

DUNGEON CRAWL CLASSICS

The 13th Skull

#71: A LEVEL 4 ADVENTURE
BY JOSEPH GOODMAN



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INTRODUCTION

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

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

BACKGROUND STORY



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

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

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

PLAYER BEGINNING

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

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

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

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

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



THE BALANCE BLADE

A Level 2 Adventure

By Joseph Goodman

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

INTRODUCTION

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

There are three important things to note about this adventure:

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

BACKGROUND STORY

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

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

PLAYER BEGINNING

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

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

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

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

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

JUDGE'S NOTE

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

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

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

