

THE IX AGE

FANTASY BATTLES



UNDYING DYNASTIES

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2nd Edition, Background Book

ENDURING ATTENDANTS

May eternity spare those who laboured to carve these inscriptions.
We'd also like to thank all the community members and other staff
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KINGDOMS OF THE DEAD

MY TRAVELS IN NAPTESH

—By Beatrix von Ueblingen, Wizard of the Imperial Society of Eichtal

6th of Acrober, 962 A.S.

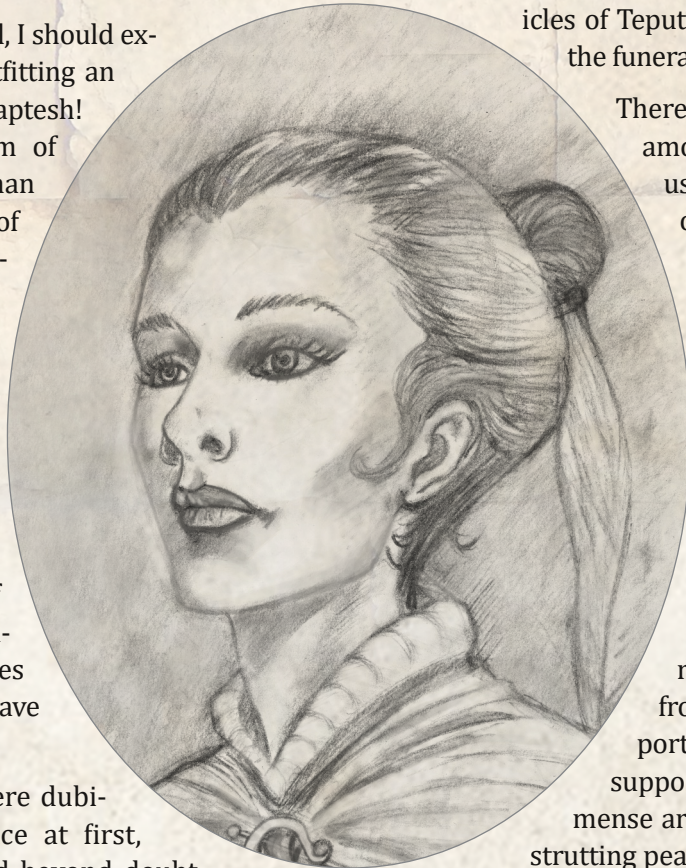
I cannot believe my luck. Of all the people the Society could have chosen to lead the expedition, they chose me! That whey-faced worm van der Grimm looked like he was on the point of apoplexy when they made the announcement.

If this is to be my journal, I should explain: the Society is outfitting an expedition to Naptesh. Naptesh! The legendary Kingdom of the Dead, cradle of human civilisation and the art of necromancy, which swallowed the Lost Crusade and generations of treasure hunters in its trackless deserts. The research opportunities are endless. This all began one month ago, when the Society purchased a number of artefacts from the adventurer Ferdinand Valdes (whose exploits you have no doubt heard of).

Though our experts were dubious of their provenance at first, close inspection proved beyond doubt that the contents of Valdes' haul were in fact genuine Naptaan grave goods. The goddess knows how Valdes came by these; he certainly wasn't forthcoming with the information.

The prime specimen was a gilded sarcophagus, containing the mummified body of an actual Naptaan prince.

As one of the Society's foremost experts on the Naptaan script, you can imagine my excitement when I deciphered the hieroglyphs on the sarcophagus that identified the body inside as none other than King Kharatep, listed in the Chronicles of Teput as one of the keepers of the funerary caskets of Phatep.



There was no sign of the casket among the loot Valdes sold us, and close questioning of his men revealed they had not seen anything matching its description. The implication is clear – if Valdes' men did not take it, the casket must still be there! We wasted no time in extracting the location of the tomb from them, and putting together our own expedition to retrieve it. Quite apart from their historical importance, the caskets are supposedly artefacts of immense arcane power – how those strutting peacocks at Narrenwald will tear out their hair when they hear we have one in our possession!

For those unfamiliar with Naptaan lore, I include on the following pages an excerpt from the Naptaan legend known as the Time of the Great Dying, which explains the origins of the caskets.

For now I must make my preparations for departure – the expedition sets off tomorrow.





THE GREAT DYING



The following excerpt is from Abd al-Latif's seminal translation of the Naptaan Book of the Dead. It is reproduced here in the Imperial tongue by permission of the Great Library of Eichthal.

Gr^eatest of all the kings of Naptesh was Phatep, who sat at the right hand of the gods. Under his divine rule the summers were long, the harvests were bountiful, and the borders of the empire stretched from the mountains to the western sea. His queen was Teput the Wise, and together they ruled in harmony over the peoples of the valley and the desert.

Vizier to Phatep was Setesh the Outlander, whose heart grew hard with envy of his king. In secret he brought together others of the younger houses of Naptesh, promising them wealth and power when he came to rule. First among Setesh's conspirators was Nepharet, the queen of Hanaphuk. Nepharet had long resented the rule of the kings of Tehmet, and saw in Setesh's plot a chance to elevate her own city above all others.

Together with his conspirators, Setesh devised a trap. When Phatep travelled by sea to speak to the little men of the mountains, a splendid banquet was prepared in Nepharet's court for his return. When the white sails of the ship were seen on the horizon, Setesh instructed that the king was to be brought to the palace in the hours of darkness, so that none would see him come or go.

When the banquet table had been laid and the king given the seat of honour, Nepharet bade her servants produce a wondrous chest, ornamented with gold and lapis lazuli. With fine words, Nepharet told all present she would present it as a gift to the first of her guests who could fit themselves wholly inside its walls.



One by one, Nepharet's guests tried and failed, protesting that they could not fit themselves inside. At last, in his cups, the king was prevailed upon to try.

The moment Phatep knelt down inside the chest, Setesh's lackeys slammed shut the lid. Drawing their swords, they ran the chest through, striking again and again until their blades ran red with the blood of the king. Nepharet and the conspirators drank of the blood that ran from the chest, hoping to gain some measure of the king's divine power.

It was at this time that Setesh the traitor chose to emerge from the shadows. He bade his followers cut Phatep's body into nine pieces. He commanded that each of the pieces of Phatep's body be sealed in a gilded chest of its own, and carried far from Nepharet's palace to conceal the evidence of their crime.

Setesh would return to Tehmet and take the throne, claiming the king's ship had been lost at sea. He took with him the king's heart, knowing that was where Phatep's true divinity resided.

Unknown to Setesh, one of his followers – Tekhamun, the Twice-Turned – already grew sick with guilt at what they had done, the taste of the king's blood turning foul on his tongue. So it was that on his journey home, Tekhamun threw the chest containing Phatep's head into the great River Napaat, which carried it to the feet of Queen Teput. Teput had received summons from Setesh to attend him at court, but knew now the treachery of Phatep's grand vizier. Carrying her

husband's head as proof, she rallied the old families of Naptesh against the usurper, and the empire was torn by civil war. At first, it appeared Setesh could not hope to triumph against Teput and her allies. Their wealth was greater, their armies more mighty. Setesh, however, had stolen the heart of the king, and with it the power of the gods themselves.

Setesh threw open the gates of the underworld, dragging the dead from their rest to fight for him again, and the armies of Teput were thrown back. For years the war raged, poisoning the lands of the empire. Cities were razed and villages were burned, leaving only death and sorrow behind. Disgusted at what had become of their favoured son, the gods turned their backs on Naptesh. A terrible drought turned the fertile fields of Naptesh to dust, and the traitors who had drunk of Phatep's blood were afflicted with a curse of eternal thirst. Still Setesh's army of the dead fought on, needing neither drink, nor food, nor shade.

After long years of bloodshed, Teput brought Setesh himself to battle on the Plain of Takhat. Beneath the blaze of the sun, the two armies clashed, while the usurper and the rightful queen sought each other out.

Face to face, they fought until at last they fell, each having dealt the other a mortal wound. As they lay dying, Setesh mocked Teput. I have no

fear of death, he told her, for I have made myself master of death. But when your death comes, your spirit will become a subject in my realm.

Even as Setesh breathed his last, Teput realised the terrible truth of his promise. She cried to the gods of Naptesh to spare her, and she was answered. The gates of the underworld were shut forever, sealing Setesh in as god of his own prison.

In turn, the people of Naptesh were condemned never to know peace in the halls of the afterlife, wandering instead in this world as the restless dead.

So it was that the Kingdom of Naptesh became the Kingdom of the Dead. Those living who remained in the haunted lands soon fled, their fields already turned to ash by the curse of the gods.

Only those nobles who could not bear to leave the proud history of their ancestors remained. Waited on by households of the dead, they lingered in their palaces of marble and alabaster until death came for them. Then their undead servants would embalm them according to the ancient custom, and carry them to their tombs, to wait down the long ages against the day that Setesh the betrayer could be destroyed, and their path to paradise made clear once more.

They are still waiting.



—Variations on this myth have been found in the Annals of the Dust Sea
and in the oldest catacombs of Avras

Records exist of another account encountered by the crusaders of Equitaine under the rock formations on the north coast of Naptesh known as the Pillars of Har-Khowarp; regrettably, these carvings were destroyed at the order of the priesthood of Sunna, B. U.

27th of Acrober, 962 A.S.

It has been a long voyage, but we have finally made landfall at the city of Port Reynaud, on the north Taphrian coast. I for one will not be sorry to say goodbye to our ship, the Glory of Sunna – the Wallowing Tub would have been a better name. I have never felt so sick in my life.

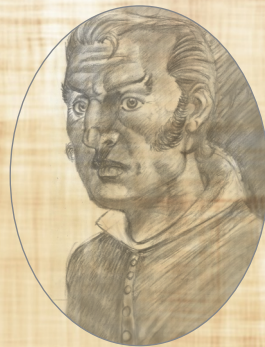
Port Reynaud was built as a crusader port, and it shows – the great fortifications surrounding the harbour and the keep are far more impressive than the town itself.

Thankfully we have no need to stay here long – just long enough to pick up guides, guards and pack animals for our expedition into the desert. Gunther has been out hiring and our roster is almost complete. Few of the locals seem willing to assist us. Perhaps in the circumstances it is understandable, but I do wish they could be made to see past their superstitious fears. I suppose it is their loss.



Gunther Helmgart

Head of our porters from the Imperial Society. A stout and reliable man, he has been invaluable on the journey thus far. I fear however that the heat is getting to him.



Johannes Grunstein

A scholar of ancient history from the University of Narrenwald. He seems singularly useless to me, but Master Aldebrand insisted we take him along. He claims some knowledge of Naphtan hieroglyphs, and chews so much qat that his hands tremble incessantly if he goes one day without it.



Gilles D'Auvigne

A grim fellow, and the newly-appointed leader of our guards. Gunther found him close to the docks, and says he fought in the last crusade. From his scars it certainly seems plausible.



Abdullah ibn-Rahil

The head of our guides. He claims he is well-known to the desert tribes in these parts, and can see us safely through the sands – although it took a great deal of money to convince him when he learned of our destination. Personally I would not be surprised if his fear was feigned. It was certainly an effective negotiating tactic.



MONARCHS OF THE DEAD



The mummy Valdes supplied to the society was the best-preserved specimen I have ever had the privilege of examining.

The hieroglyphs on the lid of the sarcophagus identified the body as Kharatep, King of Djedesh. His list of titles was very grand - Favoured Son of Nephth-Ra, Lord of the Delta, Pillar of the Sky, Right Hand of the High Queen, Last and Greatest of His Line.

These can be seen as typical for the kings of Naptesh. Though during the time of their empire all the cities of Naptesh answered to the King of Tehmet, each city had its own royal line.

The kings, or "pharaohs", were glorified as demigods, separate from and superior to the common people who laboured to build their great monuments. Each pharaoh kept a court, filled with lesser nobles (or "nomarchs") who claimed various degrees of proximity to the royal blood.

Those whose relation was too distant to hope to inherit sought glory on the battlefield, or else joined the orders of the empire's priests.

Those of higher birth attended closely to the wishes of the pharaoh, seeking always to be confirmed as his heir.

The history of the greatest dynasties of Naptesh could be traced for many centuries, and the throne of Tehmet changed hands between them on several occasions. Since the fall of the Naptaan empire, it is the tombs of the pharaohs that have formed the most enduring symbol of their kingdom.

According to legend, the mummified bodies of the kings still sleep fitfully within, waking sometimes in kingly anger to direct their armies against the lands of the living. Thankfully, Valdes' specimen showed no such inclinations - but the Society has placed powerful wards on the chamber in which it is kept.

Just in case.



I beg yer forgiv'ness Sire. The lads and me, we marched on the hill like we was ordered. There was a few of the skellingtons there, but nuthin we couldn't handle. Until the bits of bodies started fallin'. One first, then two, it were just rainin' bones and gristle. We went from 50 brave lads to just a handful of us in minutes. We tried to stand, we truly did Sire, but we was dyin' by the score. But that weren't the worst. They spoke. I 'eard them in my head, whispering and laughin'. I ain't heard nuthin like it. Told us they was coming fer us, they wanted to kill us all. Like they was alive and mad, and they wanted to be chucked at us. And we knew those voices. Friends who died last week. Me wife, dead these five years. Me old mam. Our own friends, our family, whisperin' how they were coming for us, how we failed them all, laughin' at us. I know I shouldn't have run. Shoulda stayed, shoulda reported to the army. But once we was running, we couldn't stop to save oursel's. And now I can't get the voices out me head. I hafta ask Sire, beg you, please take me home with you. Don't bury me here. The laughin' won't stop, and I don't want ta be one of them. Lady and Land have mercy on me."

—Final words of Robert de Sadoul, leader of the 2nd Levy of Lord Auvray's Crusade before being hanged for desertion, recorded by the scribe Lukas Bernstein.

DEATH CULT HIERARCH



M.H.: Who are you? What is your name?

Subject: Akhamun? Is that you? You know me. Ages have passed and seas have dried since last we fought, but I know the smell of your magic.

M.H.: I am Witchfinder General Matthias Horst, and you will answer my questions. Who is this Akhamun?

Subject: A mortal? This is an unexpected turn. Akhamun is a worthy foe. All beings are measured by their enemies, and so he makes me mighty. Once before we battled. He was only a mortal then, like you, and I was yet to rise in my masters' favour. But that was many centuries ago.

M.H.: How does he still live?

Subject: He died long ago. In life, he was the slave of kings, dressed up in a pretty gown. His order saw to their safe passage to the afterlife. How ironic that he should now call them back from the grave. In the past, his lands were fertile ground for my masters, and we vied for the souls of his people. Now that kingdom is a barren desert, but Akhamun remains. He is cursed, like all his people – he cannot rest in death. But his magic is still strong. It would

have to be, to make him an enemy worthy of my power.

M.H.: If you are so mighty, why take this body? Speak!

Subject: After many centuries, I returned to those lands to claim them for my masters. There I found Akhamun, rotted body and empty eyes, yet the same power within. My followers battled his, and broke through his lines. I advanced to victory, only to be engulfed in light and cast into this prison of flesh. A feat your pitiful priests could hardly have achieved. They have not had millennia to study their craft. My legion fell as he summoned his army to life again. But this is not the end, merely a setback. My star will rise again, my allies will return through the Veil and we will march once more. Your chains will hold me no more than this mortal vessel. And when I have claimed my rightful place as master of Naptesh, I will come for you, Matthias. The last thing you see in this life will be my true form and I will await you on the other side. Death is no escape from the Dark Gods.

[Subject began to emit smoke from his mouth and eyes. Subject was destroyed by fire.]



During the fall of Naptesh, many of the Naptaan people fled the crumbling empire. Among those recorded was Haskhonet, high architect of Hanaphuk and builder of the queen's own tomb. According to the Gods' Sea Annals, Haskhonet fled east, past the Barren Mountains and out of recorded history.

Some years later, the histories of the eastern empire of Tsuandan make note of a sage from the west who aided the Emperor in the construction of a terracotta army, to guard his tomb for all eternity. If the stories of the Naptaan proficiency with war golems are true, this could well have been Haskhonet, plying his skills in a foreign land. Unfortunately, few records of the Xun Dynasty remain, most having been destroyed with the coming of the Dragon Emperor. No-one now knows the resting-place of the last Xun Emperor – or, if the legends are true, of his slumbering army.

—Excerpt from Chapter VI of *Death Knows No Borders*,
Alberich Hauptmann, Eichtal Press 911 A.S.



TK15

TOMB HARBINGERS

Among the grave goods Valdes brought us was the golden icon. It incorporates common elements from the Naptaan religion, such as the winged scarab and the radiant sun.

It is also inscribed with hieroglyphs proclaiming the praises of the king. It seems likely that this formed a part of the king's banner. Most interesting to me, however, was a carving we found on the decayed remains of the banner pole.

From what legible sections we could recover, it read:



Loyal Shektuk,
first among the faithful
soldiers of the king,
bears this standard
let all who oppose his lord
tremble at its sight.

This constitutes one of the few mentions in the written history of the Naptaan of anyone not of the royal blood, for we can presume from his name and lack of titles that Shektuk was a simple soldier. Valdes' men claim they found this artefact inside the tomb of Kharatep himself, a position of great honour for one so lowly born.

One of Valdes' crew in particular – one Miguel – was willing to tell me a little more. According to Miguel, the banner-pole was found still clutched in the hands of an intact skeleton, at least a head taller than the other bodies in the tomb.

Valdes was forewarned about how lightly the dead sleep in Naptesh, and ordered the men to smash it to powder with clubs and hammers.

If Miguel is to be believed, it killed three men before the icon could be prised from its phalanges – and even then, one fleshless hand kept hold of the banner pole long after the rest of the undead creature had been destroyed.



TOMB ARCHITECTS



31st of Acrober, 962 A.S.

We are four days out of Port Reynaud, and have come to the landmarks Abdullah tells me are called the Teeth of the Asp. The name is certainly apt - these two great obelisks jut up out of the desert hills like the fangs of a great snake.

In the glory days of the Naptaan empire, these monuments would have marked the boundary of the Naptaan territory, standing as a



statement of the empire's great power and a warning against invaders. Now they are eroded and half-buried in the dunes, but some of the intricate carvings recording the victories of the king who erected them still remain.

I had Gunther's porters shovel away six feet of the sand obscuring the base of the columns - much to the amusement of Abdullah and his guides, who were content to sit and watch our northerners labouring in the hot sun. Beneath the dedication to the Pharaoh Oseput we found what I was searching for - the maker's mark of the Naptaan mason who built the Teeth.

From the texts recovered by earlier expeditions, we already know that among the common-born Naptaan the monument-makers were held in high regard, second only to the priesthood.

They were commissioned to build the immense tombs of the pharaohs, and great statues glorifying their rule. The inscription we found on the Teeth says that this architect - one Ammtunek - oversaw two thousand slaves in their construction, and was favoured in the eyes of the pharaoh.

Intriguingly, the inscription also says that Ammtunek is buried under the obelisks, and whosoever disturbs him by destroying his work will suffer his curse. These great monuments must have been his life's work.

I put forward the idea of sinking a mine pit under the right-hand obelisk to try to locate the burial chamber, but our guard captain Gilles refused outright, saying the obelisk might topple and crush us all. These people have no vision!





ARK OF AGES

On the second obelisk of the Teeth, we discovered another inscription. Though very worn by time and the elements, the hieroglyphs were still legible, but of a variety I was not familiar with.

A few pointed prods of my staff woke Grunstein and set him to work translating the ancient script (I suppose this proves he is good for something, at least). It would have taken him weeks to study the entirety of this inscription, but we had only until sunset – Abdullah and his men insisted we had to depart before dark.

In the few hours we had available, what Grunstein did manage to decipher made extremely interesting reading.

The inscription told of the great River Napaat, and the high priestess of the river god who cruised its waters in a gilded barge crewed by eunuch slaves. A loyal servant of the pharaohs, her power brought wealth and glory to the dynasty.

Barbarous kings from far and wide brought annual tribute to her temple.

When she died, she was mummified within her ark, which was buried intact in a great tumulus along with its crew to serve her in the afterlife. According to the curse-script chiselled upon the obelisk, she would serve her masters in death as she had in life, and sail the waters of the underworld to bring retribution on defilers of the lands of the great river.

We had no time to decipher any more of the legend. With the fading of the light, Grunstein and I were all but dragged away from the hieroglyphs by our native porters.

Abdullah never ceased scanning the darkening skies, eyes wide with fear, until we were far from the ancient monuments. He asked me what the two of us had found from our translation, but I thought it best not to tell him. These Qassari are evidently even more superstitious than our own men.





SKELETONS

2nd of Damos, 962 A.S.

Two days past the Teeth, we have passed through the hills and entered what is known as the Great Desert. Before the fall of the Naptaan empire much of this was supposedly fertile farmland. Now there is nothing but windblown sand - the curse of the gods, or so the legend says. I have my own theories - the Naptaan civil war was a bitter one, and the poisoning of water sources was a well-established weapon of war even in those ancient times.



This evening, we came upon an area that Abdullah and his guides begged us to avoid. When I pressed him as to why, he claimed it was the site of a forgotten battlefield, haunted by the spirits of the dead. Sure enough, a cursory investigation turned up a great number of human bones and even corroded weapons buried only a few inches beneath the sand. You can imagine my excitement - we must return this way with more camels!

Allowing for Abdullah's nerves, I have allowed the camp to be pitched on a nearby ridge, despite the fact that the old battlefield was much better sheltered from the wind. A sandstorm is blowing in from the southwest, and I fear we are all going to have to endure a sleepless night to indulge the superstitions of our guides.

3rd of Damos, 962 A.S.

Someone is playing practical jokes in the camp. When Gunther and his men finally managed to clear the sand that half-buried us during the night, they unearthed several skeletons taken from the battlefield, posed as if crawling towards my tent!

Abdullah and his men deny it was them. I have told them in no uncertain terms that unless the culprit is produced I will be docking their pay.



SKELETON CHARIOT

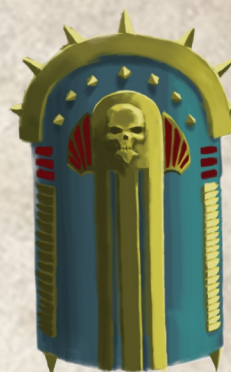
4th of Damos, 962 A.S.

This journey was bound to be full of moments of discomfort, but this morning's sight exceeded my expectations in every possible way. To the amusement of my colleagues and my chagrin, I took a tumble when confronted by two skeletal horses rising from the sands with a scythed chariot in tow.

Only once I realised the chariot was (of course) stationary and half buried was I able to pick myself up off the ground and collect my wits, with the sound of laughter ringing in my ears.

Our guides, however, did not share in the mirth and instead tried to move us swiftly on. To lessen their distress I reluctantly agreed, though I was able to make a few sketches for later research.

The similar iconography of this chariot and the riders we encountered nearby seems to confirm many of the theories of my old friend Doctor Friedman. Perhaps I can salvage his reputation and prove at least some of his theories to be correct.



GREAT VULTURES



5th of Damos, 962 A.S.

We are in the deep desert now. The nights are freezing, the days are baking hot. This damned sand gets everywhere, even into my books. Gunther has turned as red as a beetroot, but soldiers gallantly on. A growing flock of vultures have been circling us as we progress. Tiring of their attention, one of Gilles' men managed to

bring one down with his bow. Thinking it might make a decent supper, when he went to retrieve it he found its flesh was putrid and decayed, as if it had been dead for many months. It seems that in the kingdom of the dead, even birds and beasts can find no rest in death.





SCARAB SWARM

We have lost one of the porters. He must have disturbed a nest of some kind while he was searching for water. We were only alerted by his screams. When we found him, he was completely covered with a swarm of glossy black beetles, which were consuming his flesh at a startling rate. Gilles' men drove the swarm off with burning torches, but by the time the last of the insects had fled little was left of the poor man apart from bones and scraps of bloody skin. I managed to convince one of Gunther's men to re-

trieve one of the dead beetles for me, though they were understandably loath to touch even the dead ones after what had happened to their friend. From the sinister markings on its carapace, I believe these may be the scarabs of Har-Khowar spoken about in von Bodenheim's Pyramid Texts – supposedly sacred to the god of the Naptaan underworld. It is easy to see now how these insects might have picked up such an association with death.



SKELETON CAVALRY

The Edu tribe were rivals to Naptesh, before the empire reached its peak. Once Naptesh attained ascendancy, they were pushed to the fringes of the region, but their unparalleled horsemanship ensured their survival.

Records of running battles survive which show the success those riders had in many battles, both against the armies of Naptesh and the tribes which populated the less fertile lands to the east.



The success of their lightning raids made the Edu a wealthy group, allowing them to thrive as nomads where most of their neighbours lived a settled, agrarian existence. Of course, a nomadic life in this region does not breed a love for material wealth as we would think of it. The monuments and golden idols of Naptesh were far below water in the Edu reckoning of wealth. It was Naptaan control of the great river Napaat, therefore, that eventually brought the Edu into the fold as auxiliaries in the pharaoh's armies, after long years of conflict.

Some centuries after the end of the reign of King Phatep, however, the Edu appear to have suddenly ceased their trade with the empire. Most of my colleagues believe this highly skilled and successful tribe was wiped out in the wars that followed the king's death, or by one of the many plagues which sprung up around the time.

I find these explanations unsatisfactory. Perhaps there is some truth to the legends of the Great Dying. Why else were fields left to ruin and desolation at the height of the country's might? What other force could have wiped out the Edu, who for so long had resisted or evaded the armies of the greatest empire of their time? It seems overwhelmingly likely that it was the curse of undeath which overtook these people, and swallowed up their famed horsemen into the armies of the dead.

—The Golden Dynasty,
Dr Eckhardt Friedman,
Eichtal Press, 937 A.S.

SAND SCORPIONS



6th of Damos, 962 A.S.

Today we entered a bank of deep dunes that Abdullah claims is one of the last obstacles between us and the necropolis of Kharatep. The sand here is very fine, making our boots sink up to the ankle with every step.

Shortly after midday, we learned we were not alone in the dunes. A huge claw burst up from beneath the sand, cutting one of our camels in two and dragging the larger half under. I was scarcely able to believe my eyes – all of us must have stood there for a good two or three seconds before the hue and cry began.

Probing with their spears, Gilles' men managed to unearth the beast – a scorpion bigger than a bear. It burst from the dune in a terrible rage, slaying

three of our guards with its claws and striking another with its sting. The spears of the guards could draw no blood from it – only a trickle of desiccated dust. Like the carrion birds, I do not believe it was truly alive. Even my strongest spells appeared to have little effect. When it became apparent that our numbers were too great for it to overcome, it burrowed back out of sight. The last we saw of it was a fast-moving wave of sand, rolling away from us and out into the desert. Whatever venom is in these creatures' stings must be extremely powerful – the entire arm of the man who was stung is now severely necrosed, and the rot is spreading to his torso. It is a testament to the strong constitution of Gilles' guards that the man is still alive, but he surely will not last the night. I must secure some samples of venom from the wound to show to the alchemists back home.



SPHINXES

8th of Damos, 962 A.S.

We have arrived! Our scouts sighted the necropolis early this morning, and we pushed the men hard to reach it before dusk. The Pyramid of Kharatep is a magnificent sight. A man-made mountain, it towers over the desert. Looters have stripped it of much of its marble facing, but much still remains around the apex, shining a brilliant white in the sun.



The messengers said, the Edu stand ready. We have strong men and strong horses, our arrows are swift and our spears are long. We are more numerous than the grains of sand in the desert.

And Pharaoh said unto them, just as the sand of the desert, we shall crush your armies beneath our wheels.

—Excerpt from inscription on the Qashek Stone

The necropolis stretches for some distance around it, half-submerged beneath the shifting sands. We have identified several lesser tombs, and what appear to be an avenue of statues leading up to the pyramid of the pharaoh. It was at the entrance to this avenue that we found the Sphinx. It is buried almost up to its shoulders in sand, but what remains above the dunes is three times the height of our camels. Its head has

been sculpted bearing what I believe to be a pharaoh's crown – possibly this was once a likeness of King Kharatep himself, although the frequent sandstorms have weathered the face beyond recognition, giving it an almost skeletal appearance.

Grunstein has identified some inscriptions that he claims are spells of awakening, designed to turn the statue into a walking engine of war.

I told him his hypothesis was absurd, but for the sake of the record, I include on the following pages a few of the sources he presented to me as the “evidence” for his claims.



COLOSSI



9th of Damos, 962 A.S.

Entering the necropolis, we passed an avenue of colossal statues that might have stepped out of Schalle's poem.

I met a traveller from
a southern land
Who said:

"Two vast and trunkless
legs of stone
Stand in the desert.
Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered
visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer
of cold command,
Serve well the words on which
the stone feet stand.

'My name is Phatep,
king of kings:
This mighty city shows
wonders of my hand.'
Nothing beside remains.
Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck,
boundless and bare
The lone and level sands
stretch far away.

—Parzeval Schalle

There are few works of sculpture that could have rivalled their size or grandeur when they were intact. Even in ruins, they towered over our party to the height of the largest guild houses on the Geldstrasse.

Grunstein, as always, is convinced that these colossi were animated by the magic of the Naptaan priests. He

claims they were used as labour to construct the pyramids of the pharaohs, quite ignoring the historical evidence that the Naptaan empire used flesh and blood giants for this very purpose. In fact, we have found several immense burial pits on the outskirts of the necropolis that can only have been dug for such creatures.

I tried to convince the men to excavate them, but even Gunther was reluctant to do so, finding excuses about his men being "tired" and "thirsty". The Society is really going to have to start hiring a better class of servant.



SAND STALKERS

I remember as a boy I once went out into the desert. Some friends and I had wanted to do it for weeks but my father had always forbidden it. I stole one of his camels and we took a tent between us. We took it in turns: two of us would ride the camel and the other would Qassari walk.

We only stayed out there one night; we awoke to find our camel frozen into stone. I was sick I think – what kind of a thing can do that? All around our tent were ridges and valleys of sand, rising over and under one another for tens of feet in every direction.

To the south of us, five valleys met and carried on together as far as the eye could see. Must have been their tracks, whatever they were. Needless to say we packed up the tent and fled. I've never been comfortable in the desert since.

Funny thing is, when I got back, I thought my father would be angry about the camel, but other than me, he seemed more worried that he would lose the tent.

—Adil El-Amin, Qassari trader





CHARNEL CATAPULT

On the remains of the necropolis walls, we have found remnants of siege weapons – likely used at the height of the Naptaan civil war. Without exception they are dilapidated and rotted, certainly not capable of useful function. I doubt they would teach our own fine engineers anything, but they give the lie to those who paint this ancient civilisation as “primitive”. During my readings on Naptesh I have come across claims that these weapons have been used more recently. The tales make chilling reading, but can be largely dismissed as hyperbole or invention. Interesting though they

are, I do not think these engines will be of much value to the Society, and likely would not survive transportation home.



As a result, we decided to test one of those catapults to destruction, gathering valuable information as to their former power. Yet try as we might, those ancient materials flexed but would not break, while launching rocks hundreds of yards into the desert. However they were constructed, these things were intended to last. I could almost imagine them brought into battle now.



TOMB CATAPHRACTS



Dear Joanna,

I close my eyes and picture you every day. I want to hold you close to me again, now more than ever. The Caravan was attacked three days ago, but thank Sunna, I am safe.

One of the women in our caravan spotted a dust cloud to the north. Looking through my spyglass, I could pick out five dark shapes in the murk, which I showed to Hassan, the caravan master.

I have never seen the blood drain from a man's face so fast. The image of what descended on us from out of the dust is burned into my memory. Five stone beasts, ridden by grinning skeletons.

They took different shapes – serpent, crocodile, camel, monstrous scarab beetle and bird – but Joanna, they were living statues, foul facsimiles of life, built from coloured stone and embossed with gold. They fell upon us with terrifying speed.

Hassan called for the caravan to split into three groups. The creatures attacked the northern group with brutal efficiency. To their credit, the men there brought down one of the monsters – the huge bird – before they were overpowered. One moment it was wreaking carnage, the next, it tumbled into pieces like some child's discarded plaything. To our astonishment, the remaining four creatures just turned and left, though I am sure they could have overtaken the rest of us if they chose.

I long to talk with you more about this, for I'm sure your mind could find some wondrous insight that I have missed. I shall probably head north to trade somewhere safer, though I have more than half a mind to travel home with this letter.

Yours with love, Oscar.

—Letter found aboard the wreck of the Empress Matilda, 912 A.S.



NECROPOLIS GUARDS

The Luxopolis Codex is one of our most valuable insights into the history of the ancient kingdom of Naptesh. Many lesser scholars have frittered away their lives debating its contents; they have grown hoary with age picking over its every detail, seeking to imagine some new implication – how many nights did they eschew wine and song for such pursuits? Here, I shall finally resolve one of its greatest mysteries. I present here the definitive translation of the famous Verses of Amet-Ptuk.

According to the learned Professor Schiffer, these texts are merely “a ghoulish tale for children”. Others have supposed they represent a historical record of the punishment for tomb robbers. My translation shows both views to be incorrect. I write it below – square brackets indicate supplements or corrections to the damaged papyrus.



The last living princes prepare their forever places in the immortal city

In their own homes their ancestor's servants wait upon them

In the immortal city their ancestor's [armies] sleep, wrapped in bandages

Walled up awaiting the [arrival of their masters], blade armed, shield round.

Stores of weapons but [no food... they can] cut but not eat

Sir Hezek of [a late Naptaan Splinter] [entered] that great city

He took there guards and [...porters] we needed gold for trade

One tomb was opened dust issued [forth] Hezek entered

Hezek's family now counts itself fatherless a porter returned

The tomb had guards, unbreathing, dust flecked, deadly.

As anyone of the meanest intelligence can see, the most valuable information contained in these verses is not the robber's fate, but rather the guards – cursed with undeath as the legends of the old kingdom say, and sealed inside their masters' tombs! A journey to the ruins of Luxopolis is all that is required for proof that I am correct. I dispatched my assistant Beppe on a south-bound ship to investigate such a possibility, but he has not yet returned. No doubt the lazy boy has absconded with the money I gave him...

—The Luxopolis Codex,
Commentary and Translation
by Guglielmo Baldarini



SHABTI

You want to hear about the Kingdom of the Dead, you say. You ever heard about statues that walk, twelve feet tall and swinging blades bigger than a man? I thought not.

I used to fight for the empire, but the vermin-kin caught me. Made a slave out of me, sweating down in the dark, 'til they rounded a dozen of us up for their expedition into the desert. All us humans had heard the stories about that place, but you don't say no to a rat with a whip.

Some people call the rats cowards. They're probably right. But rats are damn good at saving their skins – a rat will be running before a man has even soiled his breeches. We were about three days into the journey when suddenly the rats went all twitchy. There was a big sandstorm blowing in, and they could feel it in



their whiskers. The overseer screams something in their filthy language and next thing we're all running for cover in a crack in the cliff-face. Us slaves in the back barely make it in before the storm hit.

It wasn't just a cave, though – it was a tomb. With the rats' green lamps we can see the walls are covered in marks – glyphs – and there are these statues, huge things, surrounding us. The floor around them's covered with pots and boxes, I figure valuable stuff – but the rats go dead quiet, all twitchy again. Next thing I know, the overseer flies across the room, stuck with an arrow the size of a spear.

The statues are moving. There are four closing off the exit, each with the head of some animal; a bull and a crocodile and an eagle and a fox. It's hard to see their movements in the flicker of those damn lamps, but they've got giant bows, bigger'n me. The rats get up their pistols and start firing back, but it's no good. Behind us, the other statues are coming alive too, one right next to me. This thing is fifteen feet tall if it's an inch, all stone and bone, with a blade even bigger than those damn bows. I've never been so scared in my life. After that it was a blur. The rats' stolen horses are shrieking and the monster is slamming its jaws open and shut, making an awful clacking sound as it kills. Seeing the rats running, I grab the pack horse beside me, motion my friend Lora to do the same and we flee the cave, out into the storm. Never looked back, not once.

—Wully Schmidt, once of the Seventh Auldheim Spears

TOMB REAPERS

I write this late at night, having been woken by a frankly alarming turn of events. When we made camp this evening, one of Gilles' men found a curious onyx bauble in the sand. It was marked with Naptaan hieroglyphs, so they brought it to me for study. I deciphered some parts – most intriguingly the infamous name Setesh, and a strange mention of “winged guardians”. Finding Grunstein in a rare moment of lucidity (the way the qat juice blackens his lips is repulsive!), I got him to confirm my findings before tiredness got the better of me, and I fell asleep with the thing in my hand.



In my sleep, angelic figures visited my dreams. They reached out to me, gently – but as their fingers brushed my face they became talons of sharp bone. The flesh shrivelled from their faces, showing snarling, inhuman skulls, and I sat bolt upright, tearing myself from sleep. To my dismay, the precious artefact was gone. Bursting out of my tent, I saw the thief had not got far. It was one of Gunther's porters, the thin boy with the weasel eyes – he was still clutching his pilfered prize as he ran. Woken by my shout of alarm, Gilles went to intercept him with a dagger in his hand.

I still do not trust my senses as to what happened next, but I will record what I saw all the same. It seemed that something huge dropped suddenly from the sky, its wings hiding the moon for a brief instant. It landed heavily, blocking the boy's path, towering over him.

It appeared only in silhouette, but in the moonlight that filtered through its ragged wings I thought I caught the gleam of bone. With a sweep of its blade it severed the heads of both Gilles and the boy, then stooped down to recover the stolen treasure. With a single beat of its wings, it disappeared into the night sky, leaving nothing in its wake but dancing motes of sand.

The camp is now in a state of ferment. Abdullah and his guides have struck their tents, saying they will leave at dawn – they say I am cursed. Half of Gilles' guards are leaving with them. The remainder I have persuaded to press on – whatever the thing was that struck in the night, we have come too far to turn back now.

DREAD SPHINX

10th of Damos, 962 A.S.

Grunstein was right. I was too quick to doubt him, too quick to dismiss his ideas about the Naptaan priesthood and their cursed statues. He has paid for the proof with his life.

With some hesitation after our experience last night, we made our entry to the pyramid of King Kharatep this morning, using the secret passage we were told of by Valdes and his men. Inside, we located the entrance to the king's chambers in a great pillared hall. The painted murals were faded and crumbling, but what drew our attention was the enormous sphinx that dominated the far end of the hall.

It was quite unlike any such statue I have seen, more human than beast, with great wings like an eagle. Approaching, we saw it was crouched above what could only be the doorway we were seeking. The gates were marked with hieroglyphs, which formed the riddle:

*Few seek me,
Though some embrace me,
Others flee me, but all find me.
What am i?*

Grunstein immediately set to puzzling it out, and claimed the answer was Death. Reluctantly, I turned to the doors and spoke the same word in the Naptaan tongue: Pakhat. With a deep rumble, the doors swung open – and as they did, the sphinx turned its head to look upon us. Dust drizzled from the ceiling as its stone wings unfurled, moving as if truly alive.

Someone screamed for us to run, and we did, straight through the open gates. Grunstein alone was left behind, shouting for joy at how his theories had been vindicated. The last I saw of him was the ecstatic expression on his face before the lazy flick of a stone claw removed his head from his shoulders. Moments later the passageway behind us collapsed, brought down by the shifting weight of the beast.

It is still waiting there, behind the rubble. There must be another way out – we must press on.





CASKET OF PHATEP

I write this in haste. If I escape this place, it will ensure I forget nothing of what I have seen – if not, I hope it will serve as a warning to those who come after. With our escape blocked by the collapse of the tunnel, we headed down into the darkness. It seemed like an age until we reached the bottom of the narrow passageway, each sealed with a stone slab. One had been broken, no doubt by Valdes' men. This, then, was the burial chamber of King Kharatep. Inside, the light of our torches reflected from a dazzling hoard of treasure.



A golden casket of exquisite craftsmanship stood on a stone dais above the other grave goods. If the histories of Kharatep's reign are true, this was one of the nine funerary caskets of the god-king Phatep himself, recaptured by King Kharatep at the Battle of the Burning Sands.

It shone magnificently in the light of our torches, as bright and untarnished as the day it was made.



Before I could shout a warning, Gunther and the porters rushed forwards to open it, overcome by greed. The moment they had levered open the lid, a searing light burst from inside, and howling spirits swarmed from the casket, babbling curses on those who defiled the mortal remains of their god. Where they struck, men fell dead without a mark on their bodies, faces contorted in terror.

To my shame I fled, leaving the others to die. I ran until I could no longer hear the screams of the hunting ghosts. Now I hide in an alcove of the pyramid's internal passageways, writing these words. I will never forget what I saw – not only when the casket was opened, but during my flight. The second archway we passed – the one still sealed with a stone slab that would have taken a giant's strength to move – is now open.







EPILOGUE

UNKNOWN DAY, DAMOS, 962 A.S.

It has taken what feels like an eternity, but I have found a way out of the pyramid. In the king's chamber, I found a narrow shaft behind a faded tapestry that fell into dust at my touch. Barely wide enough to crawl through, it led upwards into darkness at a steep angle. With few other choices, I crawled into it and began the laborious ascent.

Hours later, my shoulders cramping, I reached the top. A narrow aperture led onto the flank of the pyramid, two hundred feet above the ground. Taking a deep gulp of the sweet night air, I inched out onto the narrow ledge and looked down. Lights were glimmering down below, and for a moment I thought Abdullah and the others had returned to rescue us. When I saw the scale of the gathering, however, I quickly realised the lights did not come from honest torches. They burned in the eye-sockets of an army of the dead, standing in orderly regiments in the ruins of the great plaza.

As best as I could make out, there were at least five thousand skeletal warriors, accompanied by squadrons of chariots that seemed almost as numerous. The statues of the necropolis strode between their ranks, like giants among children. I recognised the great sphinx we had passed in the desert, and the winged beast that had killed Grunstein. The moonlight picked out tattered banners flying over the ruins of a temple near the pyramid's base. A convocation of wizened creatures in white and gold – the tomb city's priests – stood on its walls, awaiting the arrival of their leader.



A single figure stepped out of the darkness. Armoured in bronze scales, she carried a tall spear, and her face was hidden behind a serene death mask of shining gold.

For a moment, her blank eyes passed over where I crouched on the pyramid's side and I froze, convinced against all reason that she had seen me. I did not need to understand the dry syllables she uttered to the legion below to know who she was. Mahatesh, handmaiden of Teput, wife of Kharatep, Queen of Djedesh, whose deeds were written in chronicle and whose slumber we had disturbed with our reckless rummaging through her husband's grave. Through the gates beneath her, a procession of skeletal guards carried out the casket, now firmly shut again. They loaded it onto a gilded chariot, and the army began to file out of the square, heading north into the desert in a winding column of bronze, bone and ancient stone. The queen rode with them, riding beside the precious chariot that carried the casket. Having seen its power first-hand, I have no doubt she intends to use it as a weapon.

I clung to the ledge on the pyramid's side until the last of the living dead had disappeared over the dunes and the sun began to rise in the east. With trembling legs and aching arms, I painstakingly picked my way down to the ground, where I now write this last entry in my journal.

We have her husband. The chronicle cannot call her Mahatesh the Vengeful for nothing, and unless I am very much mistaken she and her army will be heading for Eichtal and the headquarters of the Society. I must get there first.



The Naptaan empire once spread from shore to shore of the Middle Sea. Many of the northern tribes who traded with Naptesh absorbed parts of Naptaan culture; those who warred against them were subjugated and assimilated in turn. From Destria to the Empire, barrow mounds can be found imitating the Naptaan tradition of ritual burial.

Like the pyramids of Naptesh, these barrows also have a dark reputation for harbouring the undead. Some may have worshipped a bastardised version of the Naptaan pantheon, and so been afflicted by Teput's curse; others ignorantly imitated the dark arts of Setesh, inscribing the stones of their tombs with necromantic incantations to keep their rulers from true death. Such wights can be found haunting the barrowlands of Volskaya and Equitaine, as well as our own dear Empire - the greatest numbers being found near the border of cursed Zagvozd.

—Excerpt from Chapter IX of *Death Knows No Borders*,
Alberich Hauptmann, Eichtal Press 911 A.S.



THE 9TH AGE FANTASY BATTLES UNDYING DYNASTIES



Across the world, and nowhere more than ancient Naptesh, civilisations have entombed their nobility to endure untold centuries. Yet not all that rests beneath earth, sand and stone stays buried. Returned to reclaim lost kingdoms and to cast off the shackles of flesh and time, the Undying Dynasties arise!

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