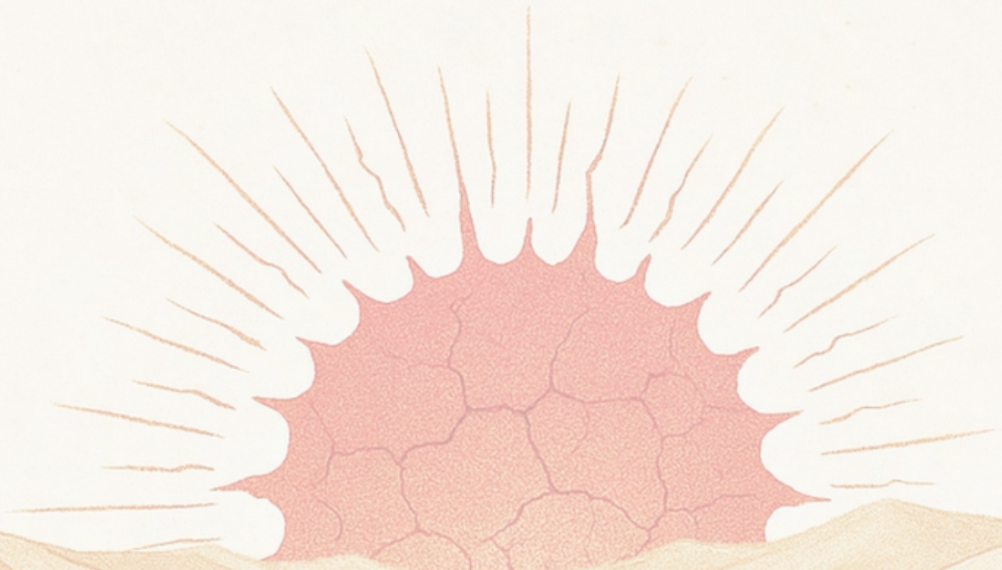


THE RUINS OF THE ANCIENTS



By XOCATCHIL

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LETTER TO LUHAM

Dear Luham,

Your mother told me you've been heading out regularly into the desert, drawn by the lure of riches so often linked to abandoned ruins. She's worried – and rightly so – but I also know that you're unlikely to heed warnings. So let me at least pass on what I've learned during my own wanderings, so you set out better prepared.

Sooner or later, you'll find that not all ruins are alike. Many are little more than scattered stones, worn down by time and the elements. You might even walk through some without noticing. Taking a step back – or better yet, gaining elevation – can sometimes help you spot subtle differences in soil texture or stone arrangement across a rocky plain. Other ruins are better preserved, occasionally in remarkable condition, though most show signs of wear and destruction to varying degrees.

The most common remnants are **fortified structures**: watchtowers, outposts, redoubts – some surprisingly large. A few remain intact, built on principles of solid, lasting construction. They resemble the fortifications raised by the sorcerer-kings or merchant houses and likely served similar purposes: guarding routes, storing goods, securing wells – whether lost or still flowing – or sheltering communities that once lived within or nearby. You'll find them scattered nearly everywhere, even out toward the edges of the Ringing Mountains.

You may also come across **temples** or other places once devoted to forgotten cults. Whether the gods they honored truly existed is anyone's guess, but the structures built in their name are often richly adorned. Friezes, statues, columns, dry basins, mosaics – you may find items or materials of great

value there. But these sanctuaries can be trapped or haunted by forces unseen. Some remain untouched precisely because something dangerous lingers within, waiting to awaken at the first sign of disturbance.

Beneath these temples – or nearby – you might find **catacombs**. These underground networks, sometimes sprawling, served as resting places for the dead. You'll move among alcoves, sarcophagi, burial chambers, and altars. These places are steeped in death, and it's best not to linger. Some of the ancients do not rest easily. Disturbing their slumber, even by accident, may rouse them. And if you come upon a sealed sarcophagus, even one adorned with jewels, remember: some things are best left undisturbed.



Tombs, on the other hand, are almost always hidden. They weren't built for remembrance, but for defense. Traps, glyphs, false floors, and even mechanisms of true destruction are often set within. Tombs rarely house more than a few bodies – a leader, perhaps, with companions or retainers – and frequently a hoard. Sometimes they conceal a single artifact, deliberately buried. If that's the case, be cautious: there were good reasons it was hidden, and that none were meant to claim it.

Village ruins fade quickly. Wind, scavengers, and sandstorms reduce them to little more than shapeless mounds. Still, a strong gust might expose a wall, a cellar, or a partially collapsed building. These finds shouldn't be dismissed. A steel blade, a crafted tool, a few coins — they're often reward enough. Don't expect grand discoveries. Most of these places have been looted many times over, especially the old cities, whose locations are well known.

You may also stumble upon **crypts** — small, connected underground chambers, plain and functional, likely used for storing goods or housing people. Sometimes you'll find stashed supplies, old objects, or traces of everyday life that, while seemingly mundane, can be surprisingly useful or enlightening.

Some **isolated ruins** give no immediate clue as to what they once were. Manor houses, collapsed palaces, public buildings, or noble residences — it's often hard to tell. Room layout, fixed furnishings, scraps of decoration or carved fragments can offer hints, but these places only yield their secrets with patience. Their seclusion also makes them perfect for those seeking to disappear.

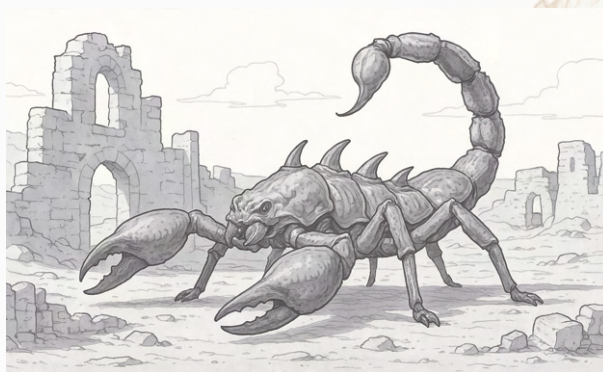
Then there are the **caves and old mines**, scattered across the desert like old scars. Most offer little beyond signs that someone was there long ago — or perhaps signs of something still there now, best left undisturbed.

Yet more than the variety of ruins, it's the danger they hold that should concern you. A wall can fall without warning. A slab can collapse underfoot. Sand can hide shafts, hollows, or weak ground. Mechanical traps are not uncommon. But the true threat comes from the things that still inhabit these places.

First, you'll encounter what I call **guardians of a bygone age** — golems, elementals, undead, and demons — bound by oath, ritual, or curse. Some ruins

are cursed so that anyone who dies within rises again, stripped of memory and driven by blind hostility. I once saw a companion fall, then rise, blade in hand, his eyes hollow. I had to strike him down. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Other ruins are inhabited by **living, thinking beings** — escaped slaves, raiders, spellcasters, or psions. Some reshape the ruins entirely, building new sections, collapsing old ones. You won't always recognize what the structure used to be, but remember this: if someone has claimed such a place and held it, they are not to be taken lightly.



And then there are the **wandered-in monsters** — creatures that stumbled in and stayed. Giant scorpions, serpents, tembos, and basilisks. They weren't placed there, but they've made the space their own. They have no plans and no spells, but they kill just the same.

That's what I can offer you. It's only a glimpse. You'll learn more on your own than I could ever teach. But never forget: the worth of a ruin isn't just in what it holds, but in what it might take from you — your life, your blood, or your soul.

Give your mother my regards. And may the desert sand never close over your tracks.

Your devoted uncle.

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