



GENIUS ADVENTURES

To Room 5

THE BLACK SKULL LAUGHS



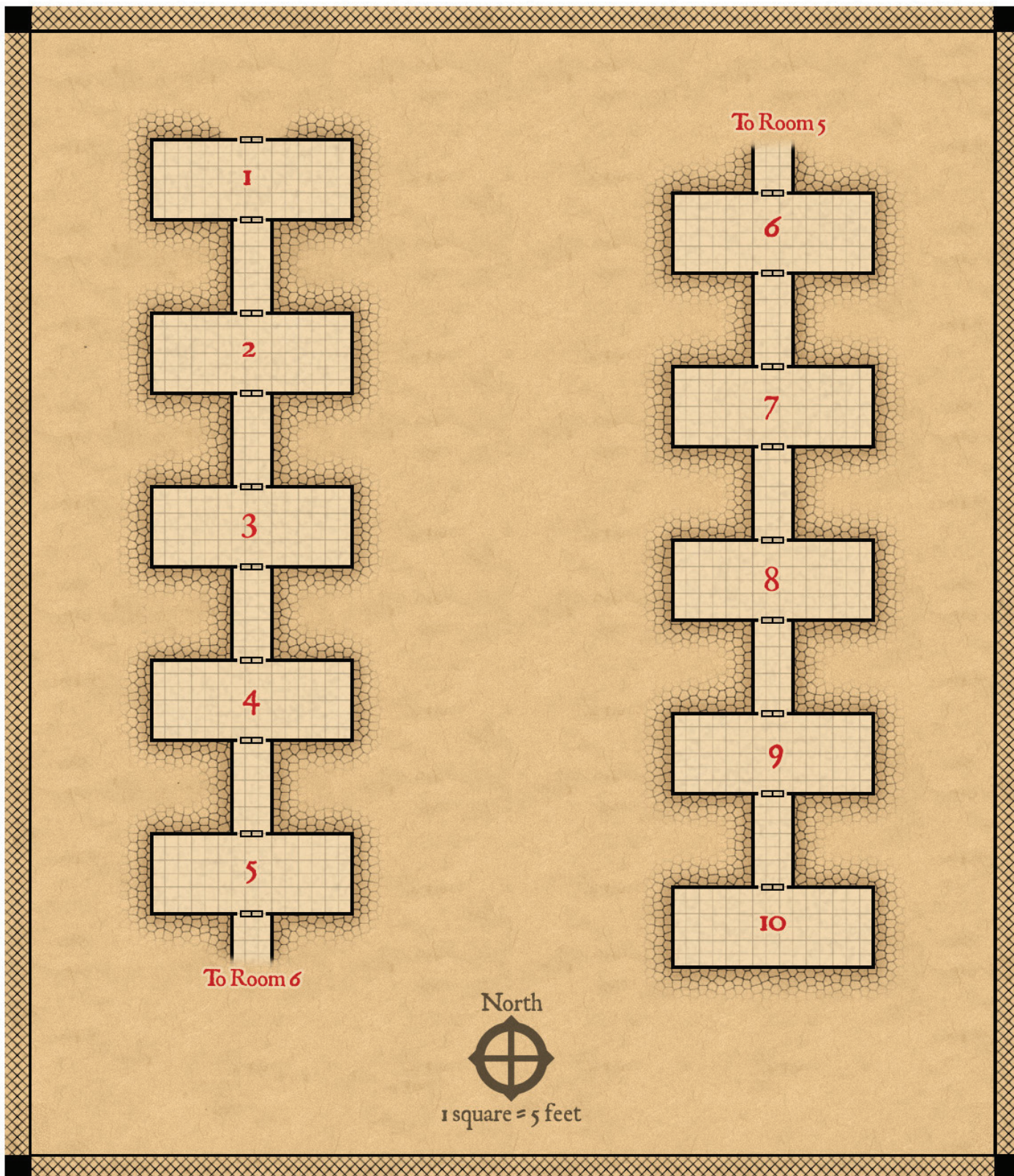
To Room 6



North

Ed Greenwood

CRYPT OF THE BLACK SKULL



THE BLACK SKULL LAUGHS

*An adventure for 4-6 characters of 7th-9th level
by Ed Greenwood*

FORWARD

You might notice that the map to the Black Skull Laughs is a little... plain. Simple even. Don't get me wrong, I LOVE funky dungeons with irregular-shaped rooms, little connecting stairs that descend and curve, linking secret passages, etc. It's just that I wanted to do two things for this adventure: 1) provide a realistic dwarven-made minor waystop warehouse (which, let's face it, would be very simple and utilitarian in layout), and 2) show that even a boring predictable layout could yield adventure fun, properly dressed. I hope you agree!

-Ed Greenwood

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

The High Lord of Endreth is distraught. His crown is gone, seized while he slept by "scores of marching skeletons" who overwhelmed the few guards of tiny Endreth Keep, took the High Lord's crown, and marched down Endreth Vale to the crypt of the Black Skull, an ancient dwarven goods-hold used for centuries to inter the noble dead of Endreth. The crypt is haunted, crawling with undead and fell magic, and local legends say it is ruled by the Black Skull—the undead remains of evil Lord Blackskell, who founded Endreth six centuries ago.

High Lord Berlus Thoreraun is frantic to get his crown back. Persistent local rumors have whispered that the crown—a distinctive plain steel circlet with a single dagger-blade "glory spike" above the wearer's forehead—keeps its wearers alive beyond their due span of years, if no steel or magic slays them. Since the crown was seized four nights ago, the tall and hale Thoreraun has become bent, wrinkled, and frail. His hair falls out in great tufts. He has offered his own weight in rubies to anyone who returns the crown to him, intact. The Endreth riches are scattered in the keeping of local holy men, who attest that there are rubies enough to make good the High Lord's promise.

The crypt of the Black Skull is hollowed out of a grassy hill (actually solid rock under a light drift of soil). It is centuries old, and its existence is widely known. Dwarves built it as a secure storehouse when trading was profitable, then slowly converted it to a mausoleum as the trade routes died out.

THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE CRYPT

Generations ago, a magic-wielding outlaw named Rován took over the crypt to use as a hideout for his bandit gang. The exact time frame can be adjusted to fit the campaign; the oldest humans around probably remember these events from when they were children (but old people tell wild stories). The bandits are thought to have looted most of the dwarves' buried wealth and rigged the place with magical defenses for their own protection.

But something happened to Rován and his bandits. No one knows what, but it was sudden; they retreated to their lair after a raid and never came back out.

Rován disturbed something the dwarves had entombed in the farthest chamber. It was one of their own most powerful warrior-wizards, a dwarf named Blackskell, who had sought the ultimate power of lichdom. The dwarves killed him before he could finish his vile rite of transformation and sealed him into the last chamber of what was then still a storehouse. But the dwarf had completed more of the rite than his executioners knew. Negative energy was flowing to him—a mere trickle, barely any at all—but it was enough to bring about undeath.

After walling Blackskell into the last chamber, the trade routes went into decline and profits fell off. The dwarves whispered that it was Blackskell's curse. "Blackskell" gradually morphed into "Black Skull," and as the need for a trade warehouse waned, the dwarves converted more and more of the chambers into mausoleums. Eventually, they moved their operation to a different area entirely. The noble human families of Endreth then used the front chamber as a mausoleum for many years, until Rován moved into the area.

These events happened so long ago and the result was so psychically devastating that the warrior once called Blackskell now knows itself only as the Black Skull. When Rován opened the last chamber, the Black Skull was set loose. It killed the bandits, performed experiments and rites upon their corpses, raised many of the dwarves and other creatures interred in the tombs, and modified the crypt to its own liking. Finally, after decades of mad contemplation, it dispatched skeletons to seize High Lord Thoreraun's crown, in the belief that the crown was the only missing piece of its ambition.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED LOCALLY

The layout of the crypt is well known from local nursery rhymes and legends, so characters can get a rough description of the floorplan ("ten rooms, one behind another, connected by thirty-foot corridors") from almost anyone in Endreth with a DC 10 Diplomacy check. Locals are quick to point out that no one with any sense goes near the place.

A second, DC 15 Diplomacy check finds one of those people without much sense who has gone near the crypt in the last year or knows someone who has. They describe the tall, black, iron "gates" of the crypt (huge, solid doors made of many layers of iron plates and straps bolted together and well-oiled to keep rust at bay) as now standing ajar, bent and twisted by some terrific force that erupted from within. They attest that nothing lives there, even though it's the perfect sort of dark, dreary place where one expects to find bats and coyotes. Those bold few who ventured within a few yards of the entrance describe scraping sounds, like bone dragging on stone, and report seeing "eerie, flying things, and worse."

Wild tales and ghost stories can be thrown into the local rumor mix, too, to keep characters on their toes.

The locals' physical descriptions are correct. The crypt consists of ten identical chambers, each 30 feet from front to back and 70 feet side-to-side, with 15-foot ceilings. The rooms are joined by identical, straight, 10-foot-wide, 30-foot-long corridors that extend from the center of one chamber's back wall to the center of the next chamber's front wall.

THE SAFE ROUTE

A DC 20 Knowledge (History) or Knowledge (Local) check turns up a villager or local herder with one more very useful piece of information. During the time when the bandit Rován held the crypt, he protected it with deadly, magical traps. He also engineered a safe path through the traps so he and his bandits could get in and out quickly. The safe route involved following a specific path through the chambers. Legend says that the path hugged the walls in some sort of pattern, but no one knows for sure—assuming it ever really existed at all and wasn't just another wild rumor.

CONDITIONS IN THE CRYPT

No living thing larger than a mouse has moved in the crypts for a long time. Everything is covered in thick dust. There is no light except what the characters bring with them. The front chambers are nicely finished with smoothed walls and stone-tiled floors. The construction becomes gradually less polished as one moves deeper into the crypts. The walls change to brick, then to rough-cut stone. The floors become uneven flagstones, then crushed gravel, then chiseled stone. Many of the walls had niches carved into them where bodies or coffins were placed, but most of the niches are now empty.

THE BLACK CURTAINS

A black curtain hangs across the rear entrance from every chamber, closing it off from ceiling to floor. These curtains radiate *silence* (aura faint illusion) and *darkness* (aura faint evocation) from the back (corridor) side, so it blocks both light and sound from deeper in the crypt. They are magically bonded to the ceiling so they can't be torn loose. A curtain can be sliced from the ceiling or burned, but either action destroys its magic. Of course, the curtain can just be pushed aside when someone walks through, and allowed to fall back into place afterward. Their sole purpose is to cut off sound and vision between chambers.

Characters hear a faint, sad moaning sound when they touch a curtain. With a DC 25 Perception check, they can identify that the moan is coming from the curtain itself; otherwise, the sound's origin is impossible to locate.

THE SAFE ROUTE

Rumors about a safe route past the crypt's traps are true, although the Black Skull has changed some of the particulars. The safe route passes through the first nine chambers of the crypt; by following it, anyone can traverse the chambers without activating most of their defenses. In general, characters are safe only if they stay on the path the entire time they're in a chamber; if they leave the path, then get back on it, they've lost its protection in that chamber. Exceptions are noted individually.

The safe path hugs either the right or left wall of a chamber, from entrance to exit. It is always 10 feet wide. The 30-foot-long corridors between chambers are completely safe (with one exception, the final corridor). Unless noted otherwise, creatures from the crypt will not pursue characters who leave a chamber, headed either toward the exit or deeper into the tomb.

The Black Skull placed clues marking which directions are safe, but the clues are subtle and subject to misinterpretation. Understanding the paths is of enormous help to the characters, so it's best if players figure out the clues on their own rather than receiving the information on the basis of a simple skill check. They'll be more likely to pay attention to possible clues if they heard in town that such a path might exist.

The safe path is as follows:

- Chamber 1: Right
- Chamber 2: Left
- Chamber 3: Left
- Chamber 4: Right
- Chamber 5: Left
- Chamber 6: Right
- Chamber 7: Right
- Chamber 8: Left
- Chamber 9: Right

There is no safe path through chamber 10.

The great iron doors of the tomb must have stood twelve feet tall before something smashed through them. Now they yawn wide, bent and twisted, their bottom edges gouged into the earth and overgrown with vines. Between them is a dark, empty opening, ten feet wide and ten feet high.

THE CRYPT OF THE BLACK SKULL

I. ENTRANCE CHAMBER CRIO

(SAFE: RIGHT)

The first thing you see at the entrance to the chamber past the broken gates is a skull nailed to the floor with a long spike. The chamber beyond is about seventy feet wide and thirty feet deep, with 15-foot ceilings. It is crowded with at least three dozen rotten, wooden coffins, a few of which still sit in niches around the walls, but most have collapsed (or been dragged) into the room, where they lie in heaps of crumbling wood. They were forced open or splintered apart years ago. Yellowing bones can be seen within.

There are also four stone caskets, one in each corner of the room. The lids to these have been pushed off and lie askew or smashed on the floor.

A large stone sarcophagus floats in midair, about ten feet from the center of the back wall, and about ten feet up. This sarcophagus is closed and undamaged. A ten-foot-wide black curtain hangs on the wall behind it.

The most startling things in the room are the twelve human skulls that float in air and dart from one spot to another. They move forward and seem almost to gaze at you with their empty eye sockets before darting away again. A few of them always cluster about the floating sarcophagus.

The pinned dwarven skull at the entrance is looking toward the right; it is the first clue to the direction of the safe path.

FLYING SKULLS

The flying skulls (as hollow helm, except freeze and skull cage are replaced with collective belch, see below) are the remnants of skull swarms created by the outlaw, Rován, to keep folk away from the crypt when his outlaw band was using it to store their ill-gotten gains. As long as the floating sarcophagus is left alone, the skulls are only curious, not hostile. They dart behind the sarcophagus if attacked or if magic is unleashed in the chamber. If the sarcophagus is disturbed, the skulls attack.

COFFINS

The scattered coffins in the chamber held the faithful wives and mistresses of the many High Lords of Endreth. Every one has been plundered by adventurers and now contain only harmless black mold, cobwebs, the shriveled bodies of long-dead spiders, and the bones of the dead—minus their hands and heads.

STONE CASKETS

The same is true of the four stone caskets, however, lurking in each casket are two crawling hands (see below) that will scuttle and leap to attack the nearest living creatures, once their casket has been disturbed. The hands are also Rován's work.

FLOATING SARCOPHAGUS

So is the floating sarcophagus. It is empty except for four crawling hands. It is protected by an effect similar to *spell turning* (caster level 13th)—it reflects the first 10 spell levels to be cast at it.



If an unreflected spell affects the floating sarcophagus or anything physically touches it, the casket explodes, hurling stone chunks in all directions (see below).

The detonation also hurls the four crawling hands (which are immune to damage from the blast) into the room. Select their targets randomly and roll a melee attack for each. A hand always tries to grapple after a successful hit, and always strangles if it grapples.

Anyone who keeps to the safe path through this room will be ignored by the flying skulls and crawling hands. If they leave the path at any time, they are no longer protected. Keeping to the safe path involves climbing over a few heaps of broken coffins, but that by itself presents no danger.

The first coffin along the wall to the left of the entrance is alone among the wooden coffins in that it hasn't been dragged from its shelf or broken open. It contains an intact and harmless human skeleton that still has its head and hands. A *darkhood* is draped over the skull (see below). This coffin is ten feet off the safe path.

FLYING SKULLS (12)

CR8

XP 400 each

hp 9

SA Collective Belch: Ranged Touch +3, 1d6 electricity

CRAWLING HANDS (12)

CR6

XP 200 each

hp 9

STONE SARCOPHAGUS TRAP

CR8

XP 4,800

Type magic; Perception DC 25; Disable Device DC 20

EFFECTS

Trigger touch (or damage); Reset none

Effect explosion (4d8 bludgeoning damage, DC 19 Reflex save for half damage); multiple targets (all targets in chamber)

TREASURE

DARKHOOD

Aura moderate transmutation; CL 5th

Slot head; Price 27,000 gp; Weight 1 lb.

DESCRIPTION

This black head covering has no eyeholes, though two grim eyes are painted on its face, and the wearer has no difficulty seeing through the cloth. The hood gives the wearer darkvision to 60 feet (or if the wearer

already has darkvision, extends its range by 60 feet) and the benefits of the *death ward* spell once per day for 7 minutes. The *death ward* automatically affects the wearer the first time each day he is exposed to magical death effect, energy drain, negative energy effect, or channeled negative energy. The hood itself takes no damage from acid (though it offers its wearer no protection against acid attacks or effects).

CONSTRUCTION

Requirements Craft Wondrous Item, *darkvision*, *death ward*; **Cost** 13,500 gp

2. GUARDIAN CHAMBER CR9

(SAFE: LEFT)

Two lines of impassive, armored figures stretch right across this otherwise bare stone room; it's impossible to proceed without passing between them. All of these human figures stand silent and motionless in full plate armor, their faces concealed by helms with no visors, every limb and joint encased in overlapping, gleaming, blued metal. Their hands are at their sides, where swords and daggers hang in scabbards.

A mummified hand is nailed to the floor at the entrance. A black ring—possibly tarnished silver—circles the index finger.

The same sort of black curtain that you encountered in the Entrance Chamber hangs across the back of this chamber.

Something small and yellowish-white lies on the floor in the front right corner of the room.

The mummified hand points out the safe path toward the left. The hand is not “pointing” with its index finger; it is flat on the floor, palm up, with the fingers to the left. The ring is silver and so badly tarnished that it’s worth only 1 silver piece. The bones will fall apart if the hand is kicked or pried off the floor to get at the ring.

GUARDIANS

There are a total of 28 guardians standing in two rows of 14, at 5-foot intervals. The first row is 10 feet into the room, and the second is 10 feet behind the first.

The four suits closest to the left wall (on the safe path) are illusions. They flicker if someone walks through them but don’t dissipate unless swept away by magic.

Fourteen of the armored suits are guardian phantom armor. PCs who examine the armor closely can detect they are undead with a DC 26 Perception check.

If any undead suit is attacked, struck, or touched in any way (by characters, by other undead, or even by shrapnel or a kicked stone), that suit animates and attacks. Once one guardian is animated, each round thereafter, 1d10 (up to a total of 14 guardians) more suits animate and join the fight. They keep attacking until destroyed or until they have no more foes in this room. In which case, they return to their original positions.

Those who never step off the safe path in this chamber won’t be attacked by the guardians. They are fair game once they step off the path anywhere in this room, even if they get back on it immediately.

The paranoid wizard Rován hid a *wand of floating disk* inside one suit of guardian phantom armor. This phantom armor will never fall down, even if its legs are knocked out from under it, it’s knocked to pieces, or when it’s killed. The suit (or what’s left of it) just hangs in the air, and the wand can be removed intact.

The remaining ten suits of armor are just that: empty suits of armor. The joints are riveted together to keep the suits standing, but they could be made functional again with extensive repair, at the GM’s discretion.

GUARDIAN PHANTOM ARMOR (14) CR9

XP 600 each

hp 14

TREASURE

WAND OF FLOATING DISK

Aura moderate transmutation; **CL** 1st
Slot head; **Price** 1,600 gp; **Weight** 1 lb.

DESCRIPTION

This *wand of floating disk* has 26 charges and glows with a greenish aura, as if a *light* spell has been cast on it. When the last charge is used, the glow stops.

CONSTRUCTION

Requirements Craft Wondrous Item, *floating disk*, *light*; **Cost**: 800 gp

3. THE INNER GUARD CR8

(SAFE: LEFT)

This chamber is bare except for six intact, upright, Large inhuman skeletons arranged in two rows. The bones have aged to a yellowish brown. The creatures have long, curved claws like rusty scimitars; one of them is missing its left arm. Scraps of mismatched armor rust on their bones. The skeletons at the four corners of the formation wear four different crowns. A black curtain hangs at the center of the back wall.

What appears to be the arm from one of the skeletons is shackled to the floor in the entrance by two chains only a few links long.

Something small glints on the floor, off to the left.

The arm in the entrance points toward the left. It is chained to the floor by manacles at the wrist and shoulder in such a way that it can be lifted a few inches off the floor but can't be repositioned. Tendons still hold the bones together tightly.

COINS

The glint to the left of the entrance comes from a row of four gold coins. They stretch from the front portion of the safe path to the back, passing between the two skeletons on the left and the two in the center. They are too far from the safe path to simply be picked up by hand. That's their purpose; to lure the curious off the safe path, in case the skeletons and crowns don't do the trick.

CROWNS

None of the crowns resemble the *Crown of Endreth*. At the front left corner is a crown of two circlets, one atop the other, joined at the front and back by plain golden medallions in the shape of shields. At the front right is a crown of a single golden circlet with nine fanglike points projecting up, evenly spaced all around. At the back left corner is a tall crown that looks as if it's made from thin, gold-plated rods fused into a tapering cylinder and decorated with tiny

golden leaves and buds. At the right rear is a crown that resembles a golden, open-faced helm with three thornlike points sweeping up above each ear.

The first time someone touches a crown, they activate a magic mouth spell that speaks these words in a cracked, breathless voice:

"You show intelligence to have come this far. Consider my offer: take one crown, then leave, and none of you will die."

The voice is that of the Black Skull, though characters have no way of knowing this. The offer is genuine ... to a point.

A character can determine the value of a crown with a DC 25 Appraise check (these are not common items). The DC increases to 28 if the appraisal is performed without handling the crown.

SKELETONS

The skeletons are those of trolls.

The crowns and the skeletons can be touched safely. However, if a crown is removed, all six skeletons animate. They stand more fully erect as if inhaling a large breath, turn their skulls in unison to face the person holding the crown, and their eye sockets light up with a dull glow, but they take no overtly hostile action. They watch this way for 30 seconds.

If the characters are still in the crypt at the end of 30 seconds, the skeletons move to close off the black curtain across the inner exit from this chamber. They do not attack; they position themselves to block further ingress into the crypt.

As soon as someone strikes a skeleton, affects it with magic, removes more than one crown, or damages a crown that a skeleton is wearing, whether or not the skeletons have animated yet, the skeletons spring to the attack. Once a fight is underway, the skeletons fight until they are destroyed or the crypt is clear of intruders. They will mindlessly hack at fallen or dead intruders until the bodies are diced into gory sludge.

The skeletons cannot attack anyone who hasn't stepped off the safe path in this chamber unless that character attacks them first. Removing a crown without leaving the safe path is nearly impossible. They have no restriction against being on the safe path. If they have no more allowed targets, they position themselves to prevent characters from moving deeper into the crypt and try to drive the intruders out by advancing menacingly; if they can't

attack, they can still threaten. In this situation, they ready actions to attack anyone who steps off the safe path, attacks them, or casts a spell at them.

These skeletal trolls are the undead servants sent forth by the Black Skull to seize the crown. He adorned four of them with crowns that he deemed unimportant from burials deeper in this crypt, thinking this might bribe off any fools from Endreth who came to recover their ruler's property.

SKELETON, TROLL (6)

CR8

XP 800 each

hp 27

TREASURE

Four gold crowns: one with two shields (96 gp), nine-pointed crown (120 gp), ring of golden rods (400 gp), six-thorned crown (280 gp).

4. THE CHAMBER OF THE HAMMER CRI3

(SAFE: RIGHT)

A huge, sculpted dwarven hammer hangs from the center of the ceiling, head down, its handle seeming to be part of the surrounding stone. It is glossy black, gleams with a high polish, and a faint aura of greenish light pulses and flows around it.

Standing in the chamber are six intact, upright human skeletons, standing in two rows of three. Their bones are brown and caked with dust and spider webs. Each skeleton wears disintegrating scraps of leather armor and holds a rusty scimitar or other blade at its side, with one exception: the skeleton in the center of the back row holds a glowing longsword pointed toward the ceiling as if in silent salute.

The dried, blackened foot of some unfortunate creature is spiked to the floor in the chamber's entrance. A black curtain hangs across the back wall.

The toes of the foot point toward the right, indicating that the safe path lies in that direction.

THE HAMMER

The hammer was carved along with the rest of the chamber; it's not attached to the ceiling, it is part of the ceiling. This nonmagical adornment marked the spot where the dwarves negotiated and sealed trade deals (they were negotiated "under the hammer," which means openly and fairly to the dwarves). Characters recognize the symbolism with a DC 10 Knowledge (History) check, or automatically, if they're dwarves.

SKELETONS

The skeletons were placed here by Rován to protect the more important, deeper chambers. Close examination reveals that the bones are completely splintered. They must be held together by magic, because without it, they would crumble into fragments.

If intruders keep to the safe path, the skeletons remain motionless. If anyone steps off the path, anything touches a skeleton or the floor off the safe path through a character's action, or a skeleton is attacked, all 6 skeletons react. Each skeleton's bones whirl up into a bonestorm that rages through the chamber. Characters on the safe path are not attacked by the swirling bones, but they are subject to the bonestorm's unholy winds. Those that fail their DC 18 Fortitude save are pulled off the safe path and into the storm. If all PCs retreat to the safe path, the bones reform into two silent rows of skeletons again. But if someone steps back off, the storms erupt all over again.

THE SWORD

While the bonestorms are raging, the armor and blades of the skeletons whirl through the air along with the bones (causing no additional damage). The lone exception is the glowing longsword, a *longsword of healing* (see below). When the skeletons fly apart into bonestorms, the longsword remains motionless in the air exactly where it was. If the skeletons reform, they seem to reform around the sword, as if it is their anchor point.

The longsword can be claimed three ways. The first is to destroy the bonestorms, at which point it clatters to the floor. The second is to snatch the sword from the air while the storms are raging. If this is done, the bonestorms are effectively destroyed and the skeletons cannot reform. The third is to freeze the bonestorms in midair, which can be done by uttering the word that is stitched in clear, foot-high letters onto the back (the side toward chamber 5) of the black curtain in this chamber. The word is "HULGORL." If this is said

aloud while the bonestorms is attacking, the bones instantly become motionless in the air. Characters can walk through the room safely, and the longsword can be taken. This effect lasts until *hulgorl* is pronounced a second time or for 3 rounds, whichever is shorter, whereupon the storms recommence. If the sword was taken, the storms do not continue.

BONESTORM (6)

CR13

XP 4,800 each
hp 72

TREASURE

TEMPLAR'S BLADE

Aura moderate conjuration; CL 3rd
Slot head; Price 4,750 gp; Weight 3 lb2.

DESCRIPTION

This +1 longsword can also create the effect of a *cure light wounds* three times per day with a touch. If used to heal the wielder, this is a swift action.

CONSTRUCTION

Requirements Craft Magic Arms and Armor, *cure light wounds*; Cost 2,875 gp



5. THE WARNING CR7

(SAFE: LEFT)

The walls, ceiling, and floor of this chamber are marred with deep black scorch marks, and the words "GO BACK" have been burned into the floor with tremendous heat and force. Two things are in motion. The first is a silently floating, menacing giant's head, jaggedly severed at the neck. Its eyes are closed, but a nimbus of flame flickers around the head. Its gap-toothed mouth hangs open slackly as if the jaw is broken. The second is a cloud of foot-long, smooth, tapering sticks of wood that dart and swoop about as if they had wings, always point-first.

The lower leg and foot of a human or demihuman, stripped of all flesh and muscle, is shackled to the floor in the entrance to the chamber. A black curtain hangs across the back wall.

The safe path through this room is along the left wall, as indicated by the direction of the foot on the skeletal leg.

LIGHTNING WAND GOLEM

The flying sticks of wood are a lightning wand golem (aura moderate evocation, DC 18), created from a pile of discharged *wands of lightning bolt* (see below). The golem is controlled by no one and nothing, except that it won't discharge lightning into the safe path area. In addition to its other attacks, it launches one *lightning bolt* per round, toward a randomly-selected target off the path, as a swift action.

FLOATING HEAD

The floating head is a burning giant, beheaded (it was magically modified by Rován to coexist with the wand golem). When the characters arrive, the head is slumbering. It awakens if anyone makes noise (DC 10 Perception check). The head is driven by rage at its own state and an insane hatred of the living. Once awake, it laughs maniacally, hisses, wails, and

snarls out threats, pleas, even bad advice—most of it barely comprehensible because of the head's broken jaw, and all of it gauged to intimidate, taunt, or lure intruders to their dooms.

Although the head is deranged and wants only to slay intruders, it retains more intelligence—and a bit more sanity—than characters are likely to expect from it. It is certain to attack the characters eventually, but not immediately. First, it wants to find out what they've seen and why they are here. Its speech may be garbled, but there is cunning behind it. It tells the characters no more than it must to keep them talking, trying all the while to get them to spill something important. If they are circumspect and clever in talking to it, they might trick it into revealing something useful about the Black Skull, the location of the crown, or what lies ahead in the next chamber. If it realizes it's been tricked, the head swears in rage and attacks.

The head has no control over the lightning wand golem but knows the properties of all the chambers of the crypt. If characters win past this chamber without destroying the head, they can encounter it again in any chamber on the way out.



LIGHTNING WAND GOLEM

CR5

XP 1,600

hp 27

As warden jack swarm. Additionally:

Move fly 40 ft.

SA *Lightning bolt* (as per the spell, caster level 4) once per round, as a swift action

BURNING GIANT, BEHEADED

CR3

XP 800

hp 19

6. WIZARD'S DOOM CR9

(SAFE: RIGHT)

This chamber's walls were once lined with workbenches, now destroyed by wild magic. All that remains are ashes and eerie illusions of how they once looked: shadows of high tables littered with pale reflections of glowing decanters. Once bright symbols chalked on the few cleared areas, vivid blue, emerald green,

and ruby red ghostly flames permanently etched in the air above the chalked runes.

Circling slowly and endlessly in the mix of the magical debris are the grisly, and very real, pieces of a man. He was decapitated, his body split into four pieces. His face and hands contorted and twisted in terror, revealing that he died screaming and clawing the air in a desperate attempt to cast a spell. The head has no eyes, just empty black pits.

Dozens of translucent silver-white drifts of hissing radiance swoop and race about the room like tiny comets, swooshing amongst the debris without disturbing or being disturbed by anything.

An unlit, crimson candle, two feet tall, thick as a man's wrist, also floats serenely around the room, never touching any of the other drifting objects.

Positioned in the entranceway are two dried up, shriveled eyes. A black curtain hangs across the back wall.

The eyes in the entrance (removed from the drifting head) look toward the right, indicating the safe path. The path can also be discerned by careful observation of the objects drifting in the room; they never drift above the safe path.

THE BODY

The body is that of Rován, the 12th level spellcaster who led the outlaw band that once used these chambers as a stronghold. This grisly death was his reward for breaking the seal on the Black Skull's prison. The wizard and his body are thoroughly dead. All of the odd characteristics of this chamber are residue of the spell with which the Black Skull killed Rován.

The first time any of the wizard's body parts are touched, the deep, rolling toll of a gigantic, unseen bell will be heard, and every creature throughout the crypt is alerted that living intruders have entered this chamber.

If someone grabs a piece of the body, they realize that it is weightless. If released, the piece drifts up to its former level and resumes circling the room. The body parts are neutrally buoyant and can't lift or support the weight of anything other than themselves. If removed from this chamber, the pieces decay to bones and dust in under a minute.

Should anyone examine the drifting right arm and hand, they notice a ring on one finger. Its special function is described below.

THE COMETS

The comet-like things darting about the room are remnants of the last, desperate spells cast by Rován in his fight to the death against the lich, captured and wrapped up by the Black Skull's strange magic that lingers in this room. This same effect will take hold of and nullify most spells cast here by the player characters. Touch spells function normally, but all other castings have no effect except to become a new ball of light and join the others already zooming around the room.

The room is thick with these racing spells. Every living being not on the safe path in this chamber must roll a DC 20 Acrobatics check to dodge the spell-balls whooshing past, each round. If that check fails, the character is struck by a spell. Roll 1d12 on the table below to determine what the spell is. The spells have their effects as listed. The targets get to make standard saving throws against them. *Chain*

lightning is the only spell on the list that will affect more than one character, regardless of how many targets the spells usually have. Even a spell such as *fireball* just wraps itself around the target character and affects no one else.

d12	RESULT	NOTES
1	<i>acid fog</i>	single target; caster level 6
2	<i>slow</i>	caster level 12
3	<i>cone of cold</i>	single target; caster level 6
4	<i>lightning bolt</i>	single target; caster level 6
5	<i>fireball</i>	single target; caster level 6
6	<i>magic missile</i>	single target; caster level 6
7	<i>burning hands</i>	single target; caster level 6
8	<i>spell turning</i>	single target; single spell - last damaging spell cast by party; if none - <i>lightning bolt</i> , caster level 4
9	<i>magic missile</i>	single target; caster level 2
10	<i>baleful polymorph</i> (fox)	caster level 6
11	<i>invisibility</i>	caster level 12
12	<i>chain lightning</i>	caster level 8

Each time a character is struck by a comet, ask another randomly-chosen character (preferably one who is on the safe path) to make a DC 15 Perception check. Success means that the character noticed a swirl of light around Rován's right hand when the spell went off. There is a ring on one of his fingers that, over decades of exposure to the magic here, has become attuned to the room's unique properties. While in contact with Rován's magic-infused flesh, it acts as a focal point for the room's energy. If it is removed from Rován's hand, the racing spells slow down; the Acrobatics check to dodge them is reduced to DC 15. If a character puts the ring on, all of the spells erupt at the same time. Every character, even those on the safe path, is struck by a random spell. Then the spells dissipate, the body parts and candle drop to the floor, and the illusions fade from view.

THE CANDLE

The candle is normal in every way but one; like the pieces of Rován's body, it is weightless while in this room. If it is removed from the chamber or the ring is removed from Rován's hand, it becomes just another candle.

TREASURE

RING OF ROVAN

Aura moderate abjuration; CL 3rd
Slot ring; Price 3,500 gp; Weight --

DESCRIPTION

This sizeable and ostentatious ring grants the wearer a +1 deflection bonus to AC, and a +1 resistance bonus to saving throws.

CONSTRUCTION

Requirements Forge Ring, *protection from law*;
Cost 1,750 gp

7. THE SPELL GUARD CRIO

(SAFE: RIGHT)

In this otherwise bare chamber stands an evenly spaced row of seven black-robed, black-gloved, steel-masked figures. The central figure wears a crown: a golden circlet with a single dagger-blade "glory spike" above the wearer's forehead.

As you approach the entrance, the robed figures raise their arms and begin tracing the patterns of spells in the air.

A black curtain hangs across the back wall.

Nothing is positioned at the entrance to this chamber to indicate where the safe path lies. Characters who make a careful inspection of the floor can detect scratch marks and spike holes with a DC 16 Perception check. The positioning and angling of the marks implies that whatever was here pointed toward the right.

THE CROWN

The crown is a replica of the High Lord's crown, not the real thing (which is of plain steel). The Black Skull made this counterfeit crown and wore it for

several years before rejecting it in favor of stealing the real one. The players are likely to ask whether they recognize this as the crown they seek. If they paid close attention at the beginning of the mission, the gold plating will tip them that this is not the real crown. If they've forgotten the details from their briefing, you can either shrug and tell them to take notes next time, or let them try a DC 18 Intelligence check or a DC 20 Knowledge (Local) check to see if their characters remember something that the players forgot. Otherwise, they'll have to guess.

THE ROBED FIGURES

The "masks" are fully enclosed steel helms with small eyeslits; they entirely conceal the heads of their wearers. The figures' robes have large hoods that are pushed down and bunched around their necks, so there is no gap between the helmet and the robe. The black gloves worn by the figures are elbow-length, so no skin can be glimpsed between



glove and sleeve, and they wear tall, black boots under their ankle-length robes.

The concealing costumes serve to hide the true nature of these seven “wizards.” They are actually just animated skeletons (undead) that have been drilled to feign spellcasting whenever a living creature approaches this chamber from Chamber 6. Mimicking is all they do; they cannot actually cast spells.

Characters may use Spellcraft to try to determine what spells are being cast. The DC for this check is 19, as if the skeletons are casting 4th-level spells. If someone succeeds, tell them it’s a 4th-level spell but nothing they’ve encountered before. If someone succeeds by 5 or more, they realize that the motions are just a pantomime with no magical effect.

The seven skeletons won’t move out of their positions or stop their miming unless attacked, directly or indirectly. Once attacked, they fight until destroyed, and will pursue enemies through the crypt.

THE REAL THREAT

The skeletons are not the real threat. Pick any four skeletons randomly (but not the skeleton wearing the crown). Crammed and hunched inside those skeletons’ ribcages are four *berbalangs*. The *berbalangs* are immune to damage while in their ribcage sanctuaries, and they stay there while the skeletons are being destroyed. When characters approach or bend down to inspect and loot the fallen corpses, the *berbalangs* burst out of the fallen skeletons to catch the characters flat-footed. Once in the fight, the *berbalangs* pursue enemies fearlessly through and even out of the crypt until one side or the other is destroyed. They ignore anyone standing on the safe path unless that character attacked a *berbalang* in this or the previous round. They prefer to team up against PCs and focus on enemies who cast spells or wield significant magic items.

SKELETON (7)

CR3

XP 135 each

hp 4

BERBALANG (4)

CR10

XP 2,400 each

hp 68

TREASURE

Gold-plated replica of the High Lord’s crown (296 gp)

8. THE CHARNAL CHAMBER

(SAFE: LEFT)

Coffins are stacked into two enormous, pyramid-like piles in this chamber. A 10-foot-wide path has been left clear all around the walls and through the middle of the room, connecting the entrance to the black curtain on the back wall. The piles look stable. The coffins are closed and undamaged.

Circling the coffins is the translucent, feebly-glowing figure of a man. In his left hand he clutches a black, spiraled rod with a silvery grip. In his right hand he holds a longsword with a black blade; unreadable runes flow along the blade from hilt to tip. His legs fade into nothingness, and he flies rather than running, while mouthing silent curses and what may be warnings.

About three-quarters of a ribcage is bolted to the floor in the entrance, though most of the ribs are broken.

The ribcage is positioned so the head of the body would be toward the left, indicating that the safe path lies in that direction. There is no danger in this chamber, but the path might matter if anything has pursued the characters here.

COFFIN PYRAMIDS

Each pyramid contains 36 coffins: 8 on the bottom layer, 7 on the second layer, 6 on the third, etc. The stacks are about 12 feet high.

The coffins contain the shrouded, skeletal remains of many noble dwarves. Every coffin has been opened and plundered, then carefully closed again without damaging the interred bodies, so there’s no treasure to be found here, with one exception. One of the outlaws hid a leather belt with six small pouches, each containing a stoppered ceramic vial holding a *cure light wounds* potion, in a coffin that was overlooked by the Black Skull.

THE FIGURE

The ghostly figure looks menacing and hurls itself aggressively toward anyone who steps off the path or approaches the coffins too closely. Contact with the figure or his weapons causes an unpleasant chill and the character sees faint, ghostly shapes gliding at the edges of peripheral vision for a few rounds, but there is no other effect. This phantom and its weapons are incorporeal and harmless. He can't be banished, driven off, or affected in any way, no matter what is done to him. He will be an annoying distraction while the characters linger in his chamber but nothing more.

TREASURE

Six *cure light wounds* potions.

9. THE HAUNTED TAPESTRY CR 10

(SAFE: RIGHT)

On the left-hand wall of this chamber hangs a gigantic tapestry that stretches from the front wall to the back. It ripples continually as if stirred by breezes that can't be felt, and glows an eerie, emerald-white that lights up the scene so vividly that it looks real. The tapestry depicts a castle on a steep, bare fang of rock towering above a nightmarish forest. Translucent women in white robes and cloaks flee through the forest on ghostly horses.

The horses and riders actually flow out of the tapestry and gallop silently through the air across the room to fade away just a few yards short of the opposite wall. The riders are pursued by gigantic flying serpents, each as long as three horses, armed with gaping jaws and propelled by rows of undulating, frond-like appendages. As the flying serpents cross the room, their flesh melts away to reveal decaying skeletons. They never quite catch the obviously terrified riders with their snapping jaws.

A black curtain hangs across the back wall.

The safe path through this room is along the right wall, as suggested by the riders fleeing for safety toward that wall. There is no other indication at the entrance.

THE TAPESTRY

The tapestry is attached to the left wall by hundreds of small hooks. Removing it is possible, but it will take an average-size adventuring group about an hour if they want to protect the tapestry from damage.

If characters try to damage the tapestry by cutting or burning the cloth, it moans loudly and leaks glittering white ectoplasm that swirls into the room like smoke. A character standing within 10 feet of the damaged spot is caught in the ectoplasm and blinded for 1d4 + 1 rounds with no save. All characters who hear the moan must make a DC 15 Will save or be frightened. Those who fail must flee from this chamber to escape the ghostly, flying serpents they see pursuing them. When a frightened character enters another chamber, he may make another DC 15 Will save. If the save succeeds, the character recovers his wits. If it fails, the character flees to the next chamber and tries again to make a DC 15 Will save, and so on.

RIDERS AND SERPENTS

While in this chamber, characters can avoid the ghostly shapes simply by staying out of their path, which is the middle 10 feet running lengthwise across the room. Anyone who enters or crosses that path must make a DC 10 Acrobatics check each round if they want to dodge the figures. Failure means one of the shapes plunges through the character's body.

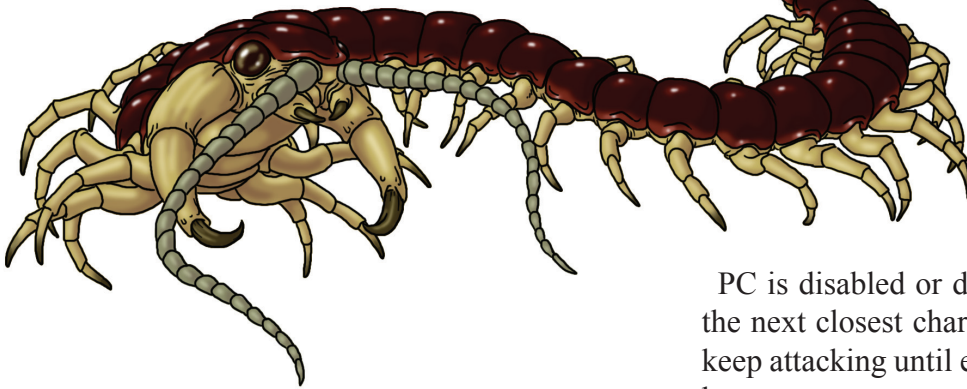
TRAP

If a character comes into contact with a rider or a flying serpent by any means—touching, grabbing, striking with a weapon or staff, or getting in the way as one races across the room—he triggers a magical trap. The floor under the feet of that character becomes insubstantial, and the character falls through. The character gets to make a DC 20 Reflex save to leap aside before the floor flickers away entirely. Characters are out of harm's way if they are on the safe path, because the riders and pursuing serpents fade away as they reach that zone.

A falling character plummets 20 feet into the chamber directly beneath this one, of the same length and width. The character takes 2d6 falling damage and lands prone.

CENTIPEDE

If the character fails a Perception check with a DC equal to the falling damage, then he is also unaware of the titan centipede in the lower chamber until it attacks. The creature is magically sustained, but it still hungers for live food and attacks immediately. It almost fills the chamber, so any movement the character makes is likely to provoke an attack of opportunity.



PIT TRAP

CR1

XP 400

Type magic; Perception DC 20; Disable Device DC 20

EFFECTS

Trigger touch; Reset automatic

Effect 20-ft.-deep pit (2d6 falling damage, DC 20
Reflex avoids)

TITAN CENTIPEDE

CR9

XP 6,400

hp 135

9A. TRAPPED CORRIDOR CR4

Unlike the other connecting corridors in the crypt, the 30-foot corridor beyond the black curtain in Chamber 9 is trapped. When the lead character has moved 20 feet up the corridor, an iron portcullis slams down across the exit from Chamber 9 and another slams down where the passage opens into Chamber 10.

Over the course of the next five rounds, five more portcullises slam down into the corridor, one per round; when all seven gates are down, the corridor is divided into six 5-foot segments. The gates fall in

any sequence you choose. They fall between rows of squares; characters in the four adjacent squares are endangered when a gate drops.

After falling, all of these obstacles remain down. Trapped or pinioned PCs will need to force their way out by spell, lifting (and possibly wedging), or bending the bars.

ARCHERS

Their trouble is only just beginning, however. Four dwarven skeletal champion archers step into view in Chamber 10 and send volleys of arrows up the corridor at the trapped characters. They shoot at the closest character until that

PC is disabled or dying, then shift their attacks to the next closest character, and so on. The skeletons keep attacking until either they are destroyed or they have no more targets.

SKELETAL CHAMPION ARCHER (4)

CR8

XP 1,200 each

hp 17

WELCOME

If characters destroy the skeletal champion archers with ranged attacks or spells without raising all the gates between themselves and Chamber 10, the gates rise seemingly by themselves (the Black Skull raises them from his throne). As the gates rise, a dwarven skeleton in splendid robes steps into view. It carries a silk pillow on which sits a silver bell. The skeleton rings the bell, which tinkles melodically. It then turns and motions toward the characters' left, in grisly pantomime of a doorman ushering guests into the fine home of a nobleman. This assumes the characters don't destroy the skeleton the moment it appears; it tries to carry out this routine even if attacked and never fights back.

If characters raised the gates and moved into Chamber 10 before destroying all the skeletal champion archers, then this skeletal servant approaches them after the fight ends. Characters should already have spotted the Black Skull by then.

SKELETON (MEDIUM)

CR1/3

XP 135

hp 4

XP 1,200

Type mechanical; Perception DC 25; Disable Device DC 25

EFFECTS**Trigger** proximity; **Reset** manual**Bypass** no reachable bypass (switch in Chamber 10)**Effect** six portcullises slam down for 6d6 damage, DC 20 Reflex avoids, characters hit by the portcullis are pinned beneath it; DC 25 Strength check lifts the gate.

10. THE BLACK SKULL'S LAIR CR II

(NO SAFE PATH)

In this crimson-carpeted chamber, a skeletal figure sits on a throne made of bones, coffin cushions, rusting weapons, and pieces of ornamental armor, near the left-hand wall. It wears a tattered burial shroud and a crown that matches the description of the High Lord's crown.

Two giant, impassive guards holding heavy flails and wearing plate armor flank the throne. To the right of the throne sits a large, ironbound chest, and atop the chest is a small, smooth, ivory coffer.

The seated figure is, of course, the Black Skull. Switches that raise the portcullises in the trapped corridor are set into the right arm of his throne.

In life, Lord Blackskell was a formidable dwarven lord. Hoping to extend his natural life as he aged, he turned to a study of magic. In bargaining with something from beyond, he set in motion a process that transformed him into a lich tyrant, but the transformation didn't occur until after he had been executed by shocked members of his clan and buried in this final chamber. When Rován's bandits reopened the final chamber during their renovations in the crypt, the lich—now calling himself the Black Skull—emerged, slew them all, raised many of them and the interred dwarves as undead, and took command of the crypt.

The lich wields a nonmagical scepter as a weapon. The Black Skull is deranged but still a cunning combatant.

His guards won't attack until after the Black Skull exchanges coldly haughty words with the intruders, or at the moment they charge, attack him, or unleash any spell in his direction. He is arrogant, has a hollowly breathless but firm voice, and is too mad to know fear; he will fight until destroyed.

The Black Skull is curious as to who the intruders are, who sent them, and what they seek—he hopes they came to negotiate over the terms of the locals' servitude to him, but he doesn't rule out the possibility that they've come to take the crown. He is quite willing to explain who he is, why the crown is rightly his, and why he deserves the fealty of all who live in the region.

The two guards are giant phantom armors who attack as the Black Skull directs them through some sort of mental link. He will sacrifice his guards to keep the characters back from him.

Neither the ivory coffer nor the iron chest is locked or trapped. The coffer contains only a lock of gray hair—all that remains of the Black Skull's long-dead wife. The chest contains a some potions and other treasure items (listed below). Substitute treasures of your own choosing, if you prefer. One possibility is a parchment containing instructions for traveling through the tapestry in Chamber 9, if that's an adventure you'd like to pursue.

GIANT PHANTOM ARMOR (2)

CR6

XP 1,200 each

hp 37

THE BLACK SKULL (LORD BLACKSKELL) CR10

XP 9,600

Dwarf Lich Tyrant Aristocrat 10

LE Medium Undead (augmented humanoid)

Init +2; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft.; Perception +17**Aura** fear (60-ft. radius, DC 19) or majesty (60-ft. radius, DC 19)**DEFENSE****AC** 23; touch 13, flat-footed 20 (+5 armor, +2 Dex, +1 dodge, +5 natural)**hp** 85 (10d8+40)**Fort** +8, **Ref** +7, **Will** +10**Defensive Abilities** channel resist +4; **DR** 15/bludgeoning and magic; Immune cold, electricity, undead traits

OFFENSE

Speed 30 ft.

Melee touch +12 (1d6+2 plus awe), or
+2 *morningstar* +12/+7 (1d6+4), and
touch +7 (1d6+2 plus awe)

Space 5 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

Special Attacks awe

STATISTICS

Str 14, **Dex** 14, **Con** -, **Int** 17, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 18

Base Atk +7; **CMB** +8; **CMD** 20

Feats Dodge, Furious Focus, Mobility, Persuasive,
Skill Focus (Diplomacy), Vital Strike

Skills Bluff +14, Diplomacy +20, Disguise
+15, Intimidate +17, Knowledge (history) +11,
Knowledge (local) +11, Knowledge (nobility) +11,
Linguistics +11, Perception +17, Ride +10, Sense
Motive +19, Stealth +18

Languages Aklo, Common, Draconic, Dwarven,
Elven, Giant, Gnome, Goblin, Halfling, Infernal,
Orc, Undercommon

SQ rejuvenation

ECOLOGY

Environment any

Organization solitary

Treasure NPC gear (+1 *glamored chain shirt*,
+2 *morningstar*, *circlet of persuasion*, *cloak of
resistance* +2)

SPECIAL ABILITIES

Awe (Su): The touch attack of a lich tyrant forces an intense feeling of awe onto its victims in addition to dealing damage. The target must make a DC 19 Fortitude save or be paralyzed for 1d4 hours. Remove paralysis or any effect that removes curses will end this effect. Those succeeding at the Fort save must immediately make a DC 19 Will save or be dominated by the lich, as per dominate monster. The victim receives a new save every day. Undead are not subject to the paralyzing effect of the touch, but are affected by the domination. A creature that saves against the touch cannot be affected by the same lich's awe for 24 hours. As a full round action, the lich may use the negative energy of its touch on itself, healing damage as if it had used its touch attack against itself.

Fear Aura (Su): Creatures of less than 5 HD in a 60-ft. radius that gaze upon the lich while this aura is in effect must succeed on a DC 19 Will save or become frightened. Creatures with 5 HD or more must succeed on a DC 19 Will save or be shaken for a number of rounds equal to the lich's Hit Dice. A creature that saves against the aura cannot be affected by the same lich's aura for 24 hours.

The lich tyrant may only have one aura active at a time. This is a mind-affecting fear affect. The lich may suppress this effect in favor of its majesty aura as a free action.

Majesty Aura (Su): All creatures within a 60-ft. radius of the lich, and that can see it, must succeed at a DC 19 Will save each round or be unable to take any hostile action toward the lich for 1 round. A creature that saves against the aura cannot be affected by the same lich's aura for 24 hours. Undead beings within the radius rally, gaining a +2 morale bonus to hit rolls and damage for as long as the aura is active. The lich may suppress this effect in favor of its fear aura as a free action. (The lich tyrant may only have one aura active at a time.) This is a mind affecting effect.

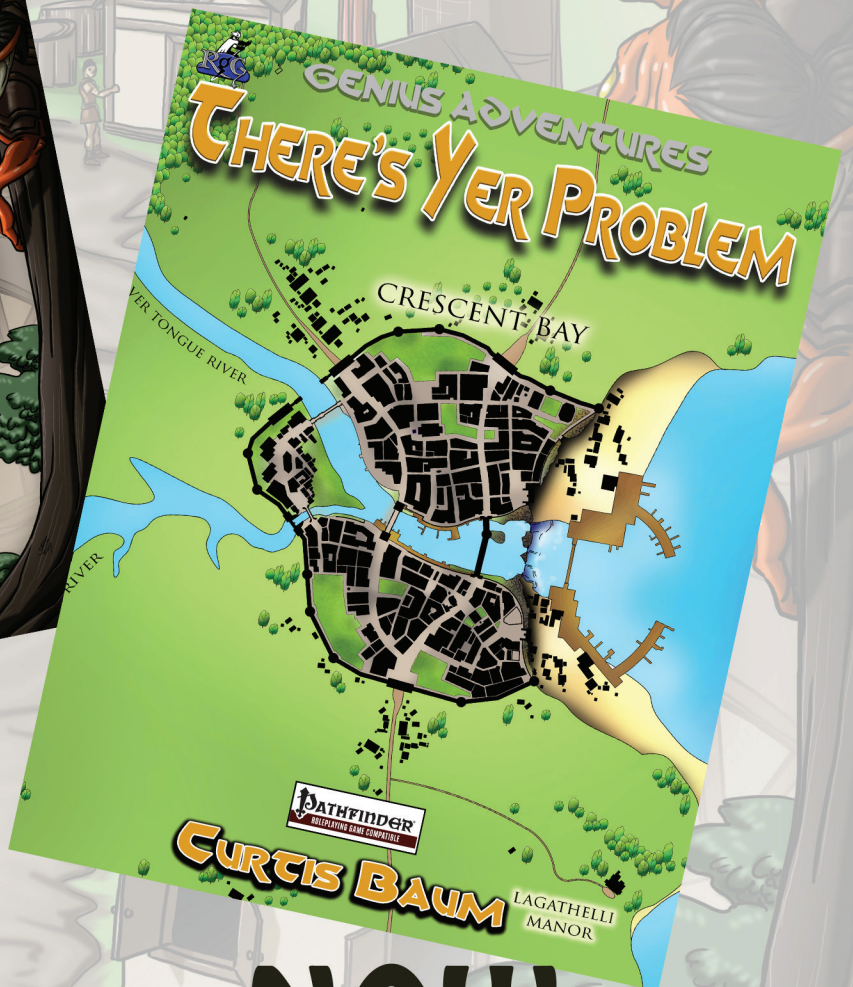
Rejuvenation (Su): When a lich tyrant is destroyed, its phylactery immediately begins to rebuild its body. This process takes 2d10 days. If the body is destroyed before that time passes, the phylactery merely starts the process anew. After this time passes, the lich awakens fully healed, lacking any gear it left behind on its old body, and begins plotting revenge on those who dared defy it.

TREASURE

Golden yellow topaz (600 gp), violet garnet (400 gp), jade (100 gp), chrysoberyl (60 gp), peridot (50 gp), blue quartz (13 gp), turquoise (11 gp), malachite (10 gp), an *adamantine dagger* (3,002 gp), +1 *flaming greataxe* (8,320 gp), +1 *scimitar* (2,315 gp), a *mace of smiting* (16,012 gp)+1 *dragonhide plate armor* (3,300 gp), +1 *mithral shirt* (2,100 gp), *potion of gaseous form* (750 gp), 2 *potions of resist energy* 10 (300 gp each), *arcane scroll (jump, darkness, flaming sphere; CL 3, 325 gp)*, *divine scroll (bless water, burning disarm; CL 2, 150 gp)*, *potion of hide from animals* (50 gp).

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Author: Ed Greenwood

Cartographer: Ed Bourelle

Illustrations: Jacob E. Blackmon;

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Consigliere: Stan!

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