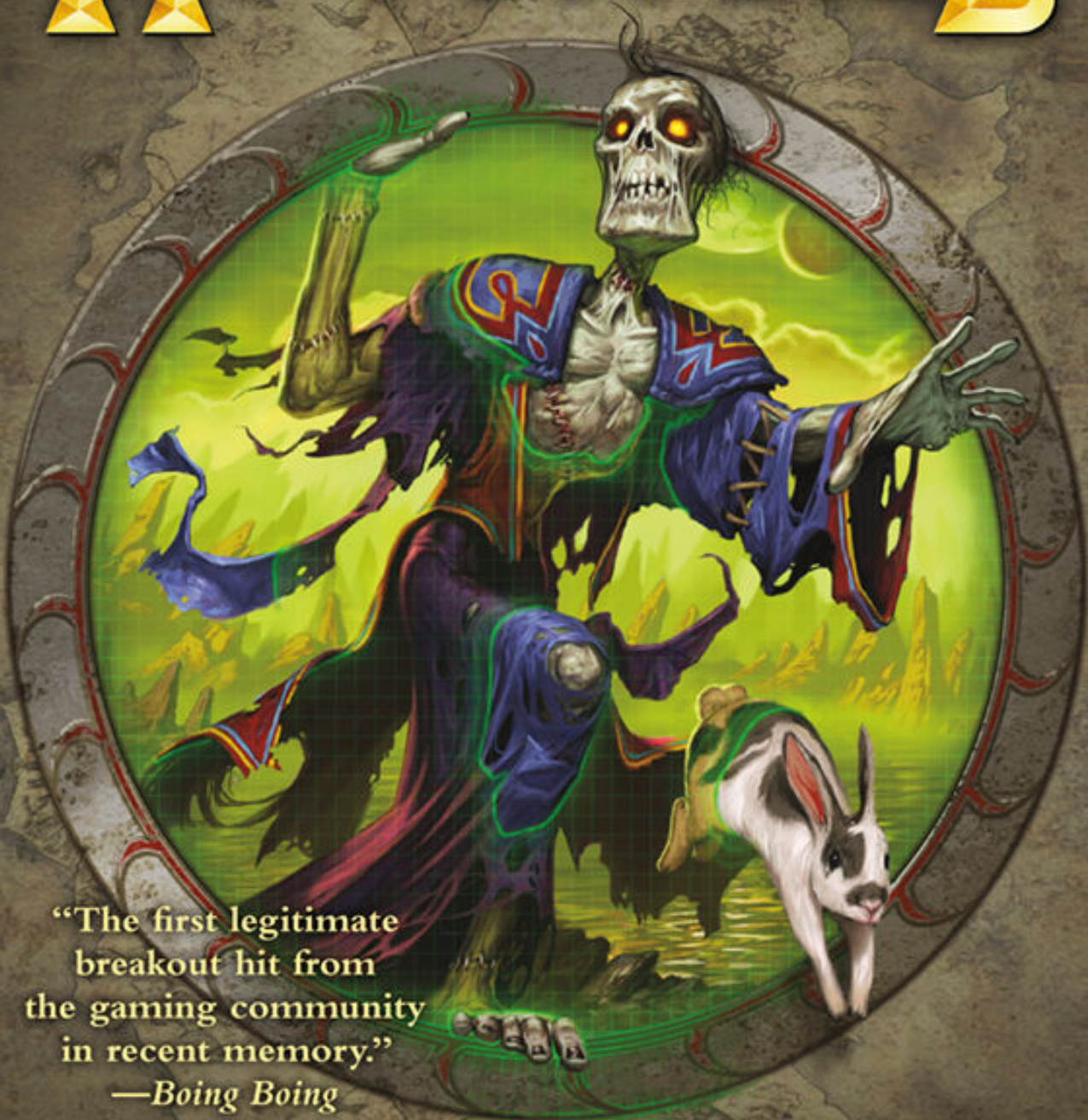


# MOGWORLD™



"The first legitimate  
breakout hit from  
the gaming community  
in recent memory."

—Boing Boing

## YAHTZEE CROSHAW

From the writer of *WILL SAVE THE GALAXY FOR FOOD!*

## ONE

It began as a soft pulling sensation, and grew violently in strength. The light went away fast. The world was speeding back towards me, a gigantic custard pie hurled by a universe determined to make me the butt of some cruel, cruel joke. I scrabbled for purchase with my astral fingers, desperately clawing for something to cling to, anything that would mean I wouldn't have to go back down there.

But no. The universe refused to see things my way, and my spirit returned to my body like a punch in the gut.

I sat bolt upright, or at least tried to; my forehead discovered something hard and wooden overhead, and my skull fell back down with an audible crack. A handful of dust in my lungs interrupted my attempts to swear and I spent a few instructive moments in a wretched coughing fit, clutching at my head. I noticed that most of my hair was missing, and as my hands travelled down, that my face was thin and sunken.

Okay, I thought. I'm not going to panic. I'm going to take a deep breath—okay, I'm not going to take a deep breath, but I'm going to count to ten, and take stock, and I'm going to stay calm.

"I died," I recalled, mouthing the words airlessly. "Oh well. Could happen to anyone. Everyone, even. And now I've come back to life. So I can't exactly complain, can I? I'm in a coffin. That's where they put dead people. It makes sense. Ho hum. There's no air in here. La de dah. Who needs air? Not me, anymore, apparently. My body seems to have been wasting away for many years. Well I never."

A loud rumbling from deep within the bowels of the earth shut me up. The ground shook violently. I could feel the spiders in my lungs clinging to alveoli for dear life.

"And there's an earthquake going on. Fiddle de RAARGH LET ME OUT LET ME OUT—"

The nails were old and gave way almost instantly, but then there was something heavy on top of the coffin, pinning down the lid. I strained until both wood and limb were creaking like talkative garden gates, until finally I felt weight shifting, my lid flew off, and I was catapulted bolt upright.

Light drilled uncomfortably into my long-unused retinas. Normal, boring torchlight, not the glorious holy light of recent memory. I knuckled away a succession of fat pink after-images and coughed up something that looked very much like a cobweb.

I was in a crypt. That made sense—I was dead, after all. The walls were lined with alcoves containing battered coffins like my own, mostly smashed open. The torches on the walls were freshly lit, and the thick piles of dust on the floor were disturbed by very recent tracks.

There came a clattering to my immediate right. I glanced over just in time to see the coffin that had been on top of mine burst open and a skeleton tumble out. "Khak!" it went. "Khakkhakh khakh!" Then it fell apart.

I was attempting to crawl along the ground away from it when another quake shook the crypt. A large portion of plaster and stone disassociated itself from the rest of the ceiling by an inch or two, and reddish dust rained down. "What the hell is going on?!" was what I tried to say, but my lungs were still dusty and it came out more like "Whrrf kkkrgghaff?!"

It did the trick, though. A grayish head peered around the corner of a nearby tunnel. It was a corpse, his complexion pale and scarred, one glassy eye dangling down a waxy cheek. His body had clearly been dead for quite a long time, but the message apparently hadn't reached his brain.

"Oh, hello," he said, his voice reverberating as if his throat was full of gravel. "Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"No!" I had coughed out the last of the dust, but my voice was just as rough and raspy as his. "No, I do not know what's going on! I was dead! I kind of expected things to stop going on!"

"It's just a bunch of us just woke up in here and no one seems to know why." He offered a hand and helped pull me to my feet. "You got off pretty lightly."



"Got off lightly?!"

"All four limbs. Both eyes. Shame about your nose. But you should see the state of some of the others."

I was fingering a rather ghastly triangular hole in the middle of my face when the room shook once again, in the way a human would say "ahem." With a noise like the enthusiastic mating of giant stone golems, the far wall buckled inwards and part of the floor gave way. The skeleton, still trying to stand up, fell from sight with a terrified "khakk," followed by the remains of my coffin and presumably my nose.

"We'd best get out of here," said my new friend. I nodded, took a step, and fell flat on my face. It would have probably been quite traumatic for a person with a nose, but fortunately I was ahead of the game there.

"Sorry," he said, helping me up again. "You're a bit wobbly. Expecting to wake up fresh and ready to go after being dead for a while would be a bit optimistic."

"Well, yes. Expecting to wake up at all would have been a bit optimistic."

"Hey, don't take it out on me. I'm trying to help."

Specifically, he was trying to help me run away from whatever was causing all the rumbling, and from the increasingly collapsing floor. Old and long-unused signals from my brain were having trouble making the long climb down my spinal column to my limbs. I stumbled through the underground chambers on my colleague's shoulder, sensation returning to my feet and joints by tiny increments. The thought was sinking in with greater and greater certainty and considerably greater discomfort: I was dead. I was alive and dead at the same time. I was undead. My current biological status was aggravatingly inconsistent.

I had seen zombies before. There had been a necromancer's tower in the village near my family farm and you'd sometimes see an undead slave lurching through the marketplace. On shopping days me and a few other kids used to flick bits of bread at them so that hungry seagulls would chase them around. And then later, at college, Mr. Everwind was in the habit of raising undead teaching assistants, and a popular hazing ritual was to steal the Undead Command Stone from the staff room and use it to make them pole dance on the school flagpole. I remembered how amusing it had been at the time to watch them move around as if their joints were held together with elastic bands. Now I just wanted to know how they had made it look so easy.

Getting to grips with myself would have to wait, because now the floor was rumbling continuously. We staggered through another archway moments before it cracked and into a wide nexus of passageways at the bottom of a steep flight of stairs. Moonlight shone invitingly down towards us, but in our current state, the steps might as well have been the north face of Mount Murdercruel. Several of my fellow undeads were milling around waiting for someone to take charge.

"Found another one," said my helper, jiggling me.

"Ohh," said a balding woman with no arms. "Look at this fancy dan with his four functioning limbs."

"And his skin hardly flaking off," said a man with no face on his skull.

"Aaa ih ee oo uh aaa," said someone else with no lower jaw.

"I bet he could still maintain an erection," grumbled a decrepit old corpse who probably had issues.

"Uh uh aaaa!"

Between us there were about six complete bodies, spread out over around ten individuals. There was more exposed bone and sinew on view than in a dumpster behind an abattoir, and everyone was wearing expensive funeral attire that had become faded and torn by the passage of time. The whole effect was rather like the aftermath of an explosion at a high-class dinner party.

For the first time I took a moment to examine myself properly. I was wearing what had probably once been a basic mage's robe, creamy brown linen stitched into a pattern that the nearest convenient tailor to the funeral home had probably thought was mystic and artsy. Time, however, had not been kind to it. Both elbows were worn right through. Threads all over the garment had come unstitched, and now dangled shamefacedly from all over my body. The tailoring had been utterly spoiled by whatever thoughtless person had cut a huge slit in the back, from neck to arse.

A particularly loud clash of falling ceiling echoed through the subterranean halls, and the floor was starting to shake again. I and the assembled undead collectively realized that we were still far from safety. A section of nearby wall slid into the abyss that was all that remained of my tomb, and a huge cloud of dust billowed out.

Now half-blind and fighting off a powerful desire to lie down and go back to sleep I tottered over to the stairs, fell forward, and began

wildly flinging my elbows and knees upwards in an impromptu attempt at climbing.

"Look, he can even climb stairs!" said the man with no face, struggling to follow.

"God, life's wasted on the young, isn't it?!" said the woman with no arms.

The fellow with no lower jaw was probably planning to add something, but then the ground cracked open beneath his feet and he was swallowed by the earth with a tongue-flapping wail of fright.

It's amazing how imminent peril can aid recovery from rigor mortis. I was making decent speed, and was already halfway to fresh air. At this rate I'd be perfectly fine as long as I was never called upon to do anything complicated, like shake someone's hand or sit in a chair. The rumbling was turning into a roar, the stairs were starting to shift beneath my hands and feet, and small bits of rock were raining down upon us constantly. A much larger bit of rock decided to join in the fun and thundered down the steps, but it flew over me and collided wetly with someone I hadn't had time to care about.

Being the most functional horrors present, I and the chap who'd found me were the first to reach the top. My arms and legs continued spinning through thin air for a few moments before I collapsed onto dead grass. A handful of the others were able to escape before the crypt entrance uttered a final impatient cough and caved in.

"Wait a second, I know this place," said the man with no face, who had been the third to emerge. "This is the graveyard near Whitbury Farmstead, in Goodsoil County."

I knew of Goodsoil County, but I had never been there in life, because of the rumors that circulated about the native farmers and what they got up to with domestic animals and unsuspecting travelers. It had not, as far as I could remember, been fingered as a dark and sinister place that oozed an atmosphere of tangible evil from every square foot of ground, but that was the sort of thing that could easily be overlooked if you were concentrating on keeping your private places away from backward rural folk.

The crypt had been the centerpiece of a vast graveyard that rolled away in all directions, a stark navy of gray stone slabs sailing on an ocean of dead grass. It was hilly country, surrounded by a black pine forest from which emanated the growl of predators and the abruptly cut-off squeals of their prey.