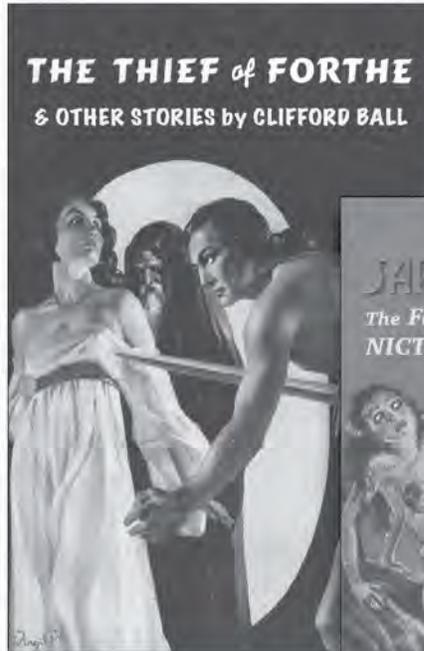


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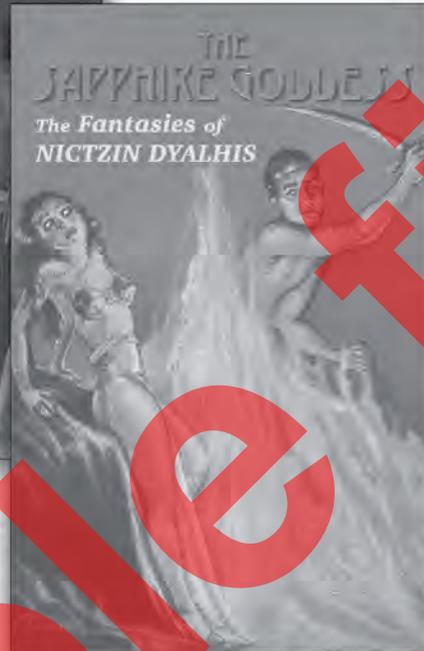
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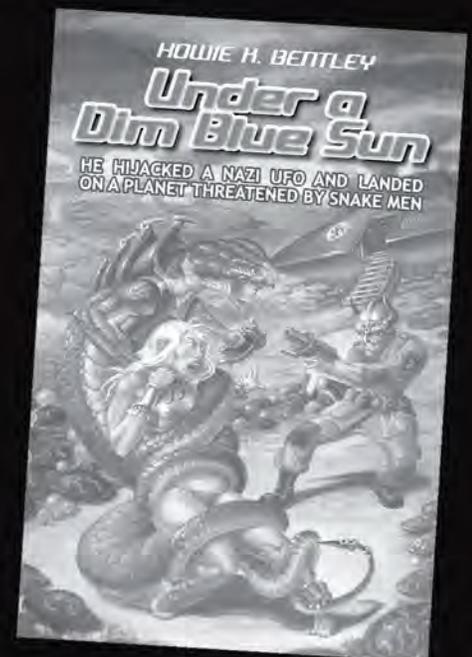
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A gong shivers... the mists part to reveal a grisly visage lying upon a mound of rubble, dead but for one glowing, malefic eye...

It speaks, in a voice of cold command: *Silence, mortal dogs! It is time now for*

Tales From The MAGICIAN'S SKULL



NO. 2

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Benhus drew and met him in a clash of strident steel. They traded blows, at first with more maddened intent than skill, swords meeting and sliding apart with a sound like a blacksmith's anvil seeing frantic work.
- Day of the Shark by James Stoddard 13**
"I led my hunters here, daring the depths to seek you. I have a keen eye, steady arms, and the courage of ten. I have killed the Great White single-handed. I demand the Trial."
- Stolen Witness by James Enge 23**
They followed the crooked man, bearing a corpse on his back and a light in his hand, into the wizard's garden.
- Blood of the Forest Born by Nathan Long 31**
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- Shuhalla's Sword by Dave Gross 55**
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An illustrated adaptation of Abraham Merritt's classic story.

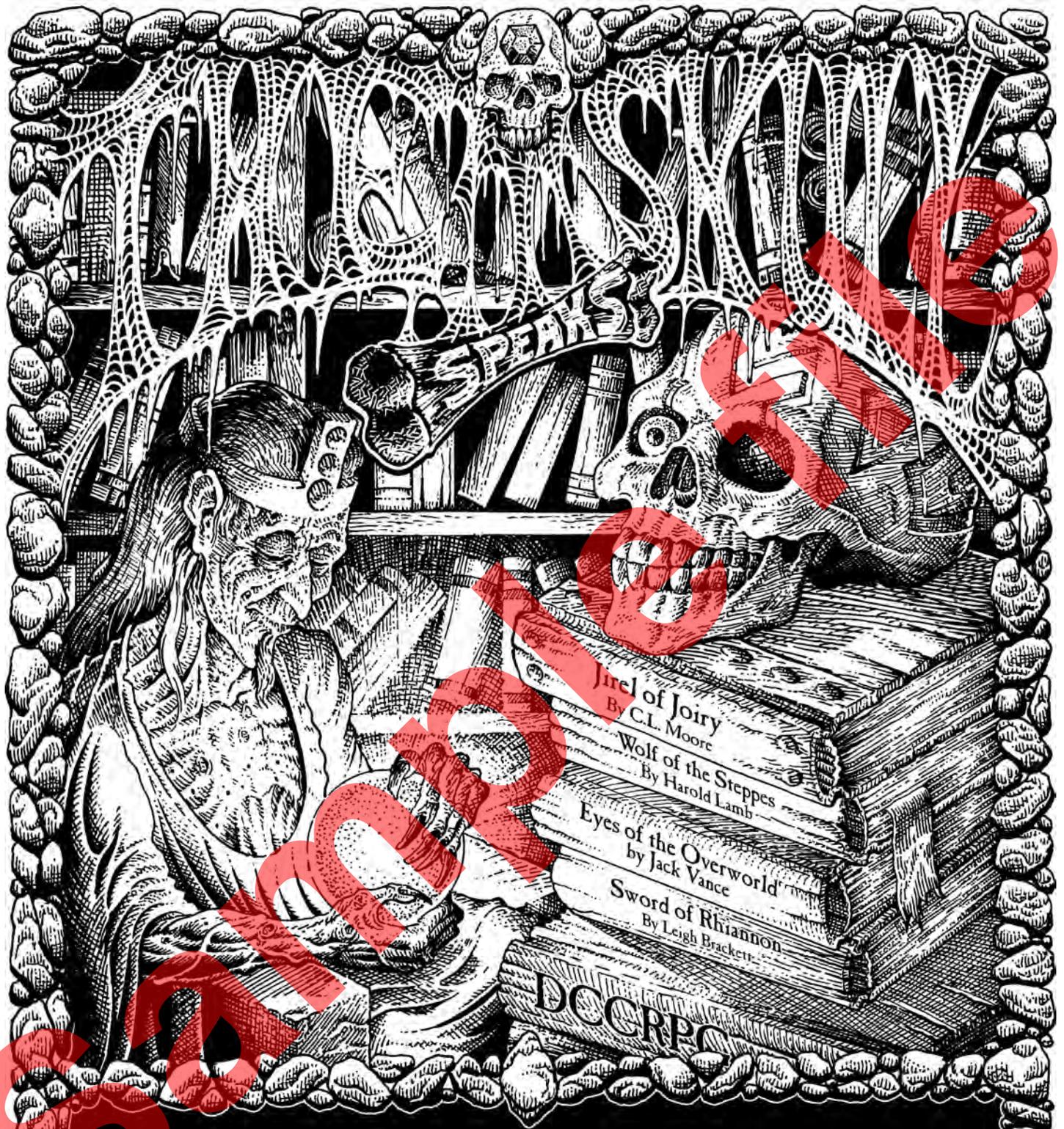
— AND —

- Appendix: Game Statistics by Terry Olson 88**
We present this appendix of game statistics for the various creatures, spells, and items described herein. All of these stats are for the Dungeon Crawl Classics Role Playing Game system.

INTERIOR ILLUSTRATIONS: Samuel Dillon, Jennell Jaquays, Doug Kovacs, Cliff Kurowski, William McAusland, Brad McDevitt, Russ Nicholson, Stefan Poag, and Chuck Whelon

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DIESEL LAFORCE, Cover Illustration
LESTER B. PORTLY, Design & Layout



YOU cannot begin to imagine what lies ahead. Once again I have summoned talented tale weavers to spin spell-binding adventures alive with shining swords, daring deeds, magical mayhem, and stark terror! They please me well, and I offer them to you so you that you too may take pleasure from thrilling work in the sacred genre. I expect your praise!

You will see my efforts, and if you have sense, you will glory in them. When you finish the final page, go forth and tell others what I have done, so that more will join us. I mean to share all the best heroic fiction I find with you for many issues to come, but we cannot do this alone! Summon your friends to my banner. Tell them of my vision! Tell them of these stories! I shall not rest until my glories are known throughout the world!

TALES FROM THE MAGICIAN'S SKULL

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION



As we look forward, we intend to build on what we've done, although I'm not at all disappointed with what we've managed so far. If there are additional features that you wish to see, we hope you'll let us hear about them. The Skull remains somewhat open to suggestions, so long as they come from a place of love for sword-and-sorcery. Unrelated topics, or those from the uninformed, are met with outrage, consternation, and dire threats, which is why Joseph and I usually send the intern in to read letters to him.

I think the most frequent question I've gotten is whether we'll open for submissions. Until we had a good sense of what we were doing and how much time it took, we wanted to publish stories by invitation only. We're likely to remain that way for a while. Joseph and I are already in contact with professional writers who can keep our readers happy for many years to come.

THIS issue is stuffed to the brim with fantastic sword-and-sorcery. You'll see the return of two characters featured in issue 1, along with entirely new (to the magazine) authors and settings. We plan to provide you with authors old and new every single issue, along with the occasional surprise, like a certain illustrated adaption by the talented Stefan Poag you'll find lurking in the back half of this issue. (I mean the work is lurking, not the artist, although you should always keep your eye out...)

As with last issue, I think our love for the sacred genre burns clear and bright. We want to find the best modern tales around because we figure you love sword-and-sorcery as much as we do, or you wouldn't be buying the magazine.

Shortly after the debut of issue 1 appeared in print I headed to Chicago, where I rendezvoused with the talented John C. Hocking, crafter of mighty tales of sword-and-sorcery, and Goodman Games stalwart and part-time pirate Dieter Zimmerman (pictured above). We were there at the Windy City Pulp and Paper convention for one of the first public appearances for the magazine.

The convention is held in early April every year, and if you love old paperbacks, old magazines, art from the same, and the people who love that stuff, then you definitely need to take it in. When we weren't at the booth in the convention hall, we were wandering around soaking in the treasures brought by other merchants. Before I left on Sunday I took part in a panel on sword-and-sorcery. You can see me on the far left raptly listening to sword-and-sorcery writer and scholar David C. Smith. On his left are writers Andy Fix and Gordon Dymowski.

With two issues under our belt Joseph and Lester and I are getting a sense for what's required and how much time it takes. Judging by the success of the Kickstarter we're more than 90 percent certain to continue the magazine after these initial issues. By the time you're holding this in your hand, that Kickstarter for it may even be underway!

That said, I was on the other side of an editorial desk for a long, long time, and I empathize with the desire to see one's story between the same covers where you find some of your favorite writers. We'll probably try opening to submissions, eventually, but we'll do it for short intervals at a time. Having read manuscripts for *Black Gate*, I'm well acquainted with the amount of material that washes in, and I don't want to be swept away by it, especially when so much of it ignores guidelines, sometimes wildly. Perhaps we'll be lucky and those future submitters will have paid careful attention to our wants and needs so that I'm not reading gangster fiction or Elizabethan verse or other clearly-not-right-for-the-market texts I used to find in my inbox. Even a sub that's obviously wrong from the cover letter requires time to process, time I'd much rather spend choosing between, say, three great professionally written sword-and-sorcery yarns.

But all of this lies in the distance. For now, turn the pages that lie before you and lose yourselves in splendid tales of wonder, terror, and adventure.

Swords Together!

– Howard Andrew Jones



DO YOU HAVE SUGGESTIONS, QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, OR CONCERNS? DO YOU WISH TO SEND US ACCOLADES, INVITATIONS, OR JEWELED GOBLETS? IF YOU DARE TO CONTACT THE SKULL, REACH OUT TO US AT: skull@goodman-games.com WHEN THE STARS ARE RIGHT, SOMEONE SHALL RESPOND.

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ILLUSTRATION BY RUSS NICHOLSON

TRIAL BY SCARAB

A Tale of the King's Blade

By JOHN C. HOCKING

BENHUS felt the pillow against his face, and it came to him that his mouth tasted like stale wine. He wasn't certain yet if he was hung-over, but he knew he didn't feel as well as he ought to and had no idea what time it was. Another idea filtered gradually into his emerging awareness; he didn't know what had awakened him.

"Well now, our host appears to be stirring. Good morning, young master." The voice was sharp with mockery and an unpleasant tinge of disdain. Benhus sat up in the big bed and saw, once his tousled head pulled free of the cocoon of pillow and sheets, that the white room was full of brilliant morning light.

There was a tall young man seated in a chair beside the bed, leaning back with his long legs extended before him. He was long jawed and sharp of feature, with thick blond hair tied back by a black ribbon. He wore an elegantly cut tunic of deep crimson with a sword and a long dagger hung on a black leather belt. Benhus was certain he was a noble but didn't need to be fully awake to notice that the fellow wore his blades as if he never took them off.

Benhus squinted sourly at the intruder, swung his feet over the side of the bed and planted them on the cold marble floor. He felt himself coming awake and saw, belatedly, that there was another visitor. A woman in the purple-bordered robes of a noble stood silently at the young man's shoulder. She looked old to Benhus's eyes, but not elderly. Her hair was long, gray and thin, and her cheeks were rouged.

"It seems you have been giving your master's home much hard use. Have you emptied his wine cellar yet?" asked the nobleman.

"I stayed here when I was in my teacher's service," rasped Benhus through a rusty throat. "He's dead."

"Yes," said the young man. "Yes, I read your report, brief though it was. I think it might be a good thing that the King's Hand can't see what you've done to his home."

Benhus stood up and walked naked across the room. His body was lean enough that his muscles seemed twisted tightly around his bones, and though he was of fewer years than the young noble who berated him, his skin was laced with an alarming number of scars. He went to a desk under a sunny window, found a wadded up tunic there and pulled it on. There was a dark wine stain on one shoulder.

"Thratos is dead in the tomb of Nervale. If you disbelieve me you might open the tomb and see for yourself."

"Oh, I believe you, Benhus. Do you know me? I'm Varus Androloc. And the noblewoman is the Lady Bethelanne Thale. Your mentor, Thratos, the King's Hand, took his orders from the King through us."

"He never mentioned that. Or you."

"No," said the woman, speaking for the first time. "He wouldn't have. He was vain."

Benhus looked at her. Her voice was the rich contralto of a much younger woman, and she sounded accustomed to speaking well and being well heeded.

"What do you want?"

Varus Androloc sputtered with laughter. "What do we want? We want to see if you've eaten all of the food in the home of your dead teacher. We want to see how many strumpets you've managed to fit under his roof." He gestured at the bed, and Benhus saw that there was a woman, still deeply asleep, embroiled in a froth of sheets like a body washed by white surf onto a white beach. "We want to learn if you have any of the skills Thratos was supposed to be teaching you. We want to see if you are remotely prepared to do the kind of work he dependably performed for the King for almost fifteen years."

Varus stood up. Benhus was taller than most, but the nobleman was taller still, and leaned into him, radiating contempt.

"I can do anything that Thratos did, and more that he could not." Benhus put as much confidence into his voice as he could, but felt breathless and constricted, dizzy with uncertainty and a growing anger he knew he had to control.

"Indeed? I understand that the King picked you out of the Legion because he saw you fight in a gutter tournament, right? I've seen you fight. You have speed and little else. You don't have your master's final approval. You don't have noble blood. You don't have anything. All you have is arrogance and a little undeserved luck. You're a blade. Just another blade."

Benhus closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. It was true that his parents had been peasants, citizens, but no more than that, and that luck had favored him when the King had plucked him from the Legion to learn at the side of Thratos, the King's Hand. Benhus had adapted swiftly to a better life, one better still now that his haughty and resentful master was dead. He did not want to give this life up, so he did not try to throttle Varus Androloc.

He said, "What do you want me to do?"

The nobleman showed white teeth in a wide grin.

"Do? I want you to..."

"Varus," said the Lady Bethelanne Thale, and his name, softly spoken, lopped the young nobleman's words off completely. "Step back."

Varus shrugged and turned away with a small and rueful smile. He walked to the open doorway and stood beside it while the noblewoman approached Benhus with something in her hand.

"I have a task for you," she said in her low voice. "Will you perform it?"

Benhus looked into her eyes, blue but hazy with age. Her thin body had a poised intensity, and he felt himself being judged.

"I will," he said, "for you."