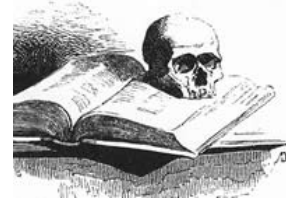


The Lands of the Dead

The Last Testament of Brancazio lo Amocacci Being the Account of Danger and Damnation in the Lands of the Dead

Before I die, I must recount my travels in the land of death and sand. Like my eyesight, my memory fails, and for that I am grateful, for many are the sights that no mortal should witness or recall. However, my soul remains troubled for I beheld things that I have never forgotten, images and experiences that chill to the bone, that destroy the illusion that death is peaceful repose eternal.



I committed many crimes in my day, but they pale in comparison to those I witnessed later. My days as a thief, a pirate, and a slaver are but child's play in contrast to the evils I saw inflicted upon the world by those unseeing eyes in the Lands of the Dead. If you hear of my last account and find yourself drawn to those lands, you are a fool and a scoundrel and may the gods have mercy on your soul. For those troubled by my account, these tales should not be seen as the delusions of an old mind or the ranting of a madman, but a warning about the shadow that waits in the afterlife. And here, at the end of my days, it is the thought of my impending death which fills me with greater fear than anything else I have suffered, for now I know how fitful is the sleep of the dead.

It was the taste of blood and the gold for pound of slave flesh that drew me to the south, and it was my greed and stupidity that led me to the Lands of the Dead. I will curse those lands and my own ignorance and stupidity until my last dying breath.

It was in the opium dens, heavy with the air of incense and lethargy that I met Ibrahim: swords master, scholar, and madman. Strange that it should have been a duel over a whore and a few copper pieces that brought us together. It was over the pearls of opium that he first whispered to me dreadful and ancient legends that seduced me into embarking upon his insane venture. His tales were of cities that sleep by day and awaken by night, where feet thousands of years old traveled the same streets they had always tread, of wars that had been waged for centuries, eyes that never closed, minds that never rested, and of terrible secrets buried deep within the earth that offered untold power, unimaginable wealth, and eternal life.

It was these prizes that drew our strange company towards damnation. Never will Araby see the likes of us, for Ibrahim had assembled the oddest of companions. Massoud the outlaw eunuch, who had carved his masters heart out with his hands and eaten them before the Caliph's harem and his successor, a man with all the strength of a mountain. The Serpent, the Vizier's exiled Wizard who could speak with snakes, kill a man with a glance, and was reputed to traffic with demons and the undead. Fritz Karlka the Empire's most wanted thief and cutthroat, a man whose ruthlessness was only surpassed by his greed. Alkar the nomad warlord who had despoiled hundreds of caravans and was reputed to roast alive those he captured. It was this foul bunch of men who blindly stumbled into the tombs of the undead.

Bel-Aliad

It was here at this sacked city that my schooling in the history of the undead began. This city was once an oasis and important trading point with the nomads to the south and for goods from the Southland when the hordes of the undead, led by a Dark Lord named Arkhan sacked the city, beginning what was later known in Araby as the Lands of the Dead.

It was reputed that the Arkhan served the Lord of the Dead, and was awakened with a vengeance that no amount of bloodshed or cruelty could slake. The atrocities committed when the dead took the living by surprise were still apparent to us centuries later. What the dead did not destroy, the scavengers, the sandstorms and thieves had. There is nothing of value here except skeletons, the buildings are empty and picked clean, and the Serpent warned us not to rest within the boundaries of the city, for he could not assure us that the dead would not find our presence an affront. We spent the night outside the walls, too fearful to partake of the malodorous water gurgling from the tainted oasis.

It was here that we left behind Alkar's companions who refused to ride further and we turned northward towards the coast with Zandri our next destination.

Zandri

The sight of the ocean was a relief for me, fatigued at the sight of the endless dunes.

That pleasure was short lived for we soon arrived on a bluff overlooking the city of Zandri. It was here that I heard Ibrahim first use the term "necropolis", or city of the dead. I had heard tales of the death hulks that terrorized the sea lanes, of ships and crew long sent to the bottom that rise to the surface with the sole intent of bringing further souls to a watery grave and it is from this city that the death Hulks set sail.

Like beached leviathans, those hulks lay rotting in the sun upon the coastline of the city, some little more than wooden skeletons, others half submerged in states of terrible disrepair. Of their crews and captains we saw nothing, and it is difficult to imagine those wrecks ever taking to sea again.

The city was a malignant shadow of what it must have been. The buildings were neglected, the streets empty, and the once bustling bazaars long silent. What was chilling was the old dilapidated docks, whose rotting wood was replaced by bones and dried sinew. Those responsible for the grisly repairs were not visible, but one's eyes were drawn to the dark and foreboding light towers and watch towers that dotted the skyline. Foul birds roosted upon them and Ibrahim took great care that we went unnoticed by the beasts.

Ibrahim was adamant that we never enter the city near dark, so we camped outside the city. To our horror, the light towers lit up with eerie green lights that turned one's stomach and caused great pain behind to our eyes. All night, the creaking of waterlogged wood was heard and the sea itself seemed to groan with pain.



After a night of troubled sleep, we set off at dawn to the city. It was here that Ibrahim began his search. Ancient tomes and scrolls in his possession had come from this city, smuggled out in night from the ports before the city was ruled by the dead, and he sought out clues here from the city's ancient and famed library.

So the living once again walked those streets. As it was in the other cities that we desecrated with our touch, nothing moved, there was naught but the eerie whispering of the wind or the voices from parched throats deep within the shadows. The fear of such places never left us, we never became accustomed to it, but on that horrific morning it seemed all the more fierce on account of our inexperience.

I'll spare you the details for the sights of that morning and those that followed are mine alone to bear. The city library was discovered sacked and a fruitless morning was spent there, although our party found some loot to keep spirits high despite the atmosphere. A map here of the ancient lands of Nehekhara provided Ibrahim with enough information to proceed.

We turned our attention the next day to the pyramids outside the city in which ancient priests were entombed. The Serpent warned us from a number of the pyramids, and Fritz proved his worth avoiding the most deadly and cunning of traps. Were it not for the skill of arms of Ibrahim, Massoud and I, I fear our bodies would have moldered there when the dead awakened. Yet the dead were vanquished and fabulous wealth was uncovered. One might think that this would content men such as us, but it merely whetted our ravenous appetites.

The Swamp of Terror

Flush with the success of our expedition we headed south for cities on Ibrahim's map that may prove even worthier of looting. While passing along the river valley to the south we came across an area that translated from the Araby was "the Swamp of Terror". In the past great effort had been made to control the river by the people who once lived here but in centuries of neglect the river had run over and created a foul miasmic plain.

The ruins of many villages had sunk beneath this plain and Alkar had warned us that the dead lay waiting beneath its scum encrusted surface. We still scoffed at this warning, but when three of our packhorses were dragged beneath the waters with a portion of our loot we heeded his advice in the future.

Along the way we could see in the distance fortresses, cities, towns, and monasteries that refused to be swallowed by the sands, but instead stood out as silent, bone-white memorials of the past. The Serpent warned us about venturing into these areas, for he claimed that the dead still fought for possession of these landmarks.

Khemri

Khemri, along the poisoned banks of what was known as the Great River is of the most evil and blighted places on this earth. In the past that there was a city here where people once lived, worked, loved, and died, but now all that remained were the monstrous testaments to the demands of the dead, their pyramids, tombs, and mausoleums.

In all that remains of Khemri, the halls in which the dead continue to scheme, the most awful are the two great pyramids, a blasphemous tribute to the perversion of the natural order. For it was here that the living slaved away to build for the dead, and it was here that the first and most evil of magics were worked by humanity. For it is claimed

that it was here that the Great Necromancer first learned his arts, first experimented upon the living and the dead, and first defied the gods by challenging death, claiming eternal life for himself.



It is said that no land has seen as much death, as much violence, as much warfare and dark sorcery as this place, and after running the sand through my hand and seeing the charred and pulverized bone in every handful, I have no doubt that this is true. The bones of the dead are forever mixed with the earth, and the air itself is as foul as if it came from the lungs of the deceased. The area around was littered with the detritus of war, great siege

machines, chariots, and other horrible instruments constructed of sinew and bone lay protruding from the sands that have spilled over into the city.

We did not need the warnings of the Serpent to keep us from plundering the Great Pyramid, the grave in which the Great Necromancer had buried his own sibling alive. At night we thought we could still hear his screams, entombed alive, along with the screams of others in a language we could not understand, but both Ibrahim and the Serpent claimed that it was the eternal torments of those who had taught Nagash their secrets, and this was the reward for these evil elves.

As for the largest pyramid there, none thought to even look at the Black Pyramid, whose malevolent nature cast a pall over the surrounding land. Nowhere in the world is there a place lacking in humanity, devoid of hope or redemption. It was here alone that the Serpent had wished to venture hoping to uncover its secrets, but upon gazing in horror upon that black edifice, that wretched and hateful man broke into tears and then suffered convulsions.

This place stifled our very nature, none of us sought out any of the treasures so precious that the dead still fought over them. Instead we spent our time seeking out the trail of even greater secrets that the dead possessed. Ibrahim took countless notes from the runes and hieroglyphs on tomb walls, and he and the Serpent summoned the shades of men long dead, quizzing them upon their lives and the things that followed after their death. We crept into dusty tombs, where guarded by powerful magics and grisly talismans, wards and amulets brought by the serpent, we spoke with liches, ghosts, and even exchanged words with a mighty Tomb King. Oh! Those dark things that I was educated in those shameful days and nights! The things exchanged between the living and the dead and the bargains that were struck I am bound to speak no more of.

It was among these mausoleums and crypts that we sulked about, dodging the undead that fought in its streets heedless of the hour of the day. The Serpent claimed that in the proximity of the Black Pyramid no incantations or rays of sunlight would allow the dead reprieve. It was upon our departure here that dissent rumbled within our group, and most of the party wanted to return to Araby with our prizes, for we saw little to gain and much to lose continuing this endeavor. It was then that the Serpent and Ibrahim told us of the secrets that they had learned, of the magical wonders that the ancient peoples here had discovered: the power to live forever, and that it was in this city that an Elixir of Eternal

Life, and it was from this city that the jealous nobles had stolen the secret. Emboldened by the thought of eternal life we recklessly carried on.

Numas

We turned north, bound in a deal with the dead. The details of this contract will not be drawn from these lips, but we turned dutifully north, glad to be free of the oppressive air of Khemri and its dreadful towers.

We arrived at Numas, a great fortress that towered on a cliff above the murky and bloody waters of the Great Mortis River. This fortress and the city at its base were strategic during the Nehekharas' growth and it was one of the mightiest fortifications created. The brave defenders of the fortress who had died in battle were buried in a maze of catacombs and crypts that reached deep into the earth. Great heroes and powerful mages were entombed there before they rose to carry on their pursuits at the whim of their undead masters.

We, by the very nature of our beating of our hearts were able to perform rituals and incantations that were beyond even the ability of the Tomb Kings. With our stealth and dweomers we were able to penetrate deep into the fortified monastery. Despite the magics wielded it was mere luck that kept us out of the clutches of the cabal of powerful undead sorcerers that now lord over the fortress. As with many other details, I cannot speak of what transpired deep within the bowels of that citadel, but we left behind the body of Massoud, whose great strength was for naught when the witch ghost screamed and blood poured forth from his ears and his great heart stopped. We felt little loss, for our own shares of the plunder were now greater for his absence.

We never learned the exact nature of the dispute, but it seems as if the Serpent had known something we did not. Ibrahim and the Serpent argued for days over our next destination. For Ibrahim the choice was simple, to follow the path of those who had seized the secret elixir from Khemri and returned it to their city; the Serpent claimed otherwise. The Serpent announced that his charms were weakening and that a tower to the south would provide us with great magical power. He had learned in Khemri of the horde of items contained there, but it seems to me now that the Serpent knew before the expedition that within that tower was something he coveted. Ibrahim grudgingly agreed to a quick expedition to the south.

The Black Tower

Had we known the dangers and terrors we would have never allowed the Serpent to lead us to this tower. Lying there in wait for us was a vast and evil intelligence that I doubt was ever human, but something more terrible.

The crooked black tower pointed to the heavens as if a finger indicting the gods of some unimaginable crime. Here in this tower the dead were but playthings, pieces to be reshaped as a parody or an instrument of evil. Everything here was an experiment in form or function, but for what end none could say. Bodies and parts from sundry creatures sewn together, shapes and forms nature never intended, dead creatures stuffed with all sorts of strange organs functioning in a mockery of life.

The powers of the Serpent had been unappreciated by us, but after our flailing about in the tower for hours the master of the tower sought us out and the Serpent's powers saved us. The Serpent had waited and planned for this moment, and the most foul

of incantations came from his lips and the very air itself was rent and creatures from beyond fear and madness came at the call of the Serpent and set upon the master of the tower. Terrible was the battle, and our company of accomplished swordsmen was trampled underfoot as daemons warred with things long dead and great magics clashed. To our surprise the tower's master fled, gravely wounded and hounded by the Serpent's servants or perhaps his masters and we rushed upwards despite our wounds and misgivings. How paltry our loot had been, when we looked in amazement upon the devices and tokens that this monster had possessed! One knew not where to start, but time was not on our side for the sounds of some great battle shook the tower and horrible cries echoed. The Serpent took but one large heavy tome, and urged the rest of us to take only those things not bound by some great enchantment, for such an item could be our undoing. Unnerved by his advice, we looked at the great treasure and half-heartedly contented ourselves with baubles and trinkets. I doubt not that the shadow still presides, maimed and bitter, over the Black Tower for the Serpent remained fearful, as if the great treasure he had seized gave him no pleasure and that he worried that its owner might seek the tome's return.

Bhagar and Quatar

Awed and fearful of the Serpent, we turned from his guidance and put our trust in Ibrahim. As we left the tower behind we continued east. The Serpent spoke of a city of the dead to the south, but Alkar warned us of the city of Bhagar, for his people knew of it. The city was on the forefront of the war with the peoples of Araby and its undead armies were powerful and vigilant, yet despite their strength they had failed to take the Araby city of Ka-Sabar, and that many of the fierce nomads and dervishes headed to the area to prove their strength and power in battle against the Undead. Looters such as ourselves are executed on sight by the powerful armies of the Caliph of Ka-Sabar and his fanatical allies.

Following the trails of ancient armies we headed to Quatar, the Palace of Corpses. To hear Ibrahim speak of its former glory rekindled the greed of this troupe of fools. One of the three great cities along with Khemri and Lahmia, this city united the regions of ancient Nehekhara and controlled a strategic valley. From the fertile river valley to the north had long ago come food, from the mountains to the East great mineral wealth, and Quatar had dominated the trade during its reign by its mortal nobility. The city's wealth and its nobility's influence played a great role in the fall of the Great Necromancer, the unification of the nearby lands, and the defeat of the city of blood-drinkers, Lahmia. The dead of Khemri had spoken bitterly spoke of the influence that the nobility of Quatar still wield, for the nobility of Quatar still play politics, engaging in bewildering diplomatic ties and alliances and controlling the important pass through the mountains.

This necropolis was of the greatest and most appalling splendor. The opulence of the palaces there was only surpassed by the decadence of their tombs. The city itself had suffered little in the wars due to the political wiles of the nobility, although the outlying fortifications guarding the city seemed to have experienced the brunt of the hardship.



More importantly to use, its distance from Araby ensured that the place had not felt the sting of tomb robbers.

Think not that they the dead here are unwary, for their city is located so strategically that many covet it. The city has countless nobles, their moldering finery infected by the same rot as their funeral wrappings, and these withered husks still hold court and entertain within their resting places and their palaces. We paused at this city to make deal with a shriveled corpse who sought information to regain his lost power as well as to loot the palaces of the vain and shriveled lords and ladies. While the dead paraded and conspired in their luxurious estates, we crept about plundering the wealth of an empire. Our three-day looting spree nearly ended in misfortune when Fritz and I were discovered in a palace treasury. By daring, initiative and my sword I fought free in time to flee with my comrades, but I surmised that the dead had seized Fritz. However the wily Fritz was able to escape their clutches, return to loot the same treasury on his own, and meet up with us the next night as we departed.

Charnel Valley

Ruined and functioning fortresses defending Quatar pock the western end of this valley. It took much ingenuity on our part to sneak past the unsleeping sentinels. The Serpent spoke with the first living thing we had seen in a week, a sickly snake hiding in its hole, from whom he claimed he had learned of a high pass that was used in the past for accessing the mines of the mountains. Fortunately we followed his advice, for the valley is desolate and barren and the undead carefully patrol the valley floor. Great carrion birds as twisted and misshapen as this land guarded the valley as well. The Serpent claimed that these Carrion feasted on the flesh of the undead and were themselves turned into undead. Ibrahim, not to be outdone by the Serpent, delighted in telling us that the valley got its name from the countless funeral pyres that burned in the valley over the ages as armies fought and died for control of it.

Mahrak and Rasetra

What little relief we felt leaving the Charnel Valley ended as we found ourselves before another mountain range, which Ibrahim translated as the Devil's Backbone. Our goal was a city known as Lahmia far to the north. We conferred together and decided to take the quickest path north, through a valley dominated by a necropolis called Mahrak. We made advanced along the valley and saw little of the undead. Our goal was to skirt the city but upon arriving at it we discovered that impossible, for the city was being besieged.

It was critical for us to circle the city rather than pass through it, and a mere glance at the city assured us of this. We had heard the legends of how this city once earned its title of the City of Decay, and I saw no sorrier site than that crumbling city. A pall hung over the city and the buildings and pyramids outside the city seemed to be crumbling away. It is said that the Great Necromancer warred upon the city and they refused to surrender so he laid a great curse upon them, and the people of the city were affected with a plague and even in death they continued to suffer from the ailment. Ibrahim claimed that it was from this event that Tomb Rot was created. Whatever the truth of the story, even the buildings looked as if they were wasting away. We knew to approach the city would be to suffer a long and agonizing death.

Ibrahim noted that the army besieging came from the fortress-necropolis of Rasetra, a place not controlled by a Tomb King but by a circle of liche Priest Kings who still demand the submission of the nobility to their beliefs. The army was a fearsome sight. Leading it into battle were the mummified champions of the Priest Kings in their war chariots leading hordes of skeletons against the crumbling city walls. Great war machines constructed of bones of giant creatures fired over walls or were brought to bear on the weakened defenses. At the back of the army bearing great altars were assembled some of the priest kings, their very cerements inscribed with mystical symbols wielding ancient artifacts of their order, using them to create dramatic displays of magic that clashed with the equally great magics being wielded by the city's defenders.

While we should have been despondent about the waste of time, turning away from that city was itself a great relief. The city passed from view and we decided to continue north upon the other side of the Devil's Backbone.

The Crater of the Waking Dead

As we circled around the Devil's Backbone we passed the Crater of the Waking Dead that from a distance looked like a festering boil upon the earth. The rest of us had to suffer through long arguments between Ibrahim and the Serpent over the nature of the crater. Ibrahim believed that the Crater was the sacred burial ground for a Nehekharan priesthood. According to him the sect's diviners predicted a day when the dead would rise and carefully planned their burials with this in mind. The Serpent insisted that the crater was created by fallen warpstone that smashed to earth and awoke the dead. I suppose it is of little import now, for neither of them lived long enough to prove their theories.

Doom Glade Swamp and the Gulf of Fear

With my long years at sea one would think I'd be pleased to see the coastline again, but I have never seen a body of water that size so poisoned as the Gulf of Fear. I would discover the source of that poison later, but the currents in the area created the Gulf of Fear, as the people of Araby call it, a gulf in which the water stagnates and has created a fetid Doom Glade Swamp which is every bit as foul as the Swamp of Terror to the west. In our exhaustion we erred in judgment, and ignored Alkar's admonishments to stay out of the marsh. We strayed and learned the error of our ways too soon, when a great beast, rotting and corpulent, raised itself from the muck. Alkar's horse fled and he fired arrow after arrow into its bloated reptilian form but the great beast swallowed both whole. We lost a few of our packhorses and camels in the flight, and with our guide gone, the one who had helped us live off the land, our spirits ebbed even lower.

Lybaras

The sight of yet another Necropolis did little to lift our flagging spirits. Lybaras was what Ibrahim called it, once a small port overshadowed by Lahmia, it was one of the cities that participated eagerly in the sacking of Lahmia. The insult has never been forgotten and Lybaras itself has been locked in bitter war with Lahmia ever since. Exhausted, paranoid, and wanting to finish this endeavor quickly we avoided the city. I can only tell you of my impressions of it, a city on a bluff surrounded by a great wall that interlocked the various monumental mausoleums that served as strong points in its

defense. The decrepit port was beyond my view but I could see little possibility of anything staying afloat on that wretched body of water.

Lahmia

It would be a falsehood to suggest that we weren't horrified but all the encounters and sights we observed, but it did little to avert us, for a strange madness had seized hold of us. We were driven by the thought of an eternity to spend the wealth that we had acquired.

And it was here that we discovered the city where the Elixir of Life was taken from Khemri. When the people of Nehekharu had long waged war upon the evil of Khemri, the Lahmian nobility had secretly stolen the Elixir. Over time they're dabbling with the precious fluid twisted them, so that they craved the warm blood of the living and hated the light of the sun. They became so great a menace that their former allies aligned themselves against them and sought to destroy the evil of the city. Its enraged neighbors razed the great city. It was here that we hoped some of the secrets of the Elixir remained. Had I known from the outset that I would journey to the city from which the blood drinkers had originated, I can only hope that I would not make the same decision.



We felt that our trip had ended at last. The city and its monuments were in shambles, it seemed as if a hateful vengeance had been exacted upon the city. The upper layer of the city was demolished, but deep below lay catacombs that even the victors had been wary to enter.

The Serpent turned to defending us, and clutching that tome he had found in the tower to his chest, we ventured into the city following Ibrahim's lead. I remember little of those sprawling tunnels, the hidden workshops, and the ancient writings concealed from sight. It seems that we spent days there, and we may well have.

The maze of catacombs seem a blur, but I remember coming across the crypts. Those crypts, and the screams and moaning coming from them have haunted my every night's sleep since., the victors had sealed the blood drinkers magically in a crypt when they stormed the city, and those monsters entombed within had gone mad with longing for a single drop of blood. In their frustration and rage that lasted millennia they must have done terrible things to each other. We could hear their desperate pleas, their maddened threats, their inhuman screams. One did not need to speak their forgotten language to sense the agony, the suffering, and the ageless evil in their voices. For even these fiends, being buried was an eternity of torment with no salvation.

Ibrahim managed to piece together most of the information he needed and we then sought out a laboratory that had been unknown to the attackers. We found the laboratory to our joy, and its occupant to our horror. I know not the nature of that entity, but I suspect that it may have been one of the first of the blood drinkers. It stalked us in its great laboratory. When it had trapped us, we thought the Serpent's wards would work, and they did seem to for a brief moment for the monster halted. Then to our horror it noticed the ancient tome the Serpent had seized from the Black Tower, and for the first time we saw a human emotion flicker through those eyes: greed. I know not what the book is, or what secrets it contained, but that creature's will drove it through all the

Serpent's mighty defenses, and it seized the Serpent as he blasted it with immense magical powers, tore the book from his grasp, lift him aloft, and then drank from his slashed throat like a greedy pig. Shocked at this display we fled, and it followed. Bereft of our defense we were sorely beset upon by all manner of creatures bursting from graves, from the very earth itself, and from the thin air itself it seemed.

Ibrahim navigated the tunnels and as the exit loomed ahead we rushed recklessly forward, only to see our pursuer, far more familiar than us with his domain, appear from the shadows. Ibrahim held aloft his blade and fought him, and his display of skill was like none I had seen before for he fought for his very life. To my eternal shame, we raised not a hand to aid him but instead Fritz and I fled as he battled. My last sight as I looked back for the last time was Ibrahim crumpling mortally wounded before that awful darkness as it hunched down to feast upon him.

Nagashizzar

I've told you we were mad. After all we had been through, and with immortality in our clutches, we were not about to pause. Without the Serpent's wife or Ibrahim's misguided wisdom, we had none to convince us otherwise, two foolhardy and greedy thieves. Fritz pieced together Ibrahim's notes and maps, and the two of us, with the great wealth in tow headed to that very region that Ibrahim himself and the dead with whom he consulted with would never mention. For we had learned that the blood drinkers, those who had partaken of the Elixir of Life had fled to the north, to a place where its creator the Great Necromancer still dwelled, and it was there that the final secrets regarding the Elixir of Life must rest. It was that knowledge and our ignorance of the place and our own vile natures that drove us there.

If Khemri was an abomination, it was at least one with human origins. Nagashizzar and the Desolation of Nagash is the work of something entirely inhuman. Not just evil and blighted, it is a land in which the very earth itself is dead, warped, and twisted. I cannot be certain of what I truly saw and what was delusion, but there can be no more a terrible sight.

The Desolation of Nagash is a wasteland where the soil is polluted with the pollution of warpstone, and amidst this desolation is a great body of polluted water, whose name the Sour Sea does it no justice, it was this horrid body responsible for the poisoning of the Bitter Sea and the Gulf of Fear. Presiding over this was a mountain turned into an abhorrent pustule, from which the foulest of vapors sulk. It is here that the Great Necromancer built a fortress that

It was here that my stupidity finally failed me. Fritz, the greatest thief that I had ever met, walked into that fortress alone to perform the greatest of thefts: the secret to immortality. I knew he would not return, but I remained on that cliff for three days. After that, I alone left with the wealth of an ageless empire in tow.

Epilogue

There's no great tale behind the loss of the countless and priceless treasures I alone now possessed. Gradually as I battled my way back to civilization that wealth slipped between my fingers without me spending the smallest gem. Chance and misfortune both robbed me of my goods, and if one could retrace my steps they could

become the wealthiest person imaginable. I crossed those deserts and mountains and emerged half dead and penniless.

Take this tale as truth or fable as you see fit. Call me a storyteller, a liar, or a fool with a fanciful tale. It matters not to me what you think of me. But by the gods, I beg of you, heed my words: there are great evils, do not seek them out, but be on guard and learn to love the good things that abound around you. For they at least will fade away, but the evil is eternal.

-As told to the Reverend Lepper