

The Old World A to Zed: B is for Grave Robber

Why Be a Grave Robber?

Why would anyone do something as universally reviled as dig up the dead? The answer is most likely “money”. For many struggling just to survive, the welfare of the dead and their possessions seems of little consequence. After all, the dead no longer need their bodies or their possessions, so why shouldn’t the living put them to good use.

Doing a job deemed distasteful or criminal means that one can operate without the normal rules and restrictions. No boss, nobody to answer to. No competition either – who else would want to take the risk. People who are Grave Robbers are likely opportunists, they see the opportunity that nobody else is willing to pursue: a little bit of work, a bit of risk, and a lot of money.



Grave Robbers’ Roles in Society

In the Old World, it is ideal that the dead stay buried in their graves and crypts, since the restless dead have too often brought grief to the living. It is therefore understandable that there are strict rules regarding where and how the dead rest, and who may handle the bodies of the dead.

Many however chafe at the restrictions they deem paranoid and superstitious. Doctors often desire to probe the dead to learn the secrets of the living, alchemists and wizards for secrets in the human body that they alone pursue.

Its a Living

The main reason for digging up bodies is on behalf of academics and professionals, acquiring the bodies for dissection and anatomical research. Due to the fear of necromancy, there are countless laws regarding the use of human bodies, mostly imposed by the Cult of Morr. Many academics, bearing suspicion for the devotion of faith and lack of medical knowledge of the Shallyans and the paranoia of the priests of Morr, scoff at these religious based laws. Such laws kept the body mystified and science needs to turn its impartial eye to the subject of human anatomy.

While these bodies are often sold to alchemists and wizards for magical experimentation and reduction of the corpse into ingredients. Such detailed reduction is

beyond the means of most grave robbers, but there is one part of a corpse that a grave robber might be interested in taking for themselves: the hair. Many grave robbers, while digging up bodies cut off the hair, this is then later sold to wigmakers, usually earning them a few gold pieces or more depending on the quality and length of hair. While this alone is financially insufficient to exhume a body, it is a profitably activity on the side.

As noted above, a handful of unscrupulous alchemists and the like also purchase bodies, and they often render them down for numerous products, using human blood and fat for various beauty products and medicines. Many folk cures and superstitions also revolve around medicines and magic involving the dead, particularly executed criminals, and the body parts of men and women executed in public can be sold for a small fortune on the black market.

Not all grave robbers are interested in trafficking in the bodies, some are interested in what the bodies are interred with. It is believed in the Old World that a body is a testament to the way one lived, and should bear the dignity and respect that they had in life. This has resulted in many being bedecked in their greatest finery and adorned with their most impressive jewelry. This act of hubris is calculated to give the deceased one last and grandiose appearance upholding their legacy and their family's wealth and status before the deceased is beyond human ken forever. An enterprising grave robber can make a fortune off of digging up the dead, stripping them of all their wealth, and hawking the goods to a fence.

The act of grave robbing that catches the imagination of the public the most is the least likely: exhumations involving the act of necromancy. This is far less common than believed, for a grave robbery gone afoul can easily result in the capture of a necromancer. There is trade in this however, but such acts are exceedingly secretive as the authorities are increasingly diligent for this sort of activity.

There is of course another reason to dig up bodies, to dishonor the dead. This isn't very common, but someone can always pay to have someone dug up, the body removed, and dumped or reburied elsewhere. The motivations for such acts are murky, but history is filled with all manner of stories of bodies defiled or moved as an act of final vengeance by the living.

Elsa, at first glance, is the last person you would expect. A young, pleasant woman whose gentle smile belies the grim task she has: providing flowers to the deceased and mourning. She stands outside the cemetery gates each day and has an exclusive monopoly on the selling of flowers. Her arrangements have brought a small amount of comfort and color to the lives of the grieving. She is also given small retainers by families to ensure that some dead receive flowers regularly and that their graves are attended, and she is often in attendance at funerals, placing the flowers within the coffin and her presence is paid for to help bolster attendance at funerals as well.

Her intimacy with the cemetery and its procedures has made her band of grave robbers some of the most profitable and successful in the Empire. She knows who has been buried where and with what wealth. With the help of her four brothers, she has managed to

provide all the local colleges with bodies, but regularly exhumes corpses, robs them of her wealth, and reburies them.

Her brothers, through her contacts, are hired by the clerics of Morr to dig graves, and they are able late at night, to return and quickly dig up the bodies. They are always careful to replace them and have even been able to steal some of the corpses out of the waiting morgue, since they often drink with the caretaker and the old chap is prone to passing out after a hard day's labor.

The group is successful for a number of reasons: first is their superior information. They know when the bodies have been buried and are able to dig them up hours after burial ensuring fresh corpses and graves that do not arouse suspicion due to disturbance. They know which bodies are most profitable, being fresh or buried in opulence. They're constant presence at the cemetery and their contacts there have even allowed them to report in rival grave robbers and thus divert suspicion from themselves. The other element of their robbery is their caution, they always ensure that the grave do not seem unduly disturbed, thus ensuring that their crimes goes unnoticed.

Elsa and her brothers are not monsters, but they are angry: angry that the dead are often treated better than the living, and that many people go to their grave with wealth that could feed families and the homeless. For them, there is nothing sacred about the dead, and that the needs of the living are more pressing. However despite their rationale, they do not give charitably or redistribute the wealth, but have hoarded the money for their own family needs.

Who Would Become A Grave Robber?

Alchemist's Apprentice's are sometimes little better off than indentured servants often laboring for a mere pittance. Now many of the ingredients that an alchemist might experiment with are simply unavailable without a little bending of the law. An alchemist, as a leading member of the community is simply too important to be tramping about in the dark digging up graves. That's the kind of menial and criminal task assigned to an apprentice. After sneaking about a couple of times and digging up bodies for an ungrateful master, there's a chance that an alchemist's apprentice might abandon the rigors of alchemy for the rewards of grave digging.

Physician's Student's are in many ways similar to alchemist's apprentice, carrying out grave robbing on behalf of their mentor's or on their own for study. There are strict laws enforced by the Cult of Morr for assuring the sanctity of the dead that makes it difficult for physicians to acquire cadavers for medical research. After a while a physician's student might just take up grave digging full time to meet the demands created by a local college or community of physicians.

A Rat Catcher is viewed with little more than contempt by many, and when living on the fringe of society it is easy to find work illegally. A Rat Catcher has little incentive to cling closely to social norms and laws. Furthermore Rat Catchers sneaking about a city

at all hours is taken for granted and there is little suspicion and relative freedom to wander about lower class areas. Thus it is a supplemental means of a rat catcher supplementing their income or an escape from their normal profession.

Wizard's Apprentices have similar reasons for becoming grave robbers as other apprentices, carrying out the dirty work of their mentors and masters. Like alchemists, wizards have their own reasons for the acquisition of a corpse, some may be dabbling in necromancy, but more likely they are simply exploring the human anatomy for research purposes or harvesting it for spell ingredients. An established Wizard would rarely want to risk their necks engaging in criminal activity when they can protect themselves by using their own apprentice.

Moving On...

An individual with the indiscretion to dig up bodies might make an ideal Bodyguard, after all, they can be entrusted to carry out all kinds of dirty work based upon their dark history. Traditionally the type of grave diggers that become hired thugs and bodyguards are those rogue individuals who entered the grave robbing practice early on. Those who entered became grave robbers from a more academic background do not typically have the same greedy and brutish disposition that their more loutish rivals.

A Grave Robber may also find his or her way towards Physician's Student based upon their contacts with the medical community. A few months or years of working in the trade may provide a grave robber with the money, experience and contacts to become a student to a physician.

Just as many Rat Catchers become Grave Robbers, many Grave Robbers become Rat Catchers, after all the difference between one unsavory job and another might not seem that great. Switching between the two trades is usually out of desperation rather than any real opportunities. Once one is stained by the stigma of one of these careers it is difficult to become upwardly mobile.

Adventure Seeds

The authorities report that an individual has died from natural causes, but some suspect a cover up and a conspiracy behind the death. Either the grave robbers or another party want the body to be exhumed to discover cause of death. Somewhere on the body is evidence of foul play, and perhaps further clues as well.

The death of a local and prominent figure was quite a tragedy, and everyone remembers the somber and cultured image of the dead in repose shortly before internments. No wonder that someone noticed the charm the deceased wore in the casket worn by a stranger. The hunt is on to prosecute the grave robbers responsible for the reprehensible crime of digging up a noted personality and desecrating their body. Perhaps the body needs to be reconsecrated.

A body gets lost or mixed up.

A doctor has been set up, a body found in his place (he performed surgery and people upset with him. Grave robbers hunted down to find out who is responsible.

A poor penniless beggar, notable for their close resemblance to a wealthy man besieged by scandal has just died. The wealthy lord wants the body, recently interred, to be exhumed and taken secretly to his estate, presumably so that he can fake his own death.

A body, buried mere hours ago is being exhumed when the sounds of desperate thrashing are heard from within the grave. Considering the superstition regarding the dead, will the exhumers realize that someone has been buried alive, and that they are not in fact the undead? Will the person be saved, or be slain in a misunderstanding?

--Rev. Lepper