

Heroic
8

A TIMELY UNDEATH

7 Difficulty
4 Complexity

A standalone encounter for five adventurers

By Corwin Riddle

A Timely Undeath is a standalone encounter designed for five characters between levels 7 to 9. The swamptown of Brelt is no stranger to death; most of its residents are wanted men and often arrive with problems in tow. Interred in an ancient cemetery that long predates the town, many of these brigands find peace for the first time—until a mysterious necromancer arrived, that is. Now, the cemetery seems to have become insatiable, and there are rumors of dead bodies being seen walking the marshlands at night. With nowhere to run and death knocking at their doors, the hardened residents of Brelt have begun to panic—because something tells them the end of their lives is only the beginning of their problems.

BACKGROUND

Deep within the marshy wetlands lies the town of Brelt, known for two things: its seedy inhabitants and an expansive, iconic cemetery. Left behind by an older, forgotten settlement, the cemetery rests atop a large hill rising above the swamps surrounding Brelt, where it overlooks the town with a foreboding presence. Many of the tombs and gravestones mark the resting places of persons unknown, the writing either worn away, illegible, or of an unknown tongue, but it's clear that those buried within the cemetery have known death far longer than the town of Brelt has known life.

Indifferent to the history, the town carelessly interts its many deceased into the cemetery, expanding it grave by grave, tomb by tomb, with alarming proliferation. Some believe the cemetery, and thus the town, is cursed by violating the sanctity of an ancient burial site. Others are unconcerned, for most of the town's residents make up a collection of ill-behaved thieves, murderers, deserters, and other miscreants on the run who find sanctuary in the remote wetlands, and there are bound to be a few casualties when so many roguish creatures meet.

Lately, however, death in Brelt has become a curious matter. People have been dying with a disturbing frequency, even for Brelt, and those long-dead have been seen wandering the marshes at night. At the center of these oddities, deep within

a crypt below the hill, a necromancer named Oril performs strange experiments, using the abundance of corpses to fuel his tests. Those foolish enough to wander near his work are chased off by zombies, skeletons, or other creations, spreading rumors of an ancient, haunting presence in the cemetery—one hungering for more bodies to fill its graves. With their numbers dwindling and the cemetery growing, the hardened people of Brelt are beginning to fear death—and the life that follows.

GETTING THE PLAYERS INVOLVED

A Timely Undeath can be used as a standalone encounter, or as the basis of an entire adventure. The characters can stumble upon Brelt and the cemetery, be sent there in search of a particular criminal, or perhaps be seeking a haven themselves. Once in Brelt, you can send them to the cemetery with one or more of the following hooks:

HOOK 1: A PROPER BURIAL

Although most authorities steer clear of Brelt and the surrounding wetlands, it is not uncommon for bounty hunters and mercenaries to come in search of their quarry. Crowlen is one of these hunters, and has been tracking a thief named Vell for over a year. Vell achieved notoriety for burning down several buildings, using the chaos as a distraction for robbing the remaining houses while the rest of the village fought the flames. Crowlen's house was lost during the fires, along with his wife and two sons, who couldn't escape; Crowlen has since sworn that Vell would die a slow, painful death. However, Crowlen just learned that Vell passed away months ago from a terminal sickness, and died peacefully in his sleep.

Unsatisfied with a death free of vengeance, misery, and suffering, Crowlen asks the PCs to find some way to resurrect Vell, and, once he's alive, give him the violently painful death he so deserves. Vell's grave is unmarked, but the thief always wore a golden key around his neck, and rumor says he was buried with it. Crowlen himself doesn't know how to bring

Vell back to life, but he's heard rumors of a necromancer located within the cemetery, and that might be a good place to start.

Quest XP: 350 XP and 300 gp worth of gems for killing Vell... again, returning the golden key as proof.

HOOK 2: THE FUNGUS AMONG US

Not everyone in Brell is a criminal; some are just honest people with nowhere else to go. Hanla, a female Halfling, is the only cook of Brell's popular inn, and her specialty is a unique and hearty mushroom soup. Unfortunately, the key ingredient, a type of mushroom called bog-tops, is found deep within the barrows of the cemetery and no one is willing to venture close enough to collect them. She offers the PCs a reward if they'll return with a basketful of bog-tops, and tells them what to look for.

The PCs can recognize the bog-tops with a Nature check of DC 15.

Quest XP: 300 XP and 200 gp for bringing back a hefty basketful of bog-tops.

HOOK 3: IMMORAL ORIL

Oril wasn't always a necromancer; he used to belong to a prestigious guild of wizards and magi, dedicated to exploring all that life had to offer. Oril, however, was more interested in exploring death, and left the guild to pursue his own inclinations. Aerus, a human wizard, was sent from the guild to follow Oril and keep tabs of his activities, suspecting they might present a danger to the rest of the world. He tells the PCs that Oril first began his experiments by defiling the ancient corpses buried within the cemetery, but has recently started poisoning townsfolk so as to gain access to fresher cadavers.

Oril's fervor has been increasing rapidly lately, and he has begun killing the townsfolk at an alarming rate. Although Aerus doesn't care much about the fate of Brell's disreputable miscreants, he fears that Oril's practices will become even more extreme as time goes by, and innocents are sure to suffer.

Aerus asks the PCs to enter the crypt and put an end to Oril's experiments, bringing back the guild medallion bearing his name as proof.

Quest XP: 1000 XP and 500 gp for killing Oril and returning his medallion to Aerus.

SPECIAL FEATURES

This encounter has a couple unique features:

GRAVE TRAPS

Spread around the crypt are several traps, marked on the map as brown dirt with hands reaching out.

Grave Trap

Trap

Level 8 Obstacle

XP 0

The icy cold hands of the dead reach up, grasping at those who pass overhead.

Trap: Reanimated corpses lie below the open grave, attempting to grab enemies as they pass above.

Perception

The trap is plainly visible.

Trigger

When a character moves into the square containing the trap, the hands emerge and attempt a grab.

Attack

Opportunity Action **Melee**

Target: Creature on the trap

Attack: +11 vs Reflex

Hit: 1d6 damage and immobilized until escape.

Countermeasures

- Immobilized characters can make an Acrobatics or Athletics check (DC 20) to free themselves.
- A character can attack the hands (AC 18, other defenses 15; hp 1). Freeing a character does not destroy the trap.

RESURRECTING VELL

When Oril uses *Reanimate* to summon more Reanimated Corpses, roll 1d8 for each corpse. When you roll an 8 for a corpse, mark the resurrected corpse as Vell and read the following to the PCs:

As more corpses rise from the ground, you notice a shining piece of metal dangling around one of their necks. It appears to be an amulet made of gold, in the shape of a small skeleton key.

GETTING STARTED

Regardless of why the PCs enter the cemetery, read this when they first arrive:

As you near the cemetery, an unnatural mist begins to roll and swirl between the ancient gravestones. Most of the markers are either too worn to read or written in an unrecognizable language, a testament to their age and mysterious history.

An eerie howl sounds in the distance, fading out to lesser noises of scratches and moans. Up ahead, a break in the fog reveals a crypt; it's entrance, though not inviting, is open, the door slightly ajar.

Perception (DC 15): The PCs notice that several graves have been disturbed and now lie vacant. Surrounding the holes is a chaotic assortment of footprints, leading into the crypt.

History (DC 20): The cemetery's ornate stone fences and gates stand out among a town built with wood and thatching. It is rumored that the marshlands near Brelt were once part of an inland sea route, so it would make sense that a former town might have sat on this very spot, though any supporting proof is absent.

AREA: ORIL'S CRYPT

Read this when the PCs enter the crypt:

Descending down a short, eroded set of stairs, you emerge into darkness and can only make out a monotonous voice whispering in sharp tones, becoming louder and more desperate as you close the distance.

Suddenly it stops, and the room becomes bright as torches along its perimeter burst into flames, one by one. Many tiles of the floor have been removed, revealing smaller burial chambers below. There are several corpses lying about the room, a few stationed on tables, twitching. On one of the tables is a small wooden box, glowing as if covered with some sort of magical field.

FEATURES OF THE AREA

Height: The crypt has a 15' ceiling.

Illumination: The crypt is well-lit, due to the torches along the wall.

Grave Traps: Marked as brown spots with skeletal hands, counts as difficult terrain. See **Special Features** for specific details.

Sarcophagi: Marked as white coffins, these are 4' tall and will provide cover if kneeling or ducking behind them.

Glowing Box: Marked as a box with a green aura, the box is surrounded by a magic shield of some sort. Any PC that attempts to touch the box while Oril is alive will take 1d6 necrotic damage.

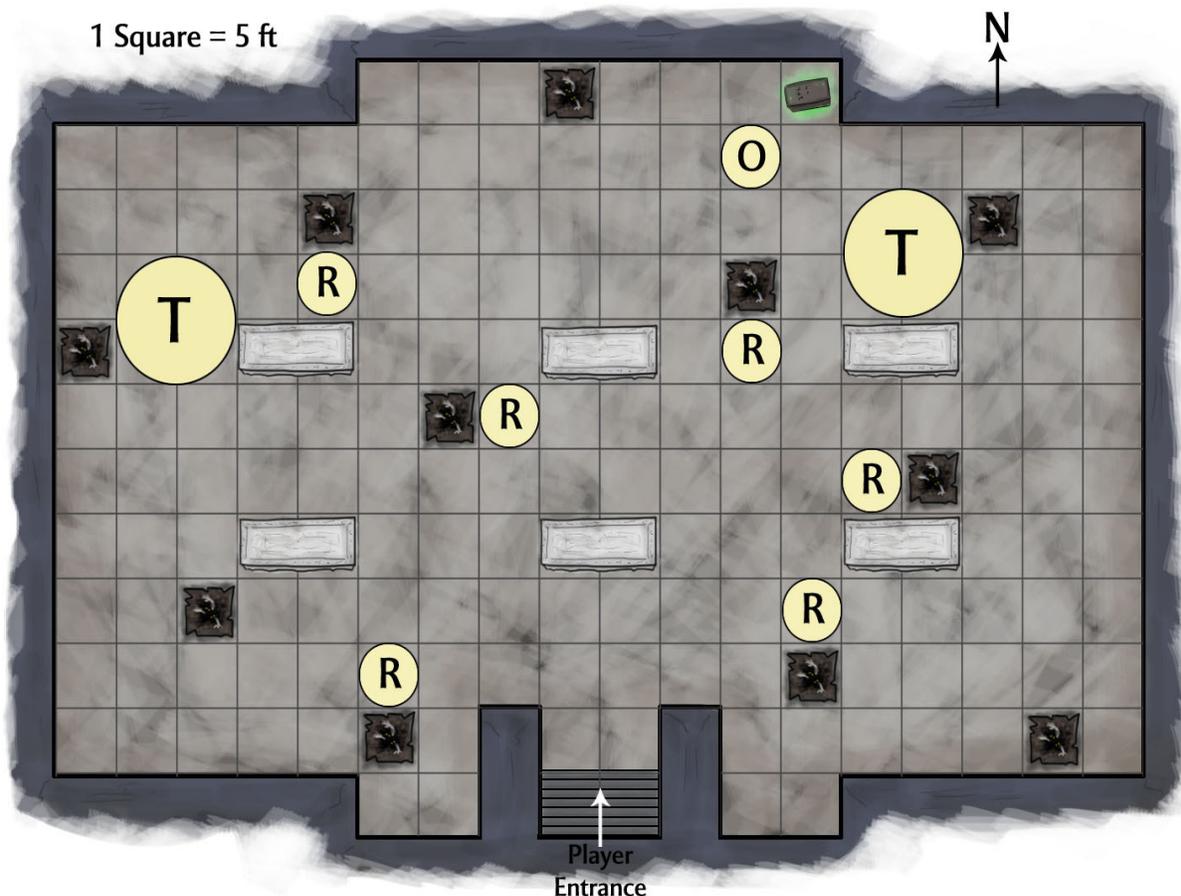
SETUP

Before combat begins, Oril summons zombie defenders to hide behind. Thrashers will appear beside sarcophagi, and reanimated corpses will appear adjacent to Grave Traps.

1 Oril (O)

2 Zombie Thrashers (T)

6 Reanimated Corpses (R)



Read this when the the PCs reach the bottom:

A tall and wiry man steps from behind a table, taking position between you and the glowing box, and says: “No! I’m so close—there’s barely any time left, I won’t give up now!”

Waving his arms and muttering, Oril is slowly surrounded by shadowy wisps of smoke and darkness. Several corpses begin to stir and rise, and you hear the sound of stone crumbling as several sarcophagi fall apart. Within moments there is a small army of reanimates standing before you, overshadowed by two enormous, heaving zombies with elongated extremities.

“It’s quite excessive, I know,” Oril says, “But death doesn’t wait—not for anyone.”

TACTICS

Oril will try to keep his distance, using the Zombie Thrashers and Reanimated Corpses as a shield between himself and the PCs. If he becomes surrounded, he will use *Horrific Scream* to make some distance. Oril will mark whichever PC currently poses the most danger with *Brand of Shadows*.

Oril will use *Reanimation* as often as possible to overwhelm the PCs. When bloodied, he will cast *Mass Reanimation* as his next standard action.

The Zombie Thrashers will attack the nearest PC with *Slam* and *Zombie Thrash*, though they will make an effort to attack a PC marked with *Mark of Oril* whenever possible, using *Oril’s Smite*. Although the Zombie Thrasher can push its targets into Grave Traps, the zombies are stupid and won’t reposition or plan to do so.

The Reanimated Corpses will swarm the nearest PC and use their *Claw* attack, though they will make an effort to attack a PC marked with *Mark of Oril* whenever possible, using *Oril’s Call* and helping the nearest Zombie Thrasher close the distance.

The Zombie Thrashers and Reanimated Corpses are unaffected by the Grave Traps. Oril will avoid them if possible.

PLAYER STRATEGY

The Reanimated Corpses can quickly get out of control as Oril summons more and more each turn, so they will need to be kept in check so the PCs are not overwhelmed.

Oril is quite weak, and burning him down quickly is possible, but might pose a risk if he manages to escape the initial assault, since he summons more zombies when bloodied.

Whoever is marked with *Mark of Oril* should do their best to stay away from any zombies, as it will be easier for a Zombie Thrasher to catch them and deal significant damage through a combination of *Oril’s Call* and *Oril’s Smite*.

Oril		Level 8 Elite
Medium natural humanoid (human)		Controller
		XP 700
Initiative +7	Senses Perception +6	
HP 200; Bloodied 100		
AC 22; Fortitude 19, Reflex 20, Will 21		
Speed 6		
Action Points 1		
Staff of Death (standard; at-will) • Weapon, Necrotic +13 vs AC; 1d8 + 5 necrotic damage		
✧ Brand of Shadows (standard; at-will) • Necrotic Ranged 20; +10 vs Reflex; 2d6 + 5 necrotic damage, and the target is marked with Mark of Oril		
✧ Horrific Scream (standard; recharge ⓂⓂⓂⓂ) • Necrotic Close burst 2; +11 vs Will; 1d8 + 5 necrotic damage, and all creatures within the burst are pushed 2 squares		
Reanimate (standard; recharge ⓂⓂⓂⓂ)		
1d4 reanimated corpses appear surrounding the nearest grave trap		
Mass Reanimation (immediate reaction, when bloodied; encounter)		
1d4 reanimated corpses appear surrounding each of the two nearest grave traps (2d4 total), and a zombie thrasher appears next to the nearest sarcophagus.		
Alignment Evil	Languages Common	
Skills Arcana +13, Religion +13		
Str 12 (+5)	Dex 16 (+7)	Wis 11 (+4)
Con 16 (+7)	Int 18 (+8)	Cha 20 (+9)
Equipment Staff		

Zombie Thrasher		Level 8 Brute
Large natural animate (undead)		XP 350
Initiative +2	Senses Perception +3; darkvision	
HP 88; Bloodied 44		
AC 22; Fortitude 23, Reflex 17, Will 18		
Immune disease; poison; Resist 10 necrotic; Vulnerable 10 radiant		
Speed 4		
Slam (standard; at-will) Reach 2; +12 vs AC; 2d8 + 5 damage, and the target is pushed 1 square		
Zombie Thrash (standard; recharge ⓂⓂⓂ)		
Reach 2; +12 vs AC; 3d8 + 5 damage, and the target is pushed 2 squares		
Oril’s Smite (immediate reaction; recharge ⓂⓂⓂⓂ)		
+14 vs AC; 4d8 + 5 damage, and the target is knocked prone. The zombie thrasher can only use this power if its target is marked with Mark of Oril and if it reached its target on account of a reanimated corpse’s use of Oril’s Call		
Rise Again (the first time the zombie thrasher drops to 0 hit points or less) Make a new initiative check for the zombie thrasher. On its next turn, the zombie thrasher rises (as a move action) with 44 hit points		
Alignment Unaligned	Languages —	
Str 21 (+9)	Dex 6 (+2)	Wis 8 (+3)
Con 18 (+8)	Int 1 (-1)	Cha 3 (+0)

Reanimated Corpse		Level 6 Minion
Medium natural animate (undead)		XP 63
Initiative +6	Senses Perception +5; darkvision	
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion		
AC 22; Fortitude 20, Reflex 17, Will 16		
Immune disease; poison; Resist 5 necrotic		
Speed 3		
Claw (standard; at-will) +11 vs AC; 5 damage.		
Oril’s Call (standard; recharge ⓂⓂⓂⓂ)		
Choose 1 target in melee range. The reanimated corpse does not take a move action this turn. Instead, a target zombie thrasher may move 1 square towards the reanimated corpse’s target. The reanimated corpse can only use this power if its target is marked with Mark of Oril		
Alignment Unaligned	Languages —	
Str 17 (+6)	Dex 16 (+6)	Wis 15 (+5)
Con 22 (+9)	Int 5 (+0)	Cha 5 (+0)

COMBAT FLAVOR

If you dislike reading full powers, stats, and effects to players, use these instead to give them hints:

When a player is marked with Mark of Oril:

A shadowy cloud engulfs you. As you look around the room, you notice every nearby zombie eyeing you hungrily.

When a reanimated corpse uses Call of Oril:

The corpse nears you and howls in anticipation, drawing the attention of a larger zombie, which gains a sudden quickness and makes its way toward you.

When Oril casts Mass Reanimation:

Wounded, Oril reels back, saying: "Enough of this meddling, time is of the essence!" Another sarcophagus breaks open as additional zombies begin to appear.

BATTLE CONCLUSION

Once Oril is defeated, all the zombies will stop fighting and fall down, dead once more. Oril will attempt to crawl towards the glowing box with desperation, but will collapse, saying before he dies: *"I've killed only condemned men—those already dead—do not let it go to waste... please, there is still time yet."* On his body the PCs will find his guild medallion, reading "Oril Murilious," and a level 10 magical staff. If the PCs have not yet found any bog-tops, there are plenty around that they can search for. If the PCs killed Vell, they will find his golden necklace nearby.

If the PCs take notice of the glowing box, read this:

The glowing shield surrounding the box gently hums as it fades and disappears, revealing what seems to be a tiny wooden coffin. Scratched into the top of the wood is the following:

Y.M.

*Death does not wait,
we all find ourselves below;
but life may come again,
for I shall make it so."*

If the PCs open the box, read this:

Inside the coffin is a small human child, a girl around the age of seven or eight. Her body seems fully intact, without the stitches and careless aesthetics of normal necromancy. Although the coffin appears to be decades old, the body emits the slightest trace of warmth; not alive, but not completely dead.

The table beneath the box is covered with notes, necromantic items and symbols, and a collection of tubes and vials. The top-most ritual is written in common, and would be legible to any familiar with magic.

SKILL CHALLENGE

If the players successfully defeated Oril, continue with the following skill challenge:

RAISING THE GIRL

Oril was attempting to bring this small girl back to life and almost succeeded, but her life force wavers upon the edge of a knife. He seems to have completed most of the ritual using magic and alchemy, and his equipment and notes remain; perhaps it could be finished without his aid.

The PCs have a short amount of time to finish Oril's ritual and revive the girl.

Setup: For the girl to come back to life, the PCs need to decipher Oril's notes and follow his process. Remember that you must first discover the notes and process and then perform it—in that order.

Level: 8

Complexity: 3 (requires 8 successes before 3 failures).

Primary Skills: Arcana, Nature, Insight, Perception, Endurance, Heal.

Arcana (DC 16): You use your knowledge of arcane rituals to follow Oril's logic, understanding his goals and the magic behind it. Characters can cooperate to aid a lead character using this skill. This must be used as at least one success.

Arcana (DC 20; only available once the first Arcana check has been successfully completed): You follow the ritual, step by step, feeling a shadowy presence as you read Oril's words. Characters can cooperate to aid a lead character using this skill. This must be used as at least one success.

Nature (DC 12): You know much of natural life and death, and use this knowledge to locate which rituals are meant for which part of the girl's anatomy. Characters can cooperate to aid a lead character using this skill. This must be used as at least one success.

Nature (DC 16; only available once the first Nature check has been successfully completed): You administer chemicals and other necromantic items as the process dictates. Characters can cooperate to aid a lead character using this skill. This must be used as at least one success.

Insight (DC 16): You are able to quickly recognize the order of Oril's notes and determine the current step in the process, arranging the information correctly.

Perception (DC 16): You catch another character's mistake, correcting it just in the nick of time.

Endurance (DC 16): You hold the tubes and equipment steady, making sure not to flinch as the magic and chemicals flow through the devices.

Heal (DC 16): You keep watch over the girl, using your

mastery to prevent her death during the ritual. Characters can cooperate to aid a lead character using this skill.

Secondary Skills: Streetwise, Religion, History.

Streetwise (DC 12): While others search for a missing tool, you use your utility to improvise and create a makeshift one from scratch. Add a +2 bonus to the next Arcana, Nature, or Endurance check.

Religion (DC 12): You focus yourself and find a spiritual calm, helping those around you concentrate. Add a +2 bonus to the next Arcana, Nature, or Endurance check.

History (DC 12): You've heard many stories about alchemy, and know that a specific chemical must be heated to a certain temperature before it becomes potent. Add a +2 bonus to the next Arcana or Nature check.

Success: *The girl's life force is restored and she awakens, unsure of where she is. "Ory?" she wonders, looking around. "Where's Oril? Where's my brother?" Her body and soul seem to have been perfectly preserved, and she does not appear to suffer any ill effects from the resurrection.* Read the Alternate Conclusion below.

Failure: *The girl's warmth fades as she slips away, into death. Within moments, her body begins to rapidly decay, as if it had been buried for over 20 years.*

NORMAL CONCLUSION

Upon returning to town, Aerus pays them, saying: *"Regardless of his motives, it's improper for a former guild member to perform such dark arts. I believe this was the only guild identifier he held, so no matter his fate or history, his actions won't be traced back to us; our reputation will remain untarnished."*

If asked about Oril's reasons or the girl: *"By now, I'm sure you're perfectly aware of Oril's intentions. While honorable, they are also abominable—death is not a jest, and should not be mocked."*

ALTERNATE CONCLUSION

The girl's name is Yori Morilious, and she doesn't remember much besides being sick and her brother worrying about her; her parents died years before then. Upon leaving the crypt, she recognizes the cemetery and Brelt, though she says her house is gone. She died 20 years ago during a sickness in the town, and her brother, distraught, vowed to return her the life she was deprived of. If you want, have her recognize some of the oldest townsfolk, and have the townsfolk volunteer to take her in, with one of them saying:

"She had a brother too, they were inseparable. He was always keeping her out of trouble, but once little Yori passed, something deep inside of him died, and he left Brelt for good. He'll be back though, I'm sure of it; he swore to return one day and take her with him—for a proper burial, of course. Won't he be surprised when he sees her now; It'll put the life back in him, I wager."

ADJUSTMENTS

If you like this encounter but aren't sure you can fit it into your current campaign, you can adjust and scale it to accommodate your adventure. Here are some suggestions:

We don't have five players:

If you have less than 5 players, use fewer zombies or have the Grave Traps function only as difficult terrain.

We're not the right level:

Oril is based off the Crazy Necromancer; Zombie Thrashers are based off Zombie Hulks; both available in the Monster Builder, just change them a little and scale them up.

It's too hard for my PCs, they keep wiping:

This encounter relies heavily on movement and working together to protect each other. If the PCs all split up and run around, they are almost guaranteed to die.

It's too easy for my PCs, they're breezing through:

Zombies. More zombies. So many zombies they can't even move.

We can't complete the skill challenge because we're not trained in Arcana or Nature:

The skill challenge is following a necromancer's work of magically and scientifically resurrecting a person without any side effects. Arcana and Nature are two essential skills for understanding and completing the process, and if your PCs are not trained in either, then at least they can take little Yori outside and bury her again, because she's probably not going to join the ranks of the living.

Alternatively, you can have your PCs fail the skill challenge but bring Yori back as a mindless zombie because of their mistakes.

We don't like the theme/characters/combat hook:

If you don't like parts of the adventure, but enjoy even one of the ideas - steal it and dump the rest.

We'd rather play a full adventure than a one encounter:

This encounter translates wonderfully into a full adventure: the town is full of criminals and the cemetery is full of undead. Here are some sample encounters along the way to Oril's crypt:

Encounter 1:

- 4 Human Lackeys (MM1)
- 1 Human Knife Fighter (MM2)
- 2 Human Hexers (MM2)

Encounter 2:

- 2 Will-o'-Wisps (MM2)
- 3 Bonecrusher Skeletons (MM2)

Encounter 3:

- 2 Zombie Hulks (MM1)
- 3 Chillborn Zombies (MM1)

