

The Skeletal Legion

The Skeletal Lord and the Seat of Dust



In a pale, pale tower in the land of the Dead, there stands a ghost. He is the Lord of Pestilence, and he loves his work. The Tower of Bone stands just outside the central plaza of Stygia, near the Great Library. It is a nearly featureless vertical column, apparently made of bone. The crown is a stylized skull, consisting of the vaguest sketch of a nasal opening and two enormous dark eye-sockets that gaze out over the Sunless Sea. Inside, the entire skull is a single room, with two round windows each a hundred feet high. At rear center of the burnished black floor squats a slightly raised dais, on which rests an unassuming throne. Those who enter the hall won't find the Lord sitting there, except on formal occasions. Some believe this is why it is called the Seat of Dust.

The Lord of Pestilence prefers to stride around his room while he thinks and declaims. To be more precise, he prefers, he prefers to stand, gazing intently out over Lower Stygia, and then, without your noticing his movement, he is behind you, peering over your shoulder or whispering in your ear. Whether he is using Flicker or is merely an expert at misdirection is unknown.

There is always at least one other wraith with the Skeletal Lord, sitting on small stool and furiously scribbling away. Every word spoken by the Lord is written down in *Journals of Bone* and stored in vaults deep beneath his tower. If one gets a chance to read these *Journals* (and permission is occasionally granted, mostly to researchers who fawn properly), they are found to be heterogeneous mixes of dry biological data, historical reminiscences and epic diatribes on the philosophy of disease. Each volume (he dictates a new one roughly every week) is closed with a paraphrase of Revelation 22:18-19 from the Christian Bible: "I warn everyone who reads the words of this book; if anyone adds to them, let be added to him the plagues described in this book, let be taken away his share in the tree of life."

From the evidence available, one might conclude that the Skeletal Lord is insane.

One would be right. While he seems, if not stable, at least rational most of the time, on other occasions the Skeletal Lord appears to believe that he is the literal, Biblical embodiment of Pestilence. It is only the absence of Charon (whom he sees as Death) that prevents him from riding into the Skinlands beside his brethren. He speaks of the fine work he did with the Black Plague, or the simple craftsmanship of AIDS. He has even claimed the credit for the plagues visited on Egypt during the time of Moses (however, even if he is the same Skeletal Lord who formed the Hierarchy beside Charon, the dates do not correspond).

In appearance, the Lord is a robed skeleton, wearing a simple crown. He often carries a staff, and his fingers, at casual glance, seem to have too many joints. His visage is all a mask, of course, and no one has seen what lies under it. The Lord's personality is fluid, but he is generally distant, courteous, and a bit frightening when his madness seeps through his polite façade. Scholars have noted that when the Skeletal Lord starts one of his didactic speeches, he is prone to expansive gestures in grand Roman oratorical tradition.

“Mr. Bonyhands” identity is the subject of as much Agora discussion as for any of the Deathlords, and many agree that there was a definite change in the flavor of the Skeletal Lord’s proclamation around 1900. Those who are actually in a position to know scoff at the unspoken theory that there was a palace coup at that time, and defend the Lord by saying that one simply has to be dead for a very long time before acquiring his unique fervor.

Politics and Policies

The Skeletal Lord is conservative and not contentious. He does maintain a subtly adversarial relationship with the Ashen Lady and the Quiet Lord, due mostly to disputes over souls. His most aggressive enmity is with the Smiling Lord, simply because they control the two largest Legions. The Gaunt Man has tried to keep this conflict polite, however, and has ordered nothing more active than the occasional waylaid Grim patrol and some espionage. He is content with his position and power, and one sometimes gets the impression he dabbles in politics simply to keep himself occupied until the Apocalypse. The Beggar Lord is considered something of an ally, and the Emerald Lord is being cultivated, though that particular bloom has not yet flowered. The Skeletal military has specific orders to aid members of the Emerald Legion in need.

The Lord currently has an isolationist stand with respect to the Dark Kingdom of Ivory, mostly due to his frequent, strident calls for the conquest of the Jade Empire. (Indeed, he has an entire corps stationed near the Great Wall, and would order an invasion on the slightest pretext.) He firmly believes in taking one conquest at a time. In his view, all shall eventually fall before Charon (and Plague), so there is no rush. Only the most naïve do not recognize this as a power move, based on the relative differences in mortality demographics between the Hierarchy-controlled lands and those of Asia. In regards to the minor Kingdoms, the Lord’s stance can vary between conquest, isolationism, and outright denial of their existence.

The Policy on Renegades

As to the renegades, any who dispute the authority of Charon shall be hunted and brought to trial. If they can be made to recant, let them be enthralled; otherwise, to the forges with them.

Those who merely disagree with Hierarchy policy, while still recognizing the wisdom of the Absent One, may be safely ignored. A certain quantity of dissenting viewpoints is required to keep the Corpus Politic the way I want it.

-From the *Journals of Bone*, the word of the Skeletal Lord, dated the 17th of December, 1837

The (Unofficial) Policy on Heresy

The Skeletal Lord believes himself to be the literal embodiment of Biblical metaphor, and, as a result, Stygian heresies such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (loosely, Purification and Supplication Cults) are tolerated among the Skeletal Legion. (No one has yet suggested to the Lord that he might be the

embodiment of Shiva, and all who know him are grateful.) While public expression of one's beliefs is still discouraged among Legionnaires, *holding* those beliefs is not considered to be a crime worth prosecuting.

The Policy of Dispute

The Legion's chief disputes over souls are with the Iron Legion (over deaths complicated by old age) and the Silent Legion (regarding those who allow themselves to fall ill and die due to despair). In most instances these are handled in bulk. If a given group of Enfants contains 10 wraiths that are disputed between the Ashen Lady and the Skeletal Lord, the local representatives of each Legion simply divide the newcomers five and five.

If someone (including the Enfant in question) argues, the Skeletal Legion-approved procedure is to have the disputed wraith, one representative from each of the claimant Legions, and two wraiths from third-party Legions discuss the matter at the end of that time. A wide variety of appeals and other delays is possible, and this procedure is not recognized by every Legion, regardless. As a practical matter, the relative personal power of the clerks involved, the strength of their Legions locally and the complex interweave of bureaucratic favors and debts are what usually determine an Enfant's fate.

The Policy of Plague

The doctors of this century are more effective than my contemporaries, true, but the tide of Pestilence has not been turned back, only slowed. For the foreseeable future, those under my authority are expressly forbidden, above and beyond the Dictum Mortuum, to artificially encourage the spread of disease in the lands of the Quick. Disease is the Will, and needs no help from the Dead.

- From the *Journals of Bone*, the word of the Skeletal Lord, dated the 17th of August, 1928

The Policy on Arcanoi

The Legion's regulations regarding the arts of the Dead have a direct correlation with the Legion's relationship with the Guilds. This balancing act of necessity versus rivalry is kept hidden from the lower ranks, who have no understanding of why they are ordered to roust one group of "conspirators" and not another.

As in any sane organization of the Restless, the higher-ups encourage education in the arts of Argos, Castigate, Inhabit, and Moliat among the ranks. The Legion of Bone turns a blind eye to most associated Guild activities that come from this quest for education, and indeed, most of the Restless trained thus have no idea that their teachers might technically be Renegades.

Fatalism, Keening, Phantasm, and Usury are less appreciated by the Skeletal. While knowledge and use of these Arcanoi is not forbidden, any affiliation with the Guilds themselves is not tolerated.

Embodiment, Intimation, Lifeweb, Outrage, and Puppetry are forbidden, and use of these arts is punished with enthrallment, at best. (It can be assumed, however that the Skeletal Lord keeps a few experts on these Arcanoi locked away somewhere, for emergencies.)

Flux and Pandemonium are also technically forbidden, but it is rumored that the R&D Department (see Special Orders) has “labs” dedicated to a detailed understanding of these abilities, with emphasis on the possibility of using them to cause (or, conceivably, prevent) disease. The Lord allegedly keeps a very close, very secret relationship with the Haunters and Alchemists.

Mnemosynis? Banned entirely. Any questions?

Secret Arts

These abilities, developed in the secret labs of the Legion, are unknown to all but high-level Skeletal personnel and equally important members of the appropriate Guilds. A minimum status of 4 (Skeletal Legion or the appropriate Guild) is required before the wraith even hears of these arts' existence.

Flux***: Disease

This art allows the wraith to give a living target a mild sickness, such as a cold or the flu. No Health Levels are lost by the victim, but the Storyteller may assign a +1 difficulty to any action the target takes. With decent medical treatment, the illness can be shaken off in a week. Otherwise it may linger longer and nag for up to a month.

This art costs 1 Pathos and 1 Willpower, and grants 1 point of temporary Angst.

Pandemonium***: Tumorous Growth

This ability causes one of the Quick to develop a (relatively harmless) cancerous growth. It may cause mild discomfort or disfigurement, but is not actually malignant. A successful Intelligence + Medical roll (difficulty 7) is required to control the type of tumor, otherwise the growth's location is at the Storyteller's discretion.

This art costs 2 Pathos and grants 1 point of temporary Angst, and the tumor usually requires up to two weeks to manifest.

Policy

The Policy on Charon

I serve him now as I served him then, and all that I do, I do in his name. He has not fallen to Oblivion, but walks the worlds, looking and learning. He will return, riding a pale steed, and I will stand ready at the head of my Legion, and the Shroud shall fall.

- From the *Journals of Bone*, the word of the Skeletal Lord, dated the third of April, 1896

The Policy on Supernaturals

Practically speaking, there isn't much of one. The Lord regards vampires, werewolves, and mages are ignorable threats, and changelings as simply ignorable. However, if a supernatural being (or, indeed, one of the Quick) should be encountered in the lands of the Dead by a Legionnaire, the wraith is expected to contact a patrol or otherwise attempt to apprehend the being for transport to the Tower of Bone. Unless the captive can somehow prove it is worth more alive, it is efficiently interrogated, and then its physical limitations are tested to destruction (e.g., does Moliate work on a vampire? What if we light it on fire first?).

Internal Structure

At the Necropolis level and below, the organization of the Skeletal Legion is reasonably similar to that described in the Hierarchy sourcebook, though it varies somewhat from city to city. To speak very broadly, however, rule-by-committee is discouraged in the Skeletal Legion. Single leaders at each level have full power to make decisions, and these wraiths bear the expectation that their underlings will carry them out. This has the advantage of speeding up the decision-making process, but does tend to promote unrest among the lower ranks, who often feel (accurately) as if they have no say.

The Military

A wraith of Centurion rank oversees a squad of Legionnaires usually numbering 10. A given squad typically has the duty of patrolling a particular section of a Necropolis or the surrounding area. Without exception, patrols are house, along with several other squads, in a bunkhaunt overseen by a Marshal (inside a Necropolis) or a Regent (in an outlying area). A Marshal oversees four squads, while a Regent may be responsible for up to eight. These groups of squads are called "companies." Each Necropolis has four to 12 companies assigned to it, organized into battalions of three to four companies each. Each battalion is commanded by an Overlord, with no more than four military Overlords per Necropolis. The Overlords, in turn, take commands from the local Anacreon, who holds both a military and civil position, and their High Overlord, who oversees a large area containing five or so Necropoli. High Overlords may have their HQ in the largest Necropolis under their command or in Stygia. Currently, the only rank higher than High Overlord in the military is the General Overlord. That office is held by a wraith, name unknown, of brilliant military genius. He is addressed solely by rank, and rumors abound as to his identity. All that is known of him is that he took office in the early 1950s.

Unique Aspects of the Skeletal Military

A strong emphasis is placed on the longbow in the Legion, despite the increasing scarcity of relic bows. (The Legion pays quite well for any new archery equipment that comes through the Shroud.) Typically, a squad has one or two dedicated bowmen, and one company in any given battalion is all bowmen, trained for strategic assaults.

Up until this century, the single largest killer of soldiers in combat was disease. (In the American Civil War, for instance, fully six out of 10 fatalities were from illness.) Most of the Skeletal military was assembled from the ranks of these Dead, and the troops frequently act as if they have something to prove. As soldiers laid low by the wrong enemy, these troops had dishonorable deaths in life, and wish to do a little better this time around.

A Skeletal patrol can usually be identified first by the soldiers' helmets or caps, which have distinct points suggesting a crown. Uniform style is somewhat hodgepodge, but tends toward 19th century US cuts. The general symbol used on the Legion's flags and uniforms is a clenched skeletal fist with different battalions distinguished by missing fingers. (For example, the First Stygian Battalion of the Skeletal Legion uses a black fist with the pinky missing on a maroon background.) The intact hand is used solely by the Hands of Bone.

The Civil Service

The non-military side of the Skeletal Legion is larger and less homogenous than the ranks in arms. There are many departments dedicated to affairs ranging from the picayune (there is a Lost and Found office) to the Hierarchy-shaking (External Affairs). Most of these divisions are headquartered in the Tower of Bone, with importance being gauged by how far above street-level one is. (The Lost and Found office, for example, is in the fifth sub-basement.) Most of the organizations under the Legion's aegis have official names that, while frequently quite pretty, tell nothing of their true purposes, and modern wraiths often end up dubbing the departments with more informative equivalents.

Internal Affairs and the Inspector-Generals

Exceptional Legionnaires recruited from the ranks of the Legion's Marshals can become Inspector-Generals, whose sole duty is to tour Necropoli and report back to the Internal Affairs department on conditions found there. Working Internal Affairs is a dangerous and thankless job, and only the most vigilant and loyal Legionnaires are suited for it. After all, a wraith whose mandate is to seek corruption among his fellows is not likely to have many friends.

Inspector-Generals have as their primary task to determine if abuse of power is leading to excessive dissent within the Legion. With that mandate, they interview the members of the Legion's lower ranks, minutely compare ledgers with Stygian records and conduct grueling statistical studies of *Enfant* distribution. I-G's of ten consult the files of Quick hospitals to make sure that every death is accounted for. Members of Internal Affairs supposedly cannot be bribed, and never give their reports to anyone of lower

rank than the Assistant Magister of Internal Affairs. Serious situations are taken to the Skeletal Lord himself. Several Anacreons have ended up as furniture as the result of an Inspector-General's visit, and more than one I-G has been clandestinely "murdered" and tossed into the Tempest by nervous Anacreons.

External Affairs

This is the largest single department outside of the military itself. It consists of "ambassadors" to the other Legions (and, unofficially, to various organizations both dead and supernatural), spies and a vast battalion of clerks whose sole duty, in conjunction with their counterparts in the other Legions, is to attempt to coordinate the eight-headed bureaucratic hydra that is the Hierarchy. (Most governments, no matter how poorly run, have no more than one or two departments trying to do the same thing, not eight.)

Research and Development

More properly known as the Department of the Crimson Trefoil, this is a division of scientifically inclined wraiths whose duty is to know everything there is to know about disease. In part, they serve as a "library" for the members of the Legion, so that the Legion's wraiths can better understand what killed them and whether it could have been prevented. R&D is not completely altruistic, however, as it charges for information. Prices vary from one obolus for the data on the common cold to as much as 1000 for the facts on secret military plagues. Despite their commonly used name, R&D's wraiths do not develop new diseases, at least so far as anyone admits. If they have connections to the CDC, it is in an entirely unofficial capacity.

Legion Constables

This branch is devoted to the internal policing of the Legion, and is technically part of the military. However, it acts mainly as an investigative bureau, with authority to call in the military when force is required. Constables are uniformly feared, duty to both their authority and to be the personal aura of their chief, Isabella Somerset.

Maps and Charts

The responsibilities of this department include both exploration of the Shadowlands and Tempest, and the creation of the resultant maps. (Charts of the Tempest are nearly useless things, but there are rumors of special maps that change even as the Sea of Shadows does.) The Maps and Charts bureau also has remarkably beautiful street maps of Stygia (only occasionally modified for political reasons) available for one obolus.

General Service

This is the blanket term for those wraiths who, while technically part of the Skeletal Legion, do not hold government jobs. They number slightly less than one quarter of the total Legion body count, and include shopkeepers, entertainers, Pathos-harvesters, writers, bums, riffraff, and other miscellany.

Special Order

The Hands of the Bone

Members of the Skeletal Lord's elite personal guard all Moliate their off hand into a skeleton's claw, both to inspire fear and for the sake of easy identification. The Lord considers it improper for anyone else (of his Legion or another) to take on this mark, and demonstrates his displeasure upon those who disobey him in this.

The Plague Guard

A small but highly trained and fanatically loyal group, these wraiths stand guard over "disease warehouses" in the Skinlands, particularly the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta and its sister organization in Moscow; where the last two samples of smallpox are stored. The party line is that these guards are there to prevent tampering by the Dead, but popular rumor is that they are a literal honor guard for a well-beloved tool of Pestilence. It is whispered where the loyal won't hear that the guards have been ordered to release these germs if the Skeletal Lord ever needs reinforcements.

The Order of the Quill

There are a great many clerks in the Skeletal Legion, and these are their elite. It is difficult to rise to the rank of Magister or Anacreon without having become a member of this order and earned the right to wear an ebony quill in one's lapel.

Demographics

Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obligated... to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

-Susan Sontag

Disease plays no favorites, but medical treatment comes with costs. A notable percentage of the countries covered by the Hierarchy have socialized medicine, but nevertheless a disproportionate percentage of the Skeletal Legion were poor in life. This is generally to the Legion's benefit; luxuries are few beyond the Shroud, and those who don't expect them are more content with the few they do receive.

A second factor affects the satisfaction of the rank and file in a surprising way. Many of Legion's members are *happy* to be dead. Their last months on Earth were spent wasting away with some painful illness, bed-ridden and with more needle-marks than a junkie. They watched their faculties slip away and their muscles atrophy. They begged for the pain to stop... and one day, it did. They woke up, relatively intact, whole in Corpus (if not in spirit), and felt immeasurably pleased to have finally died. Even when the thousand downsides of being a wraith are explained to them, they can't help but feel that they got the better end of the deal.

This leads, inevitably, to another factor. Most people who die of illness have had some time to come to terms with their impending deaths. Such wraiths may not have liked the idea; indeed, they may have fought it kicking and screaming, but they knew that, inevitably, it was coming. This leads, in general, to the members of the Skeletal Legion having fewer regrets and less ties to the living world. On average, Fetters and Passions are not as strong for Skeletal wraiths as they are for members of the other Legions.

All of these factors, along with the general melancholy associated with those who died a wasting death (as opposed to a quick one), makes Skeletal Legionnaires better suited for non-combat positions over military ones. Of the four larger Legions, only the Iron Legion has a larger percentage of clerks.

Geography

The Skeletal Legion is a strong presence across all of Hierarchy-controlled territory; there are no areas where disease does not take its toll. However, due mostly to the strengths of the competing Legions, the Lord of Bone has the least relative influence in Eastern Europe, parts of South America, the Middle East, and certain violent urban areas such as Detroit and New York City.

Disease Chic

There's dying, and then there's dying with style. Within the Legion, certain illnesses are regarded as being "hipper," "classier," "sexier," or simply "better" than others. Cancer for example, is considered to be dull, in a dread-inspiring way. Tuberculosis, on the other hand, is nearly as eroticized in 20th century Stygia as it was in 19th century London. Bubonic plague is a "commoner's disease," while typhoid is deemed upper class. The Spanish flu is widely believed to have given its victims strange powers of precognition, and Oracles actively recruited from the Legion's ranks while the disease was manifesting.

The Spectre of AIDS

In death, the only contagious disease is Oblivion. Further, the vast majority of the dead passed through the Shroud years before AIDS was named and stigmatized. Unfortunately, stupidity and bigotry are not the exclusive domain of the Quick. There is a small but dangerous Heretic faction whose members believe that AIDS is the wrath of God, and that its victims should be punished unto Oblivion itself. These wraiths call themselves the Red Hammer, but they are usually lumped in with the “unaffiliated” AIDS-bashers as “those idiots.”

Since the Hammer’s targets are universally members of the Skeletal Legion, unofficial policy within the Legion assigns paramount importance to the safety of AIDS victims. (Rumor has it that the Skeletal Lord himself handed down the ruling on this.) Until such time as the Legion smashes the Red Hammer entirely, the wraiths of AIDS victims are also generally assigned “safer” positions that involve fewer dealings with potential Heretics.

Most post-AIDS wraiths appreciate this, but there is, inevitably, a noisy minority who regard it as patronizing reverse discrimination. In death as in life, AIDS is a topic of often-vitriolic argument.

