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Bonus Feature

"Queen of the Sepulcher"
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Queen of the Sepulcher

Paul R. McNamee

Under the stark relief of the light from the full moon, the bodies of the dead cast crawling shadows. Twisted torsos and limbs askew, frozen in rigor mortis, the hillside was an infernal work of art—sculpted by Death. The only colors were black and white and the odd shades of moonlight gray.

Earlier, under the bright sunlight of day, the sloping hill had been an idyllic landscape. But the monochromatic green vista had effloresced in a kaleidoscope of color. And the crimson of blood stained landscape.

Trees lined the side of the hill, leaving the stunted growth along the center of the hillside to serve as a natural thoroughfare. A single boulder stood nestled in a depression about two-thirds of the way up the slope—as though the large stone had been pushed into place by a giant's hand when the hill was still young and muddy.

Two men made their way among the dead. DeVries was a hulking, hirsute man. Doran Coyle appeared small only in the shadow of his friend. His face was long, ending in a square jaw. He was wiry and his dark hair was pulled back in a short ponytail. Only the fortunes of war could have brought two such men together and bonded them in a friendship made deep by the tribulations of combat.

"Damn slaughter," DeVries said, his French accent thick. He had started life as an Acadian child, but he was now called a Cajun. His family had fled Nova Scotia to the Spanish controlled Mississippi territory.

"I told the colonel, but he wouldn't listen," Coyle said. He was from Anglo-Irish roots in the colony of Massachusetts. "Damn fool, marching down the hill head on toward the Redcoats. We should have taken to the trees."

"That's not how a gentleman fights," DeVries retorted. His tone was thick with sneering sarcasm. "I think that is what the colonel said before he threatened to court martial you for going into the trees anyway."

"But you're the one who punched him," Coyle said.

"He called you a coward," DeVries said with a shrug. "I wouldn't stand for that."

DeVries owed his life to Coyle, and vice versa. There were too many officers who still hoped for some civility in this conflict between the crown and the colonies and they were too quick to condemn tactical advantages as cowardice. Coyle could fight. Coyle did fight—as hard as any man did.

"Why do these foolish officers keep appearing like weeds?" Coyle wondered. "Where do they come from?"

"There's one less now," DeVries commented. "Colonel Tyler is dead somewhere out here. Saves us a court martial."

The two men spoke quietly out of an unspoken respect for the dead. There was no danger of detection by pickets from either side. The battle had moved on. But, despite the American victory, the situation for the army was as desperate as ever. Even this small battlefield where they had technically won the battle meant nothing. Far too many men had been killed fighting a mere British rearguard. Supplies were low, ammunition doubly so.

"Over here," DeVries said, and waved Coyle over with his hand.

The stubby barrel of the howitzer had not been terribly damaged, but the gun had been rendered nearly useless by a direct hit from a lucky mortar

shell. With half the frame of the gun and one wheel destroyed, the gun could not be elevated to lob its shells high enough.

"The caisson?" Coyle asked. That is why he and DeVries had returned. They needed howitzer ammunition—and anything else they might be able to carry. Ordinance was scarce. Coyle hadn't started to sling powder horns and cartridge cases over his shoulders, yet. He'd see how much space was in the caisson first. The howitzer had been hit early in the battle, though. He expected a nearly complete batch of shells.

"Due east in the trees," DeVries said. "If no one else has come to claim it yet."

Their footsteps were the only sounds across the desolate aural landscape. Insects did not buzz, and no nocturnal creature stirred. They just reached the caisson, when a faint, muffled chittering sound drifted over the battlefield. Its uniqueness gave it an eerie prominence. Coyle and DeVries stop walking and stood perfectly still.

The sound repeated, and though not growing louder, there were two sources now. The patterns of tittering chatter overlapped. Coyle thought it was a bird until the end of the measure, which sounded far more akin to an animal - but the sound came from no animal with which he was familiar.

"Do you know what that is?" Coyle asked his companion.

DeVries shook his head. "Sounds a little like raccoon kits, but something about it..." He paused to find the right words, and then said simply, "Something about it isn't right."

Coyle listened for the source of the sound. He followed after it like a hound after a scent. DeVries followed in his wake. The sound grew louder as they ascended the slope of the hill, toward the large stone.

The chittering sounds expanded again, a muted cacophony of voices. There was another sound, too. A grating sound of rock laboriously passing over other rocks, grinding and scratching. Coyle saw that the stone moved, rocking back and forth - inching out from its burial in the hillside.

"Doran..." DeVries began but did not finish.

A green light—sickly but shocking to their dark-adapted pupils—momentarily blinded the two men as it flashed around the seal of the stone. The light grew as the rock was pushed further out from its hole. Coyle knew that the rock had stood in the hillside for centuries and he felt a chill run down his spine.

Something ancient and malevolent had awakened.

Coyle waved his hand at DeVries, and the two men took vantage points behind trees.

Five forms furtively exited from the hillside and entered the moonlight. Coyle was not close enough to discern the facial features of the creatures, but they were stocky and they moved like apes. Unlike apes, they lacked fur. Their skins were gray, made all the more pallid by the rays of the moon. Spiked ears peaked over the bald domes of their pates. They chattered and growled amongst themselves, sometimes slapping and hitting one another. They reminded Coyle of hungry wild beasts over killed prey.

Finally satisfied that they were not in danger - they had not yet noticed Coyle and DeVries, who stood as still as statues - the creatures spread out among the dead. One moved toward Coyle's position. Coyle's hand instinctively moved to the grip of his pistol.

The beast stopped yards away from Coyle and it sniffed the air, puzzled. Coyle saw the face now, and his hand gripped his pistol even more tightly. Tusks protruded from the creature's mouth, one from the upper left

and one from the lower right. Misshapen swollen lips unnaturally curled around the tusks and jagged teeth. The nose was crooked, but Coyle could not tell if that was by unnatural design or from repeated breaks. The creature was bestial enough that Coyle assumed the creature to have heightened sense of smell. Coyle wondered if the creature's nose was keen enough to notice a living body standing on the field of the dead.

The creature shook its head as if to dispel the scent it could not identify. Then it squatted beside the headless corpse of a Continental soldier. Like a curious chimpanzee, it clutched the bloody hand and sniffed at the fingers. With razor sharp nails, it tore down the sleeve. The beast sank its teeth into the dead flesh of the arm, and tore it away from the bone.

Coyle's reaction to the abomination and desecration was instant. He produced his pistol and fired at the creature. With a squeal the beast was knocked over backwards, with the lead ball lodged in its chest.

The thunder of the pistol roused the other creatures. They moved faster than Coyle could have imagined. Like charging apes, they bolted across the field of the dead, incensed by the death of their brethren and the disruption of their ghoulish repast. Another creature fell to the crack of a pistol, this time from DeVries. The remaining three creatures squealed and bellowed in fury, and then they were upon Coyle and DeVries.

The ghoul ran into Coyle, bowling him over. Nails dug painfully into his arm. The snorting face leered inches from his face. From the corner of his eye, he saw the other two ghouls latched upon DeVries, but the large man stood his ground, determined not to let the smaller creatures drag him down.

Coyle slipped an arm free and punched hard at the ghouls face. He felt the leathery nose give way under his fist, but the beast hardly seemed to notice. It raised an arm, and brought down a curled fist, missing Coyle's head directly but grazing his cheek and ear. The misplaced blow still packed power, dazing him. The beast raised both hands overhead to beat down mercilessly.

The sickly green light from the hole in the hillside suddenly flashed bright and powerful. The ghouls stopped the downward sweep of its arms and clutched its head. Coyle took advantage of the moment and pushed the beast away. He drew his knife to finish the creature.

"Remember the law!"

A voice sounded from everywhere. The other creatures let go their grip on DeVries and put their hands to their ears.

"Remember my law!" The voice cried again.

The ghouls groveled among the corpses. The light spilled from the cave behind the stone, beams moving like fog spilling down the hill.

"The dead are your feast, the living are mine!" the voice said. It boomed from the stone, from the trees, from the dead. When Coyle could not determine the source, he realized that the voice was inside his mind. He looked to DeVries and saw the look of consternation that surely occupied his own visage. Not only was the voice inside their heads, they could understand the words. With a shudder of abhorrence, Coyle realized that he must have something in kin with the ghoulish beasts, though it was a connection far remote and long since obliterated by the passage of time.

"Bring them to me, alive! Now!"

The confusion of the moment left the two men vulnerable. The ghouls were upon them again, this time determined to make them prisoners, not

meals. Coyle had no resistance left to offer. The beasts were powerfully built, and they possessed an intelligence to obey orders. Coyle found his arm wrenched painfully high behind his back. DeVries was equally hobbled, one ghoul on each arm. Involuntarily Coyle was pushed up the hill, propelled into the waiting maw of the cave with its sickly green light pulsating in anticipation of his arrival.

The ghouls drove them forward. The opening in the hillside was nothing but a hole in the earth. Coyle thought of the fingernails of his captors. Had they dug their way out? If so, from where did they originate?

As they moved underground toward the source of the light, the environment changed. The cold damp earth transitioned into a stone tunnel, wrought of carved stones. Coyle felt a wave of dizziness and nausea pass over him. The pain of his arm nearly breaking under his stumbling weight drove away the uneasy sensation.

Finally the tunnel ended. The ghouls released their holds on Coyle and DeVries and shoved them forward into a chamber. Coyle looked over his shoulder as the three beasts took up guard at the tunnel mouth. The light was too bright to discern anything. Coyle raised his hand before his face, to lessen the light and use his fingers as a filter. All he could distinguish was a tall shadow, vaguely human shaped—female shaped—occupying the center of the chamber.

The intensity of the light faded, remaining only as a sickly glow, enough to illuminate the chamber. Coyle saw that the ceiling and floor were lined with stones as the tunnel had been. There was no other egress visible, other than the way they had come. The stones of the chamber were carved with hieroglyphs and other arcane symbols; none of which he recognized.

The chamber's occupant glared at Coyle with alien eyes that were entirely black, lacking whites. She was tall and lithe with spindly limbs. Her dress was so old that it clung to her body by tatters. Her skin was as pale as moonlight, her hair as black as night. Her ears were long, pointed and ended in tufts of white hair.

"Men of battle, you honor me with your lives," she said in their minds.

Coyle understood the words. Now that she had addressed them and not her ghoulish minions, Coyle could only assume she would understand his response.

"You mean we honor you with our presence, don't you?" Coyle said aloud. That was probably needless, but he would rather focus on what he understood. Mentally communicating with her might prove dangerous. How much of his mind had she already seen? Or, was she only able to speak in his mind?

"My pets feed on the dead," she said. "I need the sustenance taken from the living."

"A battlefield is a poor place to find the living," Coyle commented.

"On the contrary, that is where I find many—wounded and left to die by their own kind," the she-creature explained. "Why should they care what is done with the dead and those they've abandoned?"

"What is this place? Who are you?" Coyle asked.

"I am called Urla," the female creature said. "You may address me as 'Queen'."

"Why would want to do that, witch?" DeVries grumbled.

"Witch, I am. I have no shame in the title," Urla grinned entirely full of malice. She continued ruefully. "My magic made me eternal. But once my race realized I would never yield my rule they became unreasonable."

Finally, two wizards confined me to a living death. I - who could not die - was trapped in this sepulcher. Even now I cannot leave."

"I am no longer standing in my own world. This chamber of yours—it is a place on your world," Coyle said.

The alien sorceress nodded her head.

"They could not take my life. They could not take my magic skills. There are many worlds, many races given to war. With necromancy I find the doors and open them." She said with a wry smile. "My pets feed and if I'm lucky, so do I."

Coyle considered her words. Battlefields were horrific sights of mental and spiritual tribulation. To Urla's vile magic, the fields of the dead must shine like beacons.

"How long have you done this?" Coyle asked Urla. "How many worlds?"

"Beyond your comprehension," Urla said. "The wizards who confined me are long since dead. My home world is naught but dust, now. Races rose and fell and forgot their pasts until the world itself went the way of all things. And I have seen thousands like it, thousand that will become as it is. Death is the only constant in the Universe."

Coyle felt an immense mental weight, he could not be sure if it was projected from the sorceress to his mind. But the sense of ages and distances made him feel smaller than an ant. For a brief moment, he felt that Urla could crush his mind just as easily as a man would step on an insect.

But Coyle's mind would not be broken. He clutched at rationality, but here in an alien location that too, was tenuous. He, too, had seen much death. He knew she spoke the truth. Was Urla not a part of the natural

order? Were her ghouls nothing but another facet of the universe that yielded vultures and worms? But battles were not only about death. Men fought for reasons. Men fought for better things.

"There is life!" Coyle shouted defiantly. "Life is as powerful a constant as death!"

"Do you think? Perhaps I will keep you alive for a while. Would you like to visit other worlds, Doran Coyle?" she asked. "The portal to your world will soon be closing."

Coyle did not hesitate to take the opportunity, but the opportunity was for his friend.

"Release my companion and I will accompany you."

She laughed like leaves rustling.

"Doran Coyle, if I keep you alive, on whom shall I feed?"

With a nod, one of her ghouls again clutched Coyle's arm behind his back.

"What are you going to do to him?" DeVries demanded striding toward her.

"No!" Coyle shouted, understanding what the sorceress intended.

Her arm moved like a viper, long fingers clutching across DeVries' face. His resistance was only a natural flinch. Once her fingers touched his flesh, he stood as immobile as a statue. There was no struggle; there were no wounds. But Coyle had seen many men die in his time - men whose lives ebbed away from wounds or disease. And he knew that DeVries was dying, his life draining into the grasping fingers of the alien necromancer.

"You speak of sorcery and power, at what cost? You have no kingdom - your world is a hundred ages gone!" Coyle shouted. "You are nothing

more than a leech! A maggot that crawls through the cemeteries of a hundred worlds!"

The insults had the intended effect. Angrily, Urla released her hold on DeVries and clutched her cold fingers across Coyle's face. He felt his energy dissipating. He felt tired, he wanted to sleep, but even his eyelids could not move to close. The palm of her hand rubbed against his nose - it felt like cracked leather and smelled of the grave. Coyle felt life drifting away, and he could not move a limb to hold onto it. He was dying.

There was a roar from far away, growing louder and louder. Coyle mistakenly thought his soul had departed his body, rushing toward some ethereal destination. But the roar was no wind. Coyle was on his knees before he realized he had collapsed. He searched the chamber with confused eyes.

DeVries had been left dazed and unguarded, but he had recovered his wits. Urla had underestimated the man's bull-like tenacity. He roared a berserk holler as he held the screaming witch high over his head. Her ghouls ran to her aid, but they were not fast enough this time. DeVries dashed the sorceress against the wall. Coyle heard bones break. Even with her frail frame shattered, Coyle did not believe she could die.

Coyle leapt upon the back of one ghoul, driving its face into the stone wall with his hand behind its head. The little creature was tough as an ox, but Coyle repeated the motion until the thing was finally stunned enough to slip to the ground, shaking its head from side to side, trying to clear its mind. The other two ghouls were attacking DeVries. He held one at bay, but yelled in pain when the other sunk one of its malformed tusks into his calf.

Colye saw Urla's shattered body begin to move again.

"DeVries!" Coyle cried. "We have to get out!"

There was desperation in his voice. If the witch brought her magic to bear, what could they do against her? They were men of a rational age. They had nothing with which to fight the thing of nightmares. And Urla had said the portal was closing. If they freed themselves of the witch, they might not find themselves on their own world. There was no time left.

DeVries must have heard the desperation in Coyle's voice. They had fought together often, shouting over the sound of battle. Coyle was almost always in control of his emotion. His consternation was an unconscious signal to DeVries. DeVries knew that if his friend had reason for concern, then there was a great reason for concern for any other man. DeVries gave everything he had left into one last action. He used the ghoul he held at bay as a weapon, swinging the creature as an unwieldy club, knocking the third ghoul from his leg. Urla and her dogs were incapacitated, albeit they would not stay down for long.

Coyle moved as fast as possible with DeVries limping at his side. He again felt a wave of nausea as the stone tunnel gave way to the earthen passage. That was the portal between the worlds. The hair on his head stood on end as they reached the end of the tunnel. There was still moonlight. But was the moon the one he had known all his life? Would they emerge on the hillside from whence they came?

Coyle breathed a sigh of relief, even though he looked down upon a field of dead. They had arrived at the same place from where they had departed.

"Coyle," DeVries said. "They're coming."

The flapping stomp of feet sounded from behind. The ghouls were running up the tunnel after their prey.

"Take cover," Coyle ordered DeVries.

DeVries offered no argument and took cover behind the displaced stone. Coyle ran down the hill among the dead. The ghouls - crazed by bloodlust - chased after him, completely missing his wounded comrade. Coyle espied a cocked musket lying beside a dead Redcoat. Praying his luck would hold, he snatched up the gun, turned and squeezed the trigger. The staggered thunder of the pan and the barrel powder igniting were music to his ears. One of the ghouls was down, its face destroyed by a musket ball.

Scrambling over the Redcoat, Coyle pulled a tomahawk from the belt of a dead militiaman. When the first ghoul leapt at him, the tomahawk crashed into the beast's skull. Whatever the creatures were, they were not immortal as their mistress was.

Another shot cracked across the silent night, and the third ghoul stumbled and fell dead at Coyle's feet. He looked up the hill. DeVries waved a pistol in the air. He had not remained under cover once the ghouls had set after Coyle.

"We're not done yet!" Coyle hollered up the hill.

Hurriedly, Coyle found the howitzer's caisson. As they had hoped, the caisson was nearly full of shells. The trip had not been in vain. At least, it hadn't been in vain until that moment. The shells would not be recovered. Muscles straining, Coyle pulled the caisson up the hill. DeVries limped down and joined him halfway. The man hobbled on his injured leg, but he pulled the caisson with the ease of a packhorse.

Neither man said a word - they each knew the other's thoughts.

"I'll take it from here," Coyle told DeVries when they reached the mouth of the earthen tunnel. "It slopes down, at least."

"She'll kill you this time for sure," DeVries commented.

"Only if she catches me," Coyle said. "If she is still there."

"Without her dogs she might not want to stay around," DeVries said.

"I'm hoping she's trapped here by her own spell," Coyle told his friend.

"The spell will have a duration."

"How long?"

"Let's be superstitious," Coyle said. He really had no idea. Sorcery was dark place where his knowledge was limited and given more to theory than personal encounter. "And hope the spell lasts 'til sunrise."

"Then you don't have any time left," DeVries pointed toward the east.

Rosy fingers of dawn were reaching into the sky. Conversely, the green light of the tunnel was fading. Coyle started the slow match coil burning and pushed the caisson into the passage.

It was difficult to keep the wooden wheels from digging into the soft dirt. Coyle pushed harder. Once he gained momentum it was an easier task. The mysterious green glow continued to fade. He increased his speed as much as he could. Finally, he reached the point of the portal. Earlier he had only felt the transition point as it made him ill to pass through. Now, he saw a shimmering in the air, like waves of heat rising from the ground on a summer's day. He wasn't sure his body would survive the passage. He could only hope the caisson would pass through unharmed.

Beyond the shimmering portal point he thought he saw the form of Urla standing. He heard whispers in his mind. He did not know what was imagination and what was truth. She might have been trying to communicate. He did not care. All that mattered was that the caisson got through. Urla could not be allowed to continue her vile existence against nature. Warriors deserved better than death at her hands or desecration at the hands of her ghoulish minions.

He quickly cut a fuse and inserted it into a shell. He touched the slow match to the fuse, which sputtered and then hissed with a steady burning. Coyle deposited the armed bomb into the bed of other shells. Then he pushed the caisson across the threshold, and watched it warp as it moved between worlds.

He ran.

He expected the blast to knock him down. It would probably collapse the tunnel on top of his body, too. He meant to make a longer fuse but there was no time. He found DeVries waiting for him at the tunnel mouth with crossed arms and a quizzical look.

"Did you light the fuse?"

Coyle looked back in bewilderment. There had been no explosion. There was no longer any green light. There was nothing but the earthen tunnel behind the dislodged stone. He quickly improvised a torch from a fir branch and they made their way back into the tunnel.

The stone tunnel and chamber were gone, and so was the caisson. Whether it had exploded in Urla's sepulcher they would never know - unless they met her again. It was not a comforting thought.

"Would that really kill her?" DeVries asked as they emerged from the tunnel into the light of day.

"An exploding caisson of shells in a confined space," Coyle said. "If it did explode. Even if it doesn't kill her, it should render her entirely ineffectual."

"How does such a creature come to exist?" DeVries wondered aloud.

"It is her nature," Coyle commented. "Whether corrupted by her sorcery or wicked in her heart to start. In the end, the result is the same."

"But you don't seem surprised that we found her," DeVries said. "It's not every day that I meet an undead queen and her ghouls."

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting horror," Coyle quoted. "Daniel 12:2."

"I didn't know you were a religious man," DeVries said.

"I'm well read," Coyle told him.

The rays of the sun were shining strongly upon the hillside. The field of the dead was once again engulfed in riotous color. The horror of the night still paled in comparison to the horror of war. Yet, Coyle knew he and DeVries would fight on. It was their nature. But, at least, they fought for the right reasons. Coyle fervently hoped they were fighting for the right reasons. Otherwise, they were merely making sacrifices to Urla's ilk.

"Let's get out of here," DeVries suggested.

Coyle saw no reason to disagree with the suggestion. He swore to himself to send a burial party as soon as they returned to their battalion - even if the colonel made him return as part of the detail.

The dead men on the hillside were warriors. They deserved no less.



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Paul R. McNamee has been an amateur writer for a very long time and an avid reader for even longer. Though he reads other genres and non-fiction, one day he fell into the Robert E. Howard collection, *Eons of the Night*, and he is still there - roaming around the worlds of dark fantasy, sword-and-sorcery and horror—both as a reader and as a writer. In addition, he is a book reviewer for *Sword & Sorcery*

His first official publication is for *The Sword Review*, featuring his American Revolutionary hero, Doran Coyle, in the story, "Queen of the Sepulcher".

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