

# *Nether Kingdom*



*Book III*

*Tyrants of the Dead*

*Free Prologue and First Chapter*

*J Edward Neill*

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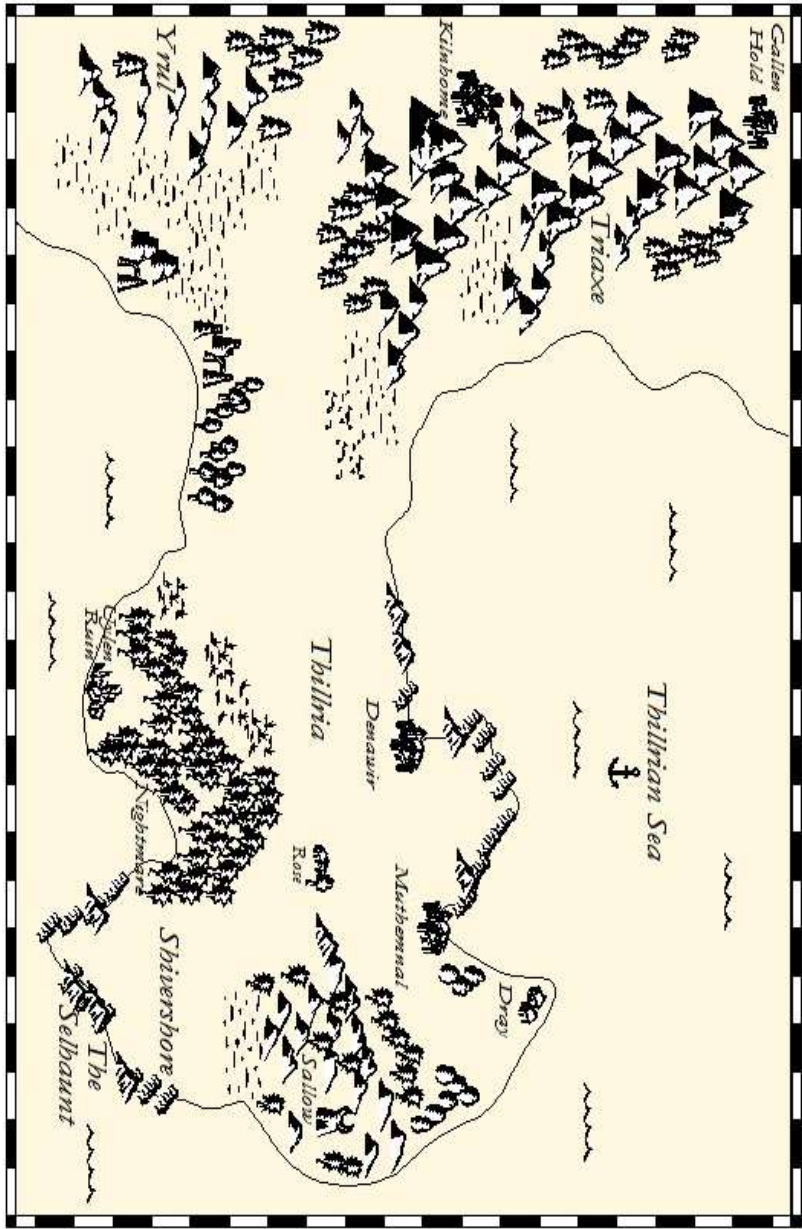
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For G

For D

For the end of all things







*The end is near. After so many years of studying, of waiting for a sign, it becomes apparent to me that the return of darkness is a planned event, a spoke in the universal clock waiting to be ticked. Heed me well, my friends. The Sleeper walks among us. His presence in our world, long-awaited, is a grave warning that the Ur will soon assail us. The Sleeper may come to us in any guise, be it a man, a woman, even a child. It matters not. He must be found. If we do nothing, if we lie on our laurels and ignore him, he will draw the curtain of night forever down upon us.*

*Look to the sky, lest you doubt me. Come a clear night, gander the heavens until your eyes glaze over and the desire for sleep weighs heavy on your lids. If luck be with you, you might witness the Eye of the Ur wandering in the dark. The Eye is clever, but it can be seen by us, by him. Look hard enough and you might find it hiding behind an errant cloud. You might glimpse it as it blots the light of several stars or casts its corpulent shadow upon Mother Moon. Spend your nights searching and you will see it. You will know what the Ur have waiting for us. You will begin to understand what the Sleeper has in store...*

Final “*Letter to the Lords of Grae*” by the warlock Dank





## Diary

*Muthemnal, Castle Maewir, Early Summer*

*The sea roils below my bedchamber. The frigid mist and salted spray drift through my window as though to invade me. If tonight is colder than nature intends, the blame is purely mine. The years have been good to me, far better than I had hoped, but now... things are different now. Another day has passed, and I sit by my window to watch the evening draw into darkness. This is normally my time for reflection, for quietude. Not so, this eve.*

*From my window, I sense Father Sun glowering behind the clouds. I cannot see his face. I spy no late amber light, no lavender sun-strokes burnishing the twilit sky. I see only clouds, stretching like a curtained coffin across Thillria, covering the death of the day in an ethereal grey shroud. I know the look of this sky. This is no natural phenomenon, no summer storm waiting to be unleashed. The shadows in this sky belong to me.*

*I hoped after five happy years in Muthemnal the Nightness would never reappear. I was wrong. Hidden though it may have been, the darkness within me has returned. I hate it. I wish anything but to be afflicted by it. The seasons will suffer until the Nightness flees. Or perhaps the shadow will not go, and the darkness remain forever.*

*It has been two summers since I last came to you, my faithful journal. Until now I hoped maybe it was done, that my outpourings upon these pages had completed my catharsis. For so long I felt purged, almost cured of the Nightness, but now it comes back to me. I cannot pinpoint the very moment I knew. Perhaps it was when I ceased putting my thoughts to paper, or perhaps it was doomed to happen no matter what I did. It matters none. I feel my state of mind descending again. I find myself sleeping late into each day, preferring dusk over dawn, and spending less and less time in the company of my friends. I cannot say this surprises me. I always knew in my heart these feelings would reclaim me. It was only a matter of time.*

*The night prevails now. The last glimmer of day slips beyond the world, and I watch it with an unintentional smile. My supper is cold, my wine untouched. My lamp is angry with me, its light floundering in the breeze of my wide-open window. While I sit at my little table, ever contemplative, the dark comes. The shadow falls across my face, and I am reminded of how I got here.*

*Old memories flutter in my mind, too tenuous to fully grasp, too precious to ever let go of. I can still see their faces. Rellen, my love, how are you gone? How are you dead? Saul, my wisdom, you made me a promise, and I wonder why you have not come to visit. And Garrett, my strength, the one I dream most often of. Where are you now? Hurt? Alone? Slain?*

*My throat tightens to think of the answers. These three are lost to me. Now that the Nightness has returned, their absence pains me all the greater.*

*I know. I know. I must fight this. I must wage a war against myself. I cannot give in, not after so long. It was more than five years ago I made my promise to Rellen. I have lived a good life since then, or so I thought. I made new friends, something I once believed would never happen. I found joy beneath Father Sun, and I relearned the art of smiling. Oh, what I would not give to remain happy, to cast the darkness out, to walk blissfully through the suntouched gardens of Muthem rather than fade into the prison of my mind. But this is my curse. My father, Archithropian through and through, passed the Nightness to me, just as his father did before him. Now I am the one, the only, the last. I wish it were not so. I wish there were another, someone I might share these feelings with.*

*But there is not.*

*I am alone.*

*I will fight, but can I hope to win? The Pages Black invaded me long ago. I have since become its vessel, its communicator to the world, far more powerful than my father ever was. The part of me that adores the light is nothing compared to the hungry me, the restless me, the me that would set foot upon the surface of the sea and walk the black waters into oblivion. I hope if my end is thus, I will hurt no one else. Thillria should not suffer for my illness. No soul should.*

*How then? How will I battle the Nightness? There seems only one way; I will dwell upon what goodness surrounds me. I have friends enough to help. I have Ghurk, good Ghurk, and his father, Duke Ghurlain. I love Ghurk like a brother, the Duke like an uncle. I hardly knew Ghurk in the beginning, but now he dotes upon me as though I was the future queen of Thillria. He sends me samples of new wine and steals flowers from the gardens to leave by my door. He gives me the run of the castle as if I had lived here my whole life, while his father ensures I want for nothing. Were I a noble, or at least a Thillrian, I suppose I might marry Ghurk and become part of the family. But that is not to be.*

*I have others besides Ghurk, others who treat me fondly. I will need them. They are the stewards, the guards, the shopkeepers, the maids, and the guests of Muthem. I am close with many of them. They are more a family than I deserve. My relationship with them would be perfect if not for what I feel. But I cannot tell them about the real me. No. Never. If any of them, even Ghurk, were to learn that magic did not die with my father, I fear for what they would do.*

*And then there is a second secret, something which complicates the matter even more. I have not written of it before. It began too recently. It is not the Nightness or the Pages Black. No, I have another source of guilt, borne of deeds I have done and continue to do. It feels so unlike me, and I wonder if it is healthy or whether it drives me further into loneliness and despair. I must write of it. I must, else this journal will be incomplete.*

*And so I will say it; in Rellen and Garrett's absence, I have taken a lover. Too often, I do lascivious things in my room after dark, and I do them with a man who does not know me for what I am. I know what I swore. I remember my oath to love no other. But is it so wrong to lose myself thusly? Am I not human? Do I not deserve some small affection? A kiss? A shared cup of wine? A moment of fleeing, foolish passion?*

*It is hard to write their names. If the ink should run, it is because my hand shakes when I think of what I have done. I agonize over whether I should describe these things, for I so often want to forget them. And yet...*

*His name is Marid. I could almost love him, but in my heart I know I will not. He is a guard, a simple man-at-arms with purpose*

*to patrol Ghurlain's holdings and keep safe its many guests. I know why I am fond of him. He is younger than me. He is full of wild, wanderlusting dreams. He guards me as a puppy guards its master, even though there is no danger here. It hurts to write as much, but Marid reminds me of Rellen. Not Garrett. Never him. But Rellen's spirit, his love of life, his love of me.*

*No, the passion is not lacking with Marid, nor the anticipation. It is only the feeling afterward, when I lift my eyelids to see that he is not Rellen, not Garrett, but only a young, hopeful boy. Oh, what manner of monster am I to lead him on? To think that I, who shudders with shame when she accidentally crushes an ant underfoot, could use someone so. How pathetic of me. How vain. Ghurk and his father must never know.*

*And so begins my self-waged war. The rhythm of the sea, the blanket of night, the darkness in my heart. They want me to surrender. They would have me pursue a purpose too wicked for Thillria to understand. You know, dear diary. You know what the Pages Black would have me do. It desires that I rouse the Ur, the destroyers of life, the monsters beneath the world's bed. The evils Thillria and Graehelm have endured are nothing compared to what soon might come.*

*Ur. When I began this journal I swore I would never write that name again, but now there is no avoiding it. Ur. I know now where you sleep, dwellers of the Nether. Not below the earth as my father thought. Your hiding place is elsewhere, closer than any living soul can imagine.*

*I paused just now. My lamplight is dead. No candles remain lit, no lanterns, and no burn in the dark beyond my window. I write now in complete and utter darkness, my vision enabled by the Nightness, still so keen in my eyes. My senses attune to something distant, something dark. The roar of the sea fades into the background, overwhelmed by the wind arising beyond my tower. This wind seems to blow down from someplace higher than the sky. It carries whispers, names, and urgent pleas. My gaze draws up, but I keep writing. I saw something just now. The slightest break in the clouds revealed it for an instant before hiding it again. The sight makes me uneasy, far less certain of my chances.*

*I know the truth.*

*Two moons exist over this earth, one bright and protective, the other blacker than the deepest underworld pitch. The latter is my fear. It is midnight's eye. I know where the Ur are imprisoned. I must do my utmost never to think of it again.*

- A

## Servants of the Sleeper

An hour before dusk, they came to Mooreye. As the sunlight drew back from the crumbling towers and broken streets, the two stalked the grounds as though they were the city's new masters, free to despoil the kingdom of the dead. They moved like smoke, soundless as spirits, drifting through alleys and hollowed homes. The shadows of a thousand burned-out buildings lay heavy on their backs, and save for the plaintive caws of the quarreling crows, all was quiet in their wake. Mooreye lay dead, a tomb for the fallen, a stark reminder of what the Furyons had done.

Just before nightfall, the pair began their work. Their stage was Mooreye's grand courtyard, in whose center a pale tower speared from the weeds, and whose sides were fenced with iron spikes taller than any man. The first of the graverobbers, a bulbous beast of a man named Unctulu, licked his lips and wormed into the loam, his fingers like hungry larvae searching for their next meal. Nearby, Thresher drove his rusted spade into the dirt, sloughing aside huge gobs of soil. Their work was rapid and inelegant, for none were near to question it. No one had been to Mooreye since the Furyons destroyed it, and none were likely to come after the robbers' work was finished.

No man, no matter his origin, could claim such hideousness as Unctulu. As he knelt in the twisted grass and speared his maggoty fingers into the earth, his sparsely-toothed grin split his face like a festering scar across a pale, misshapen melon. Worse was his cadaverous skin, quivering over his bones, flapping beneath his half-rotted raiment of leather and rags. His only possessions were his bag, stuffed with all manner of moldering food, and his belt lined with some twenty cork-sealed vials, clinking constantly as he dug. Unctulu was heedless of the sweat rolling from his hairless, malformed head, and unaware of the gurgling, toad-like sounds oozing from his throat. Had anyone asked him, he would have told

them he relished his disgustingness, that it was ‘not ‘*Tulu’s job to be pretty.*’

Compared to his companion, Thresher seemed a titan, moving ten times more dirt than Unctulu. He said nothing as he tore great shovelfuls of soil away, and he never tired. Thresher’s face lay hidden behind an eyeless, featureless iron mask, and his body beneath rusted, lobstered mail. How it was Thresher saw the world, and how he exhumed so swiftly, none would dare ask.

“Ah, Thresh, this is too easy, yes?” Unctulu gurgled. “A month more and we’ll be back home, feasting like kings. Well, you might not feast, but I will.”

If Thresher heard, he gave no sign. Wordless, he continued to dig. His armor groaned and shuddered, but he moved as though completely unencumbered, gouging out great chunks of black earth with each stroke.

“Slow, slow.” Unctulu patted a mound of soil. “I can smell it, can’t you? The grave’ll be as shallow as the Sleeper said. Easy work, after so long to get here.”

Five shovelfuls more and Thresher hoisted his spade over his shoulder, laying it to rest beside the steel greatsword on his back.

“Good, good.” Unctulu lapped up a strand of escaping saliva. “Yes, yes, this is the spot. Pale bones, we’ve found. Right where Master said.”

The evening sky dimmed to a deep, somber grey. Bumbling, Unctulu rummaged through his bag and produced a spherical lamp. “Yes, Thresh. Much better.” He stoked the lamp until it glowed like a tiny moon. “My eyes...not like yours. Need a little light for digging.”

In the lamp’s pallid light, Unctulu clawed a last few fistfuls of dirt away from the hole Thresher had dug. “Look, look.” He shivered with satisfaction.

“This is the one.”

Half-covered in rotted clothes and decomposed beyond recognition, the corpse beneath Unctulu’s fingers was laid out in awkward fashion. “Buried right where he died.” Unctulu’s smile broadened. He dug the dirt out from between each rib, each spinal disc, each brittle bone from collar to knee. Smacking his lips, he removed a vial from his belt and poured its contents along the length of a protruding hip. The foul liquid fumed and sizzled,

melting the rest of the dirt away. “Now, now,” he cackled. “Looksey, looksey, Thresh. What have we here?”

Greedy, he ran his fingers along a leather belt looped around the corpse’s hip. Two empty scabbards were affixed to the belt, one to each side. Unctulu tugged the belt and scabbards loose, afterward dousing each with a second phial of black liquor.

“See, see...” He slid one finger across the faint symbols etched on the scabbards’ steel caps. “The Raven. The crossed swords.

“The marks of the Pale Knight.”

The scabbard and belt were no ordinary items. The courtyard was no ordinary plot of land. The dry, dead grass and all the streets of Mooreye had been the site of a great and bloody battle. “Every grave, every cairn.” Unctulu grinned hideously, “Grae or Fury, dead and gone. But not this one. Of all the corpses here, this one’s different. Thillrian, he is. The worst of them, right where he should be.”

Unctulu rose. Beside Thresher, hulking and silent, the bloated man stood a full head and half shorter. “Now is the time, Thresh.” He looked up. “Give me the item.”

Thresher reached for the plate covering his left shin, finding a narrow seam betwixt the joining of two greaves. With fingers locked in a coal-colored gauntlet, he withdrew the object hidden therein. The night trembled, the breeze stopped blowing, and the last of the day’s light faded away.

The object was to blame.

It was a gnarled, needlelike tine, thick as a man’s thumb at its widest and sharper than any dagger at its point. Long as a thighbone, it looked fashioned of polished obsidian, but in truth its make was unknowable. When Thresher held it high, it made the shadows move, stirring the darkness like stew inside a cauldron.

Unctulu looked longingly at the tine, his throat welling like a toad’s. “It’s time, Thresh. Remember what we’re here to do. Now and only now, you’re to let me have it. If I don’t give it back, you’re to butcher me, but otherwise I’m to use it.

“Just. This. Once.”

Thresher released the tine. Unctulu grasped it from its thicker, duller end and waved it from side to side as if to carve a lesion in the night. When Thresher reached for his sword, Unctulu



grimaced. “Oh, all right. Well and well. Good and good. I’ll play nice.”

Thresher left his sword in its scabbard. Sniffing the air and swiping the saliva from his chin, Unctulu hunched over the exhumed cadaver. “If you’d eyes, Thresh, I’d tell you to close them. This’ll not be pretty.”

Unceremoniously, he stabbed the tine into the soil, wounding the dirt next to the corpse’s ribs. The tine punctured soil and loose stone as though they were water, sinking down to half its length. Gurgling, Unctulu left it in place, sharp end pointed to the heart of the earth, the other aimed straight at the star-pricked sky.

“A long way we marched,” he drooled. “And all for one man. How many nights have we blackened the road, Thresh? How many times did the Grae almost catch us? I’d sooner raise up the whole city than this one cruel carcass. But it’s as the Master wishes, and so we’ll do as we’re told.

“We’ll bring him back.”

The tine lay half-buried in the loam. Mist arose from the punctured earth, the grey vapors swallowing the open grave and slinking across the bones like a tongue. Unctulu’s lantern light played across the mist. It gleamed white at first, then blue, then lavender. Unctulu held his breath as the vapors thickened, the mist winding in ever tighter circles around each bone, adhering to the marrow like mortar.

“Look, Thresh. It’s working.”

A tremor rattled the courtyard. The grasses near the grave withered and turned to ash. Where once the cadaver’s brittle bones had lain bare to the night, fresh tendons reknit themselves, and muscles, raw and red, took shape. Layer upon layer, pale flesh stitched itself atop a template of veins and sinew. Organs pumped to life, and a new heart spasmed, thumping a black rhythm in a body eight years dead.

Faster than Unctulu could swallow ten breaths, the body became whole. The deep shadows lessened, and the night’s natural sounds resumed. Unbroken, the tine expelled itself from the dirt and rolled to a stop at Unctulu’s feet.

“Disgusting, wasn’t it? It’s different watching it happen to someone else.” Unctulu snatched up the tine. “Ah...well...I suppose you’ll want this back.”

Thresher snared the black tine and slid it back into his greaves. The body stirred.

The man in the grave seized a sharp breath and exhaled.

“Look at him.” Unctulu gave a three-toothed grin. “Not jealous, are you Thresh? Seems eight years in the dirt leaves a man in better shape than eight hundred. Worry not. You’re still prettier.”

Thresher tilted his head. Behind his iron mask, thoughts unknowable roiled.

“You want to know?” Unctulu asked.

Thresher remained still.

“Of course you do,” said Unctulu. “This’ll be the last of the ones Master raises, leastways for now. No one wanted him during his first life, and no one but Master wants him now. Look at him, whiter than his bones, waking up from his nightmare. Well...if his dreams were rotten, he deserved it. More than any other, I’d say. More even than me.”

Thresher tilted his head again.

“That’s right, Thresh. Don’t you know who this is? This be Archmyr Degiliac, mass murderer, ruin of the Furies, butcher and raper and slaver. The Pale Knight, they called him.

“And they’ll call him worse yet.”

### *About the author*



A reader of mass quantities of fantasy and sci-fi, **J Edward Neill** became obsessed with writing fiction in 2001. On one bitterly cold morning in the lowest corridor of his candlelit man-cave, he set fingers to keyboard and began hammering away on what would become a much larger project than he ever imagined. Since that day, he has spent all his free time lost in his daydreams, conjuring ways to write the kind of stories he always loved as a child. When he's not glooming in front of his laptop or iPad, J Edward haunts the internet via his websites: *TesseraGuild.com* and *DowntheDarkPath.com*.

While writing is his prime passion, J also has a powerful affinity for esoteric art, quirky foreign films, and drowning helpless canvasses with his dark, terrible paintings. He currently haunts the 'burbs of North Georgia, where he moonlights as a foodie, a sipper of too much pinot noir, and the hugest-armed quarterback never to sniff the NFL.

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