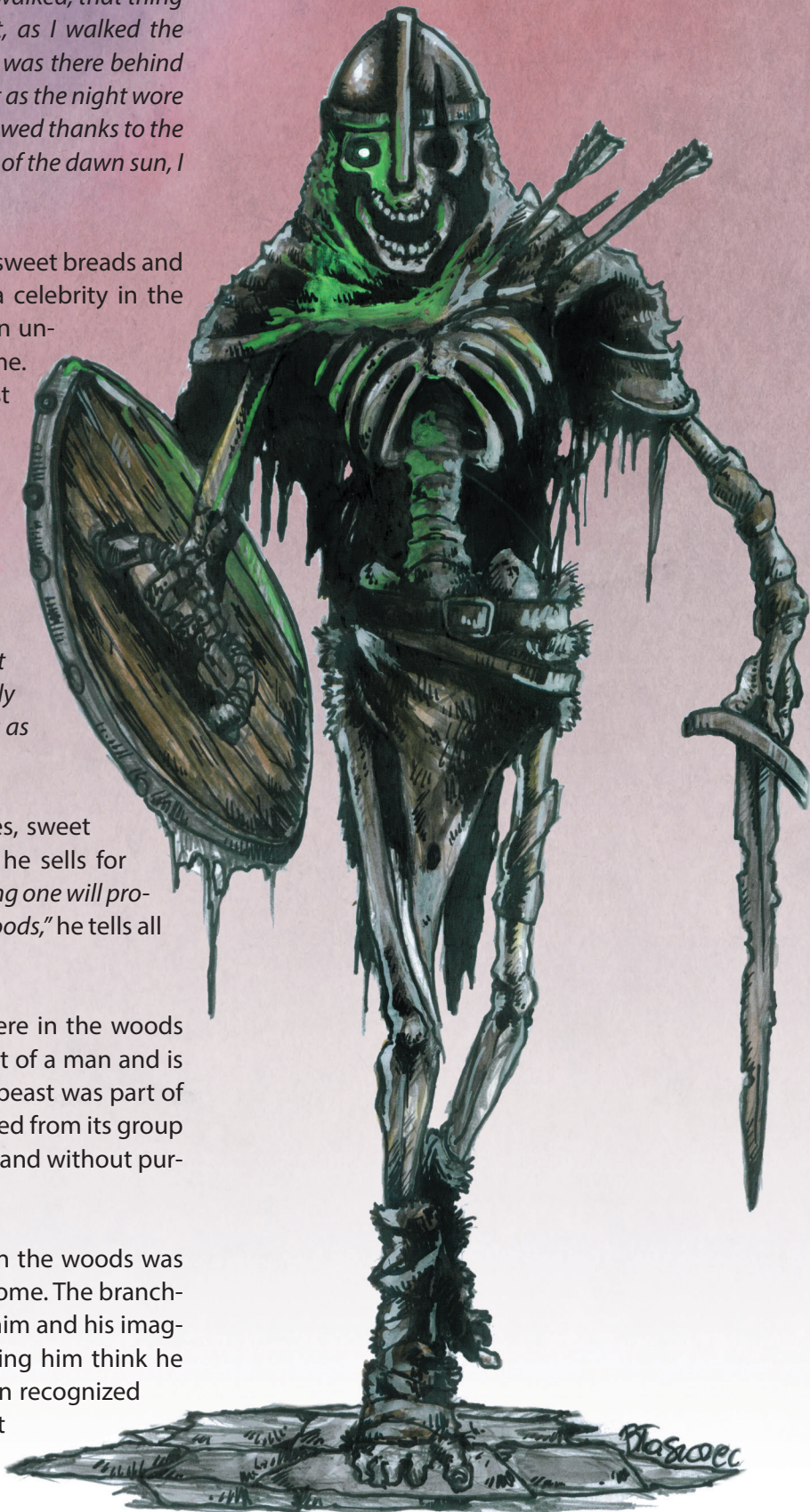
Cornelius Mapilton, a baker known for his sweet breads and fine cookies, has become something of a celebrity in the town as the story of his encounter with an undead creature spreads from home to home. It has been three weeks since Mapilton first told the tale, and those who have heard it many times claim that the tale grows taller with each telling.

"The thing was a skeleton, of that there can be no doubt, but it was nothing like the skeletal warriors told of by the bards and the dungeoneers. This one was tall – at least eight feet – and its eyes glowed a deathly green that illuminated everything around us as it chased me through the wood."

Mapilton has taken to selling skull cookies, sweet treats in the crude shape of a skull that he sells for twice the price of his regular cookies. *"Eating one will protect you for one day from that thing in the woods,"* he tells all of his customers.

True. There is a skeletal warrior somewhere in the woods near the town, though it is only the height of a man and is in no way special or strange. The undead beast was part of a larger force of skeletons and was separated from its group a month ago. It is now wandering, aimless and without purpose in the woods.

False. The only thing that Mapilton saw in the woods was an opportunity one night while walking home. The branches of a tree under the moonlight startled him and his imagination ran wild for a few moments, making him think he had encountered an evil skeleton. He soon recognized the "skeleton" for what it was – a tree – but he also knew that a good story could help him to earn some extra gold.



a SOULHUNTER IS IN THE CITY SHADOWS

"We're searching everyone, not just you and your friends."

One night while in a city, the adventurers are stopped by the town watch who insist on checking the party over and searching their belongings. The guards are obeying the orders of their watch captain.

"A soulhunter is what they're calling it," one of the guards says as he and his companions search the PCs' packs. "Some sort of undead that can disguise itself as human and is reportedly loose here in the city."

If the guards find illegal or questionable items, they turn a blind eye. *"Don't be caught with this again," the watchman tells them. "And keep an eye open for the monster. If you spot it, alert the nearest guards. Of course, ones such as you will probably ignore that instruction and instead try to claim the bounty on the beast. Just be careful."*

True. A soulhunter is an undead creature more powerful than the skeletons and zombies the party is used to dealing with. The monster seeks to capture the souls of the living, draining humanoid, intelligent beings of their life energy by biting down on the skull and sucking out the blood and life of the victim. The monster is a master of disguise and can pass itself off as human in bad light and at a distance.

False. There is no monster. The guards are using the story to look for a shapeshifter said to have stolen a jeweled crown that its owner would very much like returned. If the PCs visit a local tavern, they soon hear of the stolen crown and that the owner is offering 200 gold for its return. No questions asked.

"Some undead even have the ability to transform their fallen opponents into similarly twisted mockeries of life—the ultimate penalty for failure."

*— Andy Collins and
Bruce R. Cordell,
Libris Mortis*



TALE OF THE MUMMY

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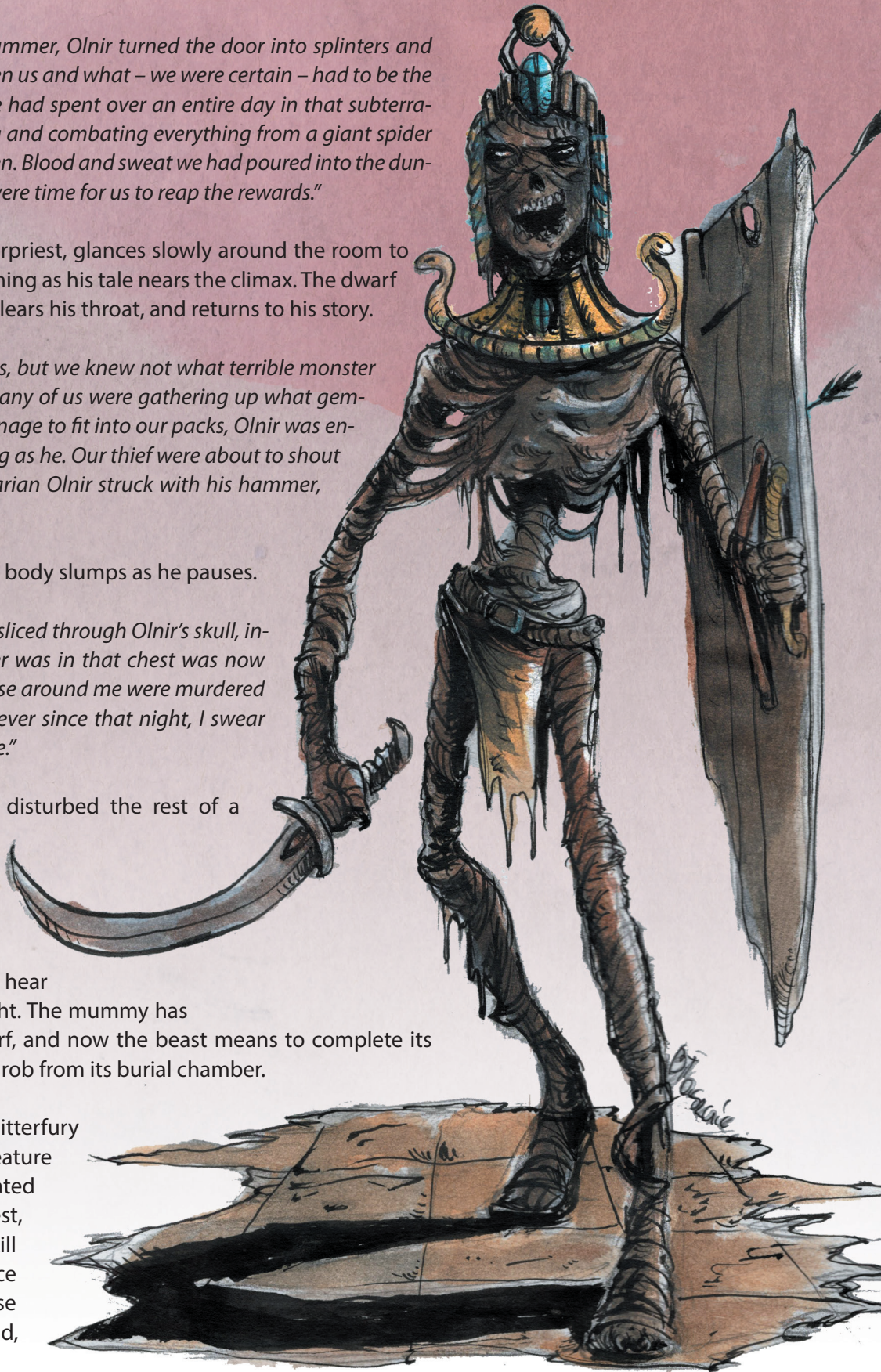
"It were the treasure chamber, yes, but we knew not what terrible monster our actions had awakened. As many of us were gathering up what gemstones and coins as we could manage to fit into our packs, Olnir was enraptured by a wooden chest as big as he. Our thief were about to shout a cry of warning when the barbarian Olnir struck with his hammer, forcing the chest open."

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False. It all happened as Bitterfury claims, except that it wasn't a creature that killed his friends. An animated sword was trapped in the chest, and it exists for one reason: to kill those who rob the chamber. Once the dwarf dies, the sword will lose its magic and fall to the ground, once again lifeless.



a CORPSEKNIGHT

"We were three torches into the dungeon and nearing stairs when a shuffling sound ahead froze us in our tracks. Each one of us, even our fearless elven cavalier, Elas Arabella, took a step back when the armored thing stepped from the shadows and into the light of our torches. It stood tall, taller than even many elves, though it was far too thin to be anything living. The clank of metal against stone as it approached us became a ringing, haunting sound that I'll remember until I'm deep in the grave."

Gilbert Defries, thief and scoundrel known well to the owners of the tavern, is hunched over a thick stew and spooning it into his open mouth, talking around bites of his dinner. If the PCs ask others in the tavern, everyone identifies Defries as a liar and conman, but they also say that this is the first time that they've ever heard the man tell a tale without changing it.

"I remember it as if it were this morning," Defries says, *"even if it has now been two weeks since we encountered the monster. I'm having difficulty sleeping; I can see it every time I close my eyes, and I still hear the clang of its walk if I try to close my eyes and relax."*

Defries will trade the location of the dungeon that he and his companions were in for a few gold coins and, if pressed, will tell how he and the others ran and were unwilling to face what he is calling an undead soul as wicked as the vilest of liches.

True. Gilbert Defries and his companions did meet a vile undead beast in a nearby dungeon, a corpseknight. An armored, powerful skeletal warrior, the corpseknight is the equal of a dozen skeletons and possesses the magical power to cast low-level, offensive spells (usually flame-based attack spells, though some may also cast protective magics). A corpseknight is created when an evil knight has an unfulfilled promise to a necromancer. The bond and power of the promise instills the corpse with dark energy that rises the beast to its feet. A corpseknight will continue to stand again, even if defeated in battle, until either the promise is fulfilled or the necromancer is dead.

False. This is simply another one of Defries' many scams; there was no monster and there is no dungeon. He is trying to trick others into giving him gold for a worthless map that he found a few weeks ago.



THE GUARDIAN OF TOMBS

"It weren't undead, but that didn't mean it were a friend of the living. We were six layers below the surface, doing all we could to scoop up only the richest of the treasures, when we came face to face with one who called hisself only 'guardian of the tombs' and demanded that we pay for his protection."

Swallowing the last of his drink, Grakrel Bottlestone, dwarven warrior and as grumpy as they come, slams the mug onto the table and demands another drink from the server. If the six empty mugs on the table are any indication, Bottlestone and his two dwarven companions have already each had a few drinks.

"Now if ye know dwarves, ye know we're not the sort to hand over our gold to anyone, not even a strange man who promised to protect us. So we did what any sensible dungeoneer would've done; we attacked."

Bottlestone turns to his drinking companions and then back to the PCs. He motions with his new mug of ale at one of the dwarves and says, *"See that black flesh around his eyes? That's where the thing grabbed him by the face and set him afire. We tried to fight, but we had no choice but run."*

True. The dwarves met some evil in the dungeon, and they're happy to tell others exactly where to find the danger. The guardian is a powerful necromancer who is harvesting corpses from the lowest level of the dungeon, and he will not allow anyone to stop his work.

False. The dwarves got into an argument and fought each other. So stubborn are they, though, that they refuse to tell the truth to anyone.

"Of course we fought the man. Ye think we be cowards unwilling to go to war? We fought as hard as we could, but we were forced to flee and here we are now, resting before going back."



HELP FROM THE GUIDE

"Many gory tavern tales about liches and vampires and armies of shuffling zombies chill farmers and merchants alike late at night around dying hearth fires."

– Ed Greenwood, **Lords of Darkness**

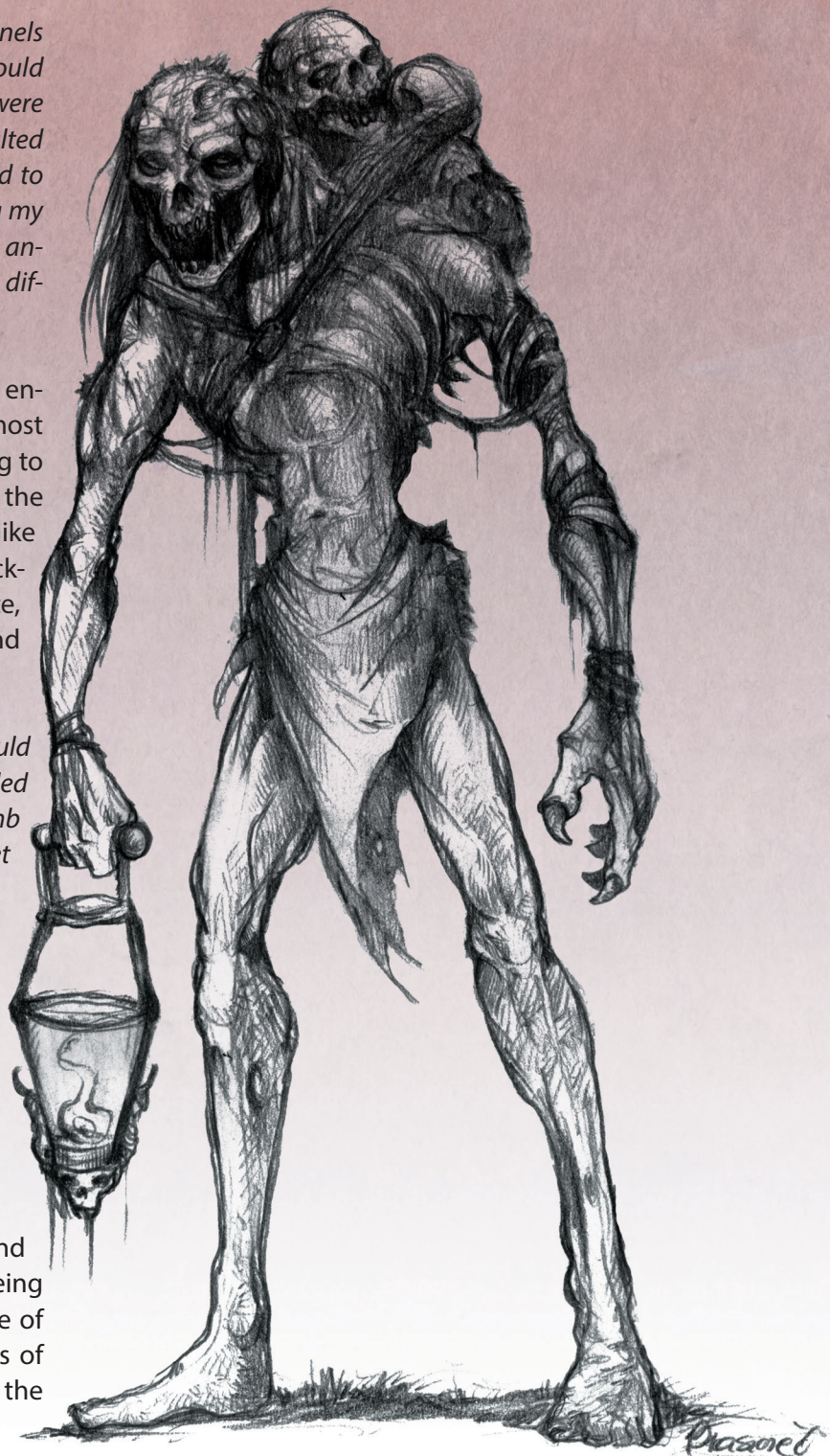
"For six hours, I was lost in that maze of tunnels and corridors and was starting to fear that I would never again see the light of the sun. My friends were defeated, devoured by the ghouls that assaulted us, and it was either luck or misfortune that led to my escape from the flesh-eaters. As I was losing my strength and will to live, I soon stumbled across another monstrosity . . . but there was something different about this one."

The cleric Raimis Zarin is still shaken from his encounter with the undead guide, he himself almost unable to believe that the creature was willing to help him to escape the catacombs beneath the city. Zarin tells of how the beast, a zombie-like undead that carried a spectral lantern, beckoned that he follow. Exhausted and desperate, the cleric eventually followed the creature and hoped for the best.

"After what felt like another six hours, but could have not been more than six minutes, the thing led me to a stairway and motioned for me to climb upward, where I soon found myself on the street and safe from whatever evil lives in the sewers."

True. Not all undead are evil, as Zarin learned when the undead guide helped him to escape from the sewers. The creature was once a man and now roams the tunnels, using its magic lantern and what few memories remain from its life to rescue those unfortunate enough to become lost in the sewers.

False. Zarin dreamed the event, his body and mind so overwhelmed by the disaster of seeing his companions eaten that it created this tale of a guide to protect the man from the horrors of the incident. Any going to locate the guide in the sewers will only find rats, ghouls, and death.



an army of skeletons in the nearby woods

"There were hundreds of them, as far as I could see. All sizes and shapes I tells ya! I'm serious. Never in me life have I seen so many at once, not even when the king's army passed through last summer and not when the carnival was here a few months ago. I've seen bigs groups of men before, lots of times, but I've never seen an army as big as that in the woods."

The boy, no more than ten, is talking fast and is clearly very excited after whatever he saw that led him to this moment. Standing in a busy street of the town, the boy is almost shouting his story at any who will stop and listen to him speak.

"They weren't at all like the king's army. These were thin and ragged, almost as if they weren't men at all."

Those nearest to the boy press him for information, demanding that he tell them everything he saw in the woods only an hour or so ago.

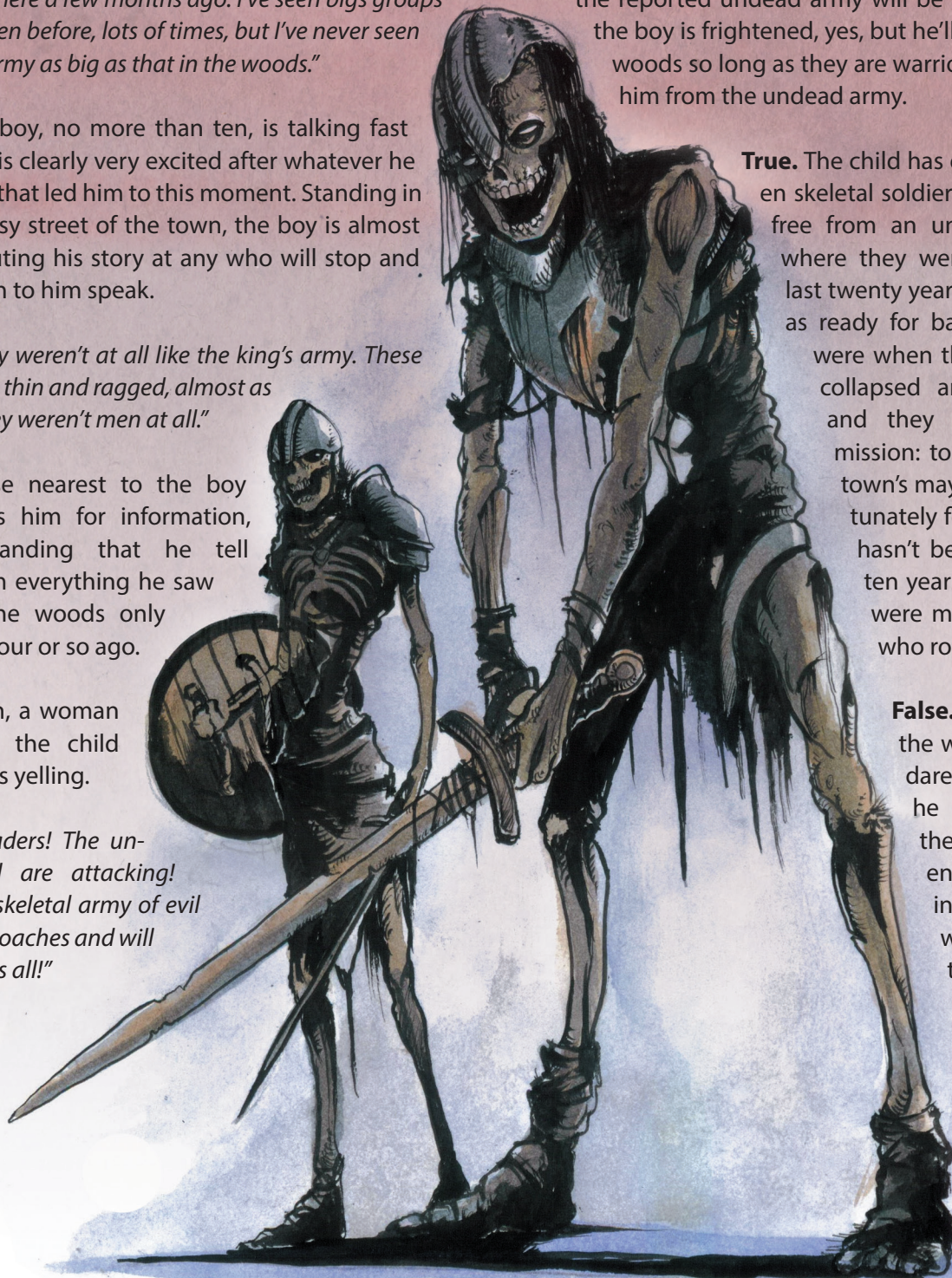
Soon, a woman near the child starts yelling.

"Invaders! The undead are attacking! The skeletal army of evil approaches and will kill us all!"

If others push in to question the boy, he is now describing what he saw as an army of skeletons. Hundreds of them. Every one armed and armored and ready for battle. Any who ask the boy to take them to where he saw the reported undead army will be instantly rewarded: the boy is frightened, yes, but he'll lead them into the woods so long as they are warriors who will protect him from the undead army.

True. The child has encountered a dozen skeletal soldiers who have broken free from an underground cavern where they were trapped for the last twenty years. The skeletons are as ready for battle today as they were when the cavern entrance collapsed and trapped them, and they continue in their mission: to kill the son of the town's mayor, Nabo Eil. Unfortunately for the skeletons, Eil hasn't been mayor for over ten years; he and his family were murdered by thieves who robbed the family.

False. There is nothing in the woods. The boy was dared by his friends and he is going to show them that he is brave enough to lie to all in the town. As they walk into the woods, the boy tries to slip free and escape. If caught, he breaks down crying and admits to the lie.



THE SCOUT

"Turn back now, while there is still time to save yourselves."

On a major road between cities, many miles from the nearest village or town, the party comes across signs of a struggle. Seven men are dead – merchants and their guards from the looks of things – and one man is dying, too weak to do more than beg that the PCs flee. A broken wagon, scattered chests and sacks (all empty of any valuables), and the remains of the dead suggest that something terrible has happened.

"It were undead," the dying man tells them. If the PCs use healing spells or potions to save the man, he regains enough energy to sit upright and thank them for their assistance. Looking about the ruins of his party, the man tells them that his name is Biorn Lambisson and that he and the others were attacked by a solitary skeleton on horseback.

"It came up out of nowhere, cackling madly, those teeth chattering so loud that we could hear it for moments before it attacked. We got in a few hits, but we were no match for the beast and the last I saw of it, the thing were headed north."

True. Biorn and the others were unfortunate enough to encounter a skeletal scout, a creature that is searching the road and nearby forest for treasures. If it finds a large enough hoard of goods, the scout will return to its master and report on what it has discovered. In its travels, the scout has taken to slaughtering others at every chance it can get.

False. Biorn is lying to the party. He was a highwayman, a thug who – along with others – assaulted these merchants and murdered them. Biorn was wounded and left to die; his "friends" are out there somewhere.



SIGNS OF AN EVIL CADAVER GOLEM

"Yagath be damned! I'll not go into those alleys at night until whatever is out there has been slaughtered and strung high where we can all see its guts pouring from its inhuman belly."

The cutpurse Nelis Kats, one of the thief Yagath's minions who rob and steal from others to support their lifestyle, has been hiding in the Grave Tough tavern for six days now, refusing to set foot outside after what he saw in the dark of the alley.

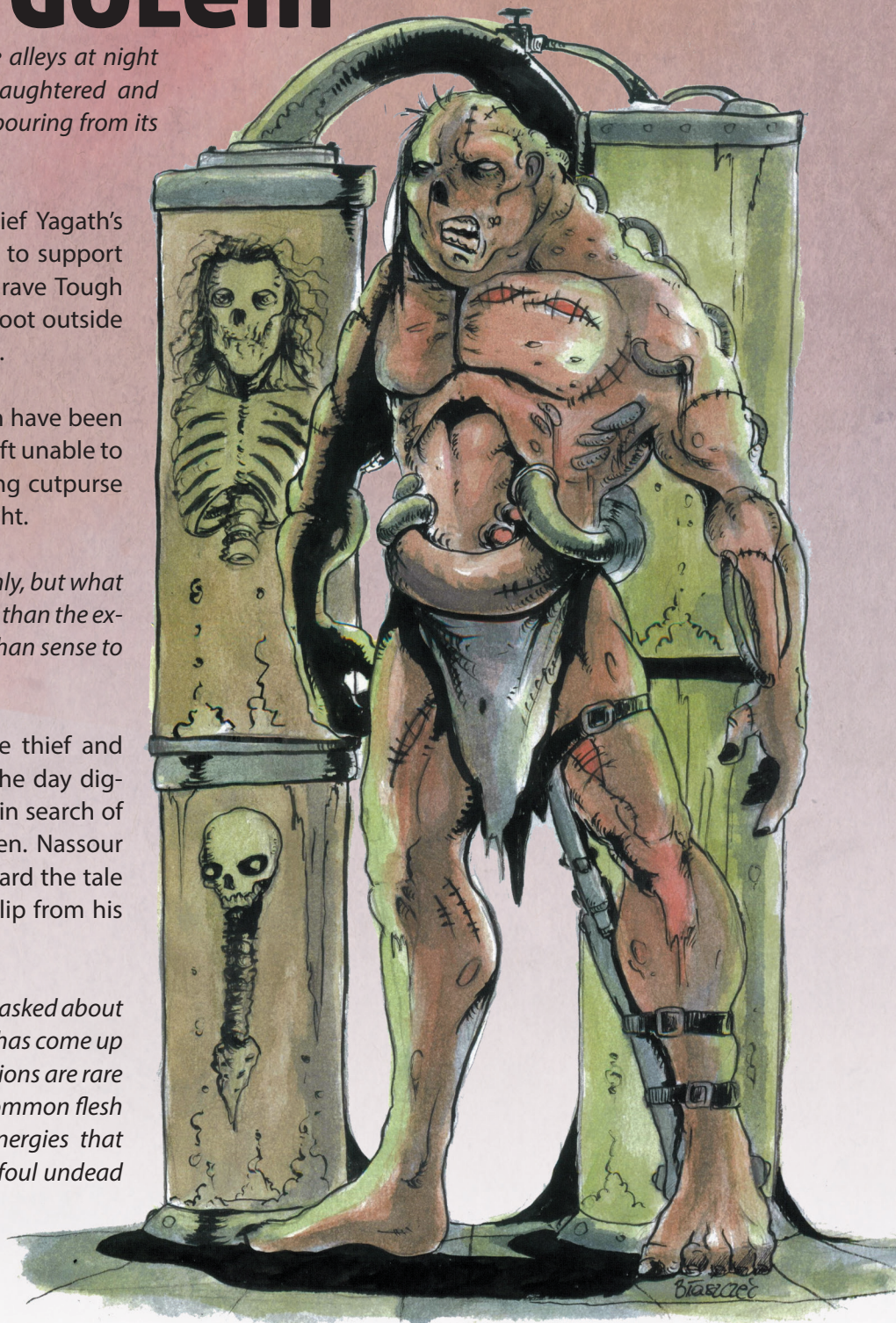
Friends of the thief and agents of Yagath have been to visit Kats in the tavern, and each has left unable to explain what could have made the young cutpurse so very afraid to go back out into the night.

"I've heard tales of the flesh golems, certainly, but what was out there was something far, far worse than the experiment of a wizard who has more time than sense to let well enough alone."

Scholar Ramin Nassour, sitting near the thief and listening closely to the tale, has spent the day digging into the dusty tomes of the library in search of information on what Kats may have seen. Nassour is no friend of the thief, but when he heard the tale a couple of days ago he couldn't let it slip from his mind and is eager to learn the truth.

"As best I can determine," the scholar says if asked about his opinion on the matter," is that the thief has come up against a cadaver golem. The arcane creations are rare and powerful, a larger form of the more common flesh golem and instilled with necromantic energies that make it equal parts mystic construct and foul undead monster."

True. There is a cadaver golem loose in the city and it is seeking the ring of its creator. The wizard Juvan, dead for two weeks, created the golem and commanded it through the power of a magic ring. The beast knows that destroying the ring will allow it to die, and it wishes for nothing more than to die and to escape this world.



False. There is an evil wandering the city alleys in the dark of night, yes, but it is not an undead beast. One of the servants of Yagath is a hulking brute of a man and has been mistaken for a monster many times before.

a CORPSEHOUND LOOSE IN THE TOWER OF GHOULS

"I didn't see it, but I heard from Murderous Raven that the tower is now home to much worse than the rats and spiders that have inhabited it these last few years. Ever since it were cleared of the ghouls and other nasty creatures that once called it home, the tower has been empty . . . but the word is it is again occupied by evil."

Kel Snowaxe* isn't one to go out on adventures, but he is always hungry for another story and willing to spend his coin for the best of tales. The noble merchantman is always keeping an ear open for the latest tale of danger and destruction, and he passes on the stories – regardless of it they are true or not – to any who will listen. He has zeroed in on the PCs in an attempt to impress them with his knowledge of a monster in a nearby tower.

"You say you've never heard of the Tower of Ghouls? Then it pleases me to tell you of this once-cursed tower that, it now appears, is again haunted by evil."

Snowaxe tells of how a small tower of no more than five floors, three of which are above ground, was cleared of evil ghouls by brave adventurers over a decade ago. The tower has since been empty and unused, the tales too scary for any to take up residence in the place.

"Until now," Snowaxe says. "It seems that an undead hound has found its way into the tower and even as we speak it may be turning the larger rats that live in the tower into unliving monsters. Someone must stop it."

True. It is true that a corpsehound – a form of flesh golem created by an evil wizard – is in the tower. It is seeking a spellbook that its master wishes to own.

False. Bored, Snowaxe has fabricated the story and hopes to sneak after and watch any who try to locate and kill the "monster." If caught, he admits to his lies and begs for forgiveness.

* See *A Dozen Dreadful Rumors*.



a SCREAMING SOULKNIFE

"Ye've not heard the soulknife screams? Buy this old man a drink, gang, and I'll tell ya o' the most wickedest undead stalker to haunt the streets late into the night. Just don't blame me when ye tough adventurers are too afraid to walk the streets late at night."

He introduces himself to the player characters as Penkov Bachev and says that he has lived in the city for all of his seventy years. *"I were a dock worker in me youth,"* Bachev tells them, *"and that were where I first learned o' the monster."*

Bachev describes the unknown undead monster as a corpse-like beast that walks on its legs and carries a curved dagger at all times. *"It sometimes be carrying a lantern,"* the old man says, *"though why I've no idea since it can see as easily in the darkest night as I could under the midday sun when I were as young as you lot."*

The man says that the monster is in search of blood for its sustenance and that it lives off of the life energy of the living. How such a dark and terrible monster has gone for so many years unstopped is a mystery to Bachev. *"All them guards be too feared to walk the streets at night to put an end to its wanderings,"* he says with a shrug. If pressed, Bachev says that the last he heard, the thing was still walking the streets and alleys of the dock district.

True. The thing has been loose on the streets for over thirty years now, but it is no monster. The son of a nobleman started dressing up as the monster many years ago, and to this day he wanders the streets at night scaring others. He only lives because of his father's great wealth and influence.

False. Bachev has been telling the same story to those who pass through the city for years now, never wavering from his tale and insisting that it is all true. It is likely that he no longer remembers that he first heard the story from a traveling bard who sat up late into the night spinning ghost stories for the man and his friends. And now, in his old age, his memory is going and what was once nothing more than a story to scare children has become a type of truth in his mind.

"They says it were once a man, but I know the truth. The soulknife were never no man. This evil monstrosity comes from the soullight demiplane and it is not to be crossed."

