

Greetings reader!

Playing Dungeons and Dragons is one of my favorite hobbies. I have been Dungeon Master in every game I played so far. I have created many characters and villains over my years of gaming, but this one story is special to me. You see, I really love Vampires. I keep a list of all the Vampire films and games I have experienced, and am constantly looking to expand it. In the most recent game I play I chose to create a Vampire villain, and though his backstory was only roughly thought out, I kept expanding on it in my mind, until I could no longer resist the need to write it down in as much detail as I had the patience to. Below you can read the result.

Here is some background on the campaign to help understand the world and the setting. The game we play is set in a custom world I named Eternal Winter, a land that once was vibrant and full of life, but a large storm shook the world, and radically cooled down the climate. As a result, society changed, borders shifted, alliances were formed and broken, and the whole world and the people in it had grown cold. The campaign takes place 300 years after this storm, and it is this campaign that the party encountered a Vampire lord they know as Dorian Thorne, but goes by many other names in the various parts of this world. He is shadowy figure, who appears at seemingly random times to manipulate the flow of mortal politics for no reason the players have set to understand. What they do know about him is that he is an elegant and well-mannered individual, who can appear anywhere he wants whenever he wants and is likely one of the most powerful creatures in the material plane.

His story begins back in this world's ancient history, more than 2000 years before the Storm. While the campaign takes place in a setting very much inspired by medieval Germany and ancient Rome, ancient times in this world are inspired by ancient Egypt and Sumeria. Places, people and deities have names that reflect this. For reasons that will become clear from the story, the main character enjoys writing, and fills most of his days doing just that. The story of his life and undeath are written below from the perspective of the most reliable person to deliver an accurate account: himself.

The story is written in the first person, as Amenrahersef recounts his tale of slavery and mastery. Since this is the backstory of a Vampire, expect mature themes: blood and gore, violence and aggressive themes, sexual content and everything else associated with the creatures. Also keep in mind that I am not a professional writer, I have no training and only minimal practice. As such my story structure is just "bunch of stuff that happens", and my

spelling and grammar are more horrifying than anything a Vampire could do to a victim, so sorry for that.

Thank you for your interest! I hope you enjoy this little trip into my demented mind!

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I have an impeccable memory. I remember every event of my life as though I was still in all those moments at once. Every source of joy and anger, pleasure and regret, live in my mind as an endless gallery of meticulously detailed paintings. Still I write, not stemming from a need to preserve, for I preserve the eternity that is my existence in my own memory. I write for the pleasure of the process itself, the one thing I truly love in undeath, as I did in life. My names are many, as I have lived a long time and collected quite a few. Know that I am one of the most powerful beings on the face of this world, and my story is not for the faint of heart. Tread carefully mortal, for you are about to enter into the mind of one of the most ancient Vampyre to ever walk this plane.

## Chapter one - life

### The story of my birth

My birthers gave me the name Amenrahersef. That is all they gave me. I was born as the result of the mortal passion between two slaves. They were in the service of a man named Mudads, who was a loyal vassal of my liege, Uhtman, Child of the Sun. I mention this specifically, as the person of the slaveowner who possessed my birther was the reason I was kept alive. She had attempted to keep her child hidden for a while, ultimately unsuccessfully. Under normal circumstances shortly following my discovery I would have been slated for sacrifice to one of the Empire's gods. But as the fates, or perhaps the gods themselves would have it, that would not be the future in store for me. The priests were told of the precise day and hour of my birth, and looked to the stars for clairvoyance. It was their interpretation of the signs that I had a great destiny and some divine role to fulfill. So, my life was spared, to their great regret, I imagine, had they any actual foresight.

My sacrilegious birther and the one who impregnated her did not share in my luck. They were discarded as one dose a faulty tool. I am unaware of their precise fate, save for the fact that their deaths served to please one of the gods. Based on the calendar and records of the stars at the approximate time, the deity in question was likely Horus, but I have no specific information on the topic. Just as well, because the details of their fate carry no weight for me. I did dwell on the matter for a good long while at the start, as is the custom for mortals, but the perspective of what is truly important is one of the great gifts of my condition.

My earliest memories all pertain to my training. After deliberation on what my special fate should really be, the priests would eventually settle on sending me to a private teach-master in Khakesh, so as to train me in the art of writing. History has already long forgotten the age of the Empire of the Sun, which is to be expected, I suppose, following more than 2000 years and the two major world-shattering cataclysms that occurred since then. Rightly so too, for there is little in their history worth preservation, aside from the art of the time. What remains of the Empire's memory is either buried beneath the earth of Eternal Winter, or hewed within the darkened crypts of my memory. I shall therefor account all the elements of the culture required to understand my story.

First, the rule of law. Travel was hard back then, even harder than today. Horses had not yet been tamed in those lands, and any beasts of burden strong enough to carry significant weight were too slow to travel efficiently. The only way to move long distances in what could be considered good time was using ships, boats and barges along the rivers, which were wild and unpredictable in nature as far as the weather and flooding was concerned. As a result, governance was extremely localized, even in comparison to the system of vassalage that currently dominates the human kingdoms of the north. Regents were held in such high regards as to often place them on the same planes as the gods themselves. All owed allegiance to the Sun Emperor, the lord of lords, only a fingers width from true godhood himself. This Emperor was the man who would one day become my master, once the teach-master had finished training me in my new craft.

That brings me to the second point, writing. The art was passed down to the first humans who knew it from the dwarves, who had been practicing the craft for centuries prior. But to the early human mind the concept was unbelievably beyond comprehension. The thought that a collection of so many tiny markings on a stone slab, a clay tablet or a roll of papyrus could hold so much meaning was too much for most people to handle at the time. The list of all the people in the empire who were properly trained in the art of writing was short as to fit on a note light enough for a sparrow to carry. Merchants, engineers, architects, even priests and rulers were without such skills. Yet a few individuals were selected to have this knowledge passed on. One such man was my teach-master. And soon, another would be me.

Every ruler, local or greater made it a point to employ a scribe, a man trained to read and write. The task entrusted to these men was simply to write everything and anything their masters asked of them. This could be something of great importance such as a letter to a foreign ruler, or something as mundane as a note of which wife was of the most pleasant company that

evening. I was deemed ready to serve my emperor when I reached the age of 11 winters, old enough to be competent at my craft, but young enough to easily grow attached to my new master. I was adorned in golden silks and showered in the finest perfumes, and sent off in an ornate chariot to be delivered to him. Upon my arrival I was inspected from top to bottom.

“Somewhat small of build.” Said the king’s advisor tasked with the inspection. “Well enough muscled for his age, but short as a winter day. Though I suppose for the task he is assigned that is of little consequence.” The bald-headed imbecile was referring to my task of writing, though his implication was that I would not match the king’s sexual taste. The entire time his advisor did his examination my soon to be master was laid back in his throne being fed fruit by a beautiful chocolate skinned woman. A southerner. I had not seen one before but heard of them. From a place where the sun shown so bright that it darkened the skin of the people who lived there. Had I been more critical of thought at the time I would have posed myself the question why it shown brighter there and not where the chosen god-king of the Ra resided.

“A shame.” the king said. “Would have been nice not to have to make separate inquiries for that. Some of my current bed-slaves began to bore me.” Then turning to the eager teacher behind me he asked: “I assume his skill with the ink will leave nothing to be desired?”

“He is our brightest, my holy king.” came the reply. “It was foretold and we saw to it. None in the schools of Khakesh can do better.”

“Very well. Give the masters their payment!” As if waiting for that very command servants from the king’s side carried a sealed chest over the ones who delivered me. With a bow and prayer, they left me to my new master, and to my new life.

### My life in the king’s service

I spent a total of twenty years in service of the Sun King, and sadly a majority of it can be summed up in the same paragraph of text. I would follow my master throughout his routine along with the rest of his slave-horde escort of bathers, lovers, feeders and so on. On his whim he would instruct me to take notes on whatever caught his fancy at the time. Most often he would just ask me record transpired events he felt he would want to regale later. Other times he would have thoughts about politics or philosophy he wanted immortalized. At times there would be important correspondence to dictate. The other half of my task involved keeping track of the

things I had written down, so that should it be required I could read them back to him when he so desired. He delighted much in hearing his own thoughts from past days. I curated the royal library, the chamber in which my writings had been stored on tablets or scrolls. Writing was my life, as it is now my undeath. It was also what would end up saving me when my time came.

I was raised to love my master above all else, myself included. My existence was to serve him and him alone. The teach-masters did a remarkable job engraving that in my mind, however, as the years went by many of the veils would drop. The first moment that opened my eyes occurred during my master's mealtime. Plates of fine delicacies had been laid out before him, and he shared it with his favorite wives, of which he had nineteen. As the feast progressed, and my master's debauchery was at its highest the following occurred:

"I feel as though we are missing something important." he said with a mouth full of roast quail. "Yes... I remember now. Five or so suns before I had a craving for something exotic and exquisite. Scribe! Recall this for me."

I scrambled at my master's request. In this moment I would have to look through my pouch and find the scroll where this reference was written down. Alas, the scroll in question was already filed away in the library, which meant I would have to find it there to fulfil my master's desire. As fate would have it that very day I had stepped on a piece of dropped cutlery that left a deep bloody wound. I had kept quiet about it, as my master need not be burdened by the suffering of his slaves. I simply took a spare moment to wrap a piece of spare cloth on the wound so as to not bleed on my master's floor, and I licked up the blood that had been spilt already. While I did not trouble the king with any of this it did cause me a fair amount of pain and discomfort to simply stand, let alone walk. At the thought of having to walk the whole way to the library and back to find what my master desired to eat five days ago with this pain in my foot, I did something I had never even considered doing: lying to my master.

The lie was not malicious in its intent, and it wasn't even really my goal to mislead him. I simply wanted to avoid that pain and discomfort. So I took out the oldest scroll in my pack and pretended to read from it. I was not focused on what was written down, rather I was invoking my memories of the day in question desperately trying to remember the information my master needed. To the best of my recollection he had the thought of eating a finely cooked boar doused in soy marinade atop eastern rice with sliced carrots and string beans.

“Yes! Indeed!” he shouted merrily. “I remember now. To have forgotten something so obvious...” And he called to him a servant from the side of the hall. “Have the cook prepare it immediately while I still have my appetite!”

The servant bowed and rushed to the kitchen to deliver the master’s orders. The thought of what I had just done made me nervous to the point of trembling, but as my master reacted, I felt a great wave of relief wash over me. I had done my work well and pleased my master without the need to cause myself unneeded pain. Later though when I was curating the collection, I opened up the scroll to confirm my memory. I was horrified to discover that my master had actually craved the same dish I described but with meat of ostrich, not boar. I was instantly drowned in a sea of shame at having mislead my king. I should have come clean to him and told him my mistake. And yet, before my opportunity to do so arrived I came to another realization: I gave my master the wrong information, but he believed me. He believed what I told him about his own past thoughts more than he did his own recollection. Years later I would understand that in that moment I had my first taste of what it was like to wield power. So, I kept my secret to myself. And though at the time I saw this as just a mistake swept under the carpet, this was my first step on a long road that would lead me to becoming one of the most powerful beings on the mortal plane.

As time progressed, I would get the thought to experiment with just how much my master’s memory depended on my records. Once I managed to get over the fear and learned to see it as a harmless move to make my duty slightly less difficult, I started to bend other small truths as well. I wanted to see how far the bow-string would stretch before breaking. When it came to most culinary choices, I could say most anything I wanted. My master loved many kinds of dishes, and in reality, so long as he was eating well prepared food, he was content. He had thought about eating most all dishes as some point. He was more in touch with his past thoughts on his women. When asking me to recall which of his wives and bed-slaves he had picked for himself in the past, he proved more resilient with his memories, overriding my “writings” saying I was mistaken or that he must have been influenced by the wine to think such a thing. To my great fortune he never accused me of trying to mislead him, though I would have to endure harsh punishments for my “mistakes”. My attempts at changing my master’s memories were spread out over long periods of time, for if he should grow to believe I was unreliable he would just get rid of me and have me replaced with another aspiring student from Khakesh. Suffice it to say, that by the time I had seen my 20<sup>th</sup> winter I had grown quite

knowledgeable about my own power I wielded, though I saw it more as a margin for error. That would change before long.

### Mortal love

In between these events I also had my first and only experience with mortal love. The subject of my affection was one of the master's bed-slaves, a beautiful young girl by the name of Renisenb. Our first meeting occurred that same day when I had suffered the wound on my foot. Later in the day the king had noticed my makeshift bandage.

"Good Ra!" he exclaimed. "What happened to your foot?"

"I tread on a piece of fallen cutlery, master." I responded truthfully.

"You better not have stained any of my fine carpets with your blood." He said with a stern look.

"No, master. I saw to it that I did not."

"Well, we can't have you walking around with that gash. It will distract you from doing your work. Reni!" At my master's call Renisenb emerged from the swarm of women following in my master's shadow. I knew all of my master's slaves by name, so I had known Renisenb before. She was brought to Uhtman from the south, so her skin was brown and her hair the darkest of black, as were most people born in those lands. She was one of the master's younger slaves, 15 winters of age at that time. Her clothing – or rather lack of – was subject to what my king preferred at the time, but right then she was wearing a revealing assortment of blue and violet silks, that left little to the imagination. Her eyes were a mesmerizing, shiny hazel, her black locks wavy and long. As she appeared before the king she bowed deeply and awaited his command. "Take my scribe back to the servants' quarters and see to it that his wound is properly dressed and cared for. Scribe you may spend the remaining day resting. I will expect you at my side with the rising sun."

Renisenb nodded her head and bowed. I did so as well, then she took me by the hand and lead me back to my bed in the servants' quarters. There she gently removed the cloth I had wrapped around my foot.

"What caused this?" She asked aghast at the sight of the depth of the cut.

“There was a knife on the floor I did not see.”

“Why did you not say anything?” She looked at me with a look of deep concern.

“I did not want to bother the master with my pain.”

Nodding to me with approval she sought to her task and started rubbing a balm on the cut. Her hands were gentle and her touch was warm. As a slave to be presented to the king I had been touched and cared for many times, but always like one cares for a highly valued object. There was more to her touch than that. There was a sense of caring on a human level. I remember it being intoxicating, mostly because I had never really felt it before. I remember wishing the wound had been larger so that she would spend more time dressing it.

The encounter was short, but its effects would spread out for years. From that day forward Renisenb and I would exchange shy glances when we thought no one was looking. To the best of my knowledge they were never intercepted throughout the whole affair. The master never got wind of it, not in the early stages when it was just innocent eye-contact, or even later when we started making love. Yes. It went that far. It would evolve slowly over a number of years, and it would end as all mortal love does: with hurt feelings and tragedy. In our case it would also end with death, mine first, then hers. But that would only happen much later, and yet again I get ahead of myself.

On occasion my duties in the library would require assistance. My master would assign one of his slaves to the task, one who he would pick at a whim. I perceived it as a benevolent act of kindness when my eyes were still shut, later it only served to further my taste for power, as I had someone who would need to follow my instructions to be effective at their task. Several months after Reni had dressed my bleeding foot my master’s whim selected her. It was such a chance occurrence that I got to feel her touch once that I never expected to be close to and alone with her ever again. Yet every time my master needed to send me someone to help, I harbored a secret desire to be reunited with her for an afternoon. That day the gods smiled upon me.

Reni had never been in the library before. It brought me great joy to see the enthusiasm on her face when she first saw it.

“I’ve never seen so many scrolls in one place!” she exclaimed. “And you wrote all of these?”

“Not really.” I responded trying to burry my pride. “The scribes before me filled most of the shelves. I have not yet written anything of great substance. That will come when I am older, I am told.”

“You keep note of our master’s thoughts. What could be any greater?”

“Well...” I blushed in shame. I had spoken my mind in haste, and Reni had put her finger on a hidden desire of mine. “I could wish for nothing more worthy, for certain. But many of these scrolls record things other than the thoughts of kings. Some of them are the collections of knowledge composed by numerous wise men and mystics. Compositions of sciences, mysticism or the arcane. And they lie here, preserved for the wise of the future to learn from.”

“You’ve read them?”

“Only a small amount. My work demands most of my attention. But there is no way of knowing if my possession of that knowledge might one day help my master at the right moment.”

I pulled out the scrolls I had been working on that day. I laid them out on a table and showed them to Reni. “See this symbol?” I pointed to a symbol I knew to resemble a sparrow with a branch of wheat in his beak. It was part of a sequence of symbols on the top part of the scroll, separate from the main body of text. “This symbol indicates the season of the floods. I need to find all notes from that season of this year, and compile my notes into a text easy to reference in the future.” I turned to look at Reni, who I could tell was struggling to follow the meaning of what I was saying. I realized that I had gotten so excited to talk about my passions to the girl I was fond of that I forgot she was not trained in the way I was. “I apologize. I am very passionate about this.”

“It sounds fascinating. I confess I understand very little of your profession. I just find it so hard to imagine that all these little scribbles and lines can have such meaning.”

I had not had much contact with people at all. For the most part I would just be in the shadow of my master, when speaking to Reni it was him I was trying to emulate. My master’s partners in conversation were nobles, and priests, and merchants, and song-writers, and many others of great intellect and artistry. Reni was of a much simpler mind, as one would expect from a slave, but the experience was still new and interesting to me. The meaning of all those “scribbles and lines” has become so engraved in my mind, and to realize that they carried no meaning to many, most in fact, it was moments like these that would add up over time to help

me understand the power I wielded. For as great and mighty as Uhtman was portrayed, he was just as illiterate as his slaves.

These were thoughts that formed over the years to come. In the moment I simply showed Reni the one symbol she needed to know, and showed her the shelf where the recent scrolls were kept. I spent the time there instructing Reni on the organization, and writing my index. Reni showed more interest in the work I was doing than any other slave to assist me before. I also caught her glancing in my direction at times in ways I interpreted as longing. My hopes for her to be drawn to me forced me to assume that her curiosity for writing was due to a romantic interest in me. As is the custom for mortals, particularly at younger ages, I tended to see what I wanted to see.

Uhtman's servants slept in slave quarters and dined out of sight. Though we were kept mostly ignorant of our opportunities, I started to see my times of sleeping and eating as time to use for other things. One of these things was showing my affection for Reni. We would exchange glances when faces were turned, find spare moments to lay our hands on each other, even to smuggle gifts. I could not believe my good fortune, to have feelings of adoration become mutual. Three years after the day she first bound my wound we had our first sexual encounter. She had snuck out of her sleeping quarters to come to visit me. As Uhtman's scribe I was considered a most important slave, thus had a small room to my own. I was awakened by the sound of my door closing shut. Reni was standing there with her back to the door and her hands at her sides with her palms on the door. Her head was tilted downwards, and her gaze fixed on me. I had half thought I was dreaming. Step by step she approached me. As she got to the side of my bed, she reached her hands up to her shoulders and lightly moved the straps of her silk dress to the sides. The fabric flowed down the curves of her body with hypnotizing grace. Her beauty was overwhelming. I remember having desired for that moment to come, but having it right before me I suddenly found myself frozen with fear. To try and put me at ease she gently reached out and put a hand on the side of my face. Hers drew ever closer to mine, while also she climbed onto the bed on top of me. I felt the warmth of her body for the first time, as well as her hands on my cheeks, then her lips pressed against mine.

The best way for me to describe the encounter is: clumsy. She was a bed slave and knew exactly what she was doing below the waist. But my master had never kissed her like he did his wives, and I had no experience being with a woman at all. I was filled with fear and desire. She moved with grace and beauty, captivating me with her motion. I wanted her with every fiber of my being. Yet I was filled with the fear of not being good enough for her, not to mention the

chance of us being heard from outside. As she rode me, she would try to keep her voice muffled, as did I, but the occasional moan would escape one of our lips, at which point we would freeze for a moment before continuing. My kisses were wet and sloppy, and though she whispered to me not to worry, I did so relentlessly. It was after this moment that she first told me to call her Reni. Up to that point I always referred to her by her full name: Renisenb. Reni was the master's name for her, and to be allowed what I considered the privilege of using that name as well, made me feel more loved than I ever had before.

Emboldened by our first night together many more would follow. We were always cautious with our encounters, spreading them out over long times to keep the other slaves off our scent. The longing we built up for each other over that time made the act all the more passionate. I had already been experimenting with manipulating my master through my notes, but this was the first real dangerous secret I kept from him. I was getting away with it too. The secret was so well kept, that throughout the time Reni and I saw each other not a single soul managed to find out. This fact emboldened me to pursue other interests of my own behind my master's back. Chief among these was the one that would facilitate my transcendence of mortality.

#### The master's true face

As a part of Uhtman's personal cohort I would follow him out of the land when he travelled. After all the thoughts he had while in foreign lands were of special value. The trips my master made to countries beyond the Kingdom of the Sun with me as his scribe were few enough for me to be able to list:

The first was a trip to the Elves of the Valius woods. Nothing can really compare to walking in the Sylvan forest. The experience is literally magical. The fey-woods are teeming with magical energy strong enough to be felt by even those who are not attuned to the arcane. According to the Wood Elves responsible for nurturing and caring for the wilds, if you listen really closely one can hear the trees speak, anxious to tell tales older than the first civilizations of the northlands. The woods are filled with Elven settlements: huts and hovels formed hamlets twisting among the trunks and branches of the trees where the wood elves reside, and glorious cities of white stone with towers that breached the crown to touch the sky built by the high elves.

For what I managed to learn of the immortal elves they were a relaxed and kind hearted people. Open and welcoming to the races of the world, eager to learn of their experiences and tell tales. They devoted centuries of their worldly existence to pursuing their passions, be they arts and music, druidcraft and arcane magic, knowledge and exploration of the past, or even the art of war. I learned to speak and read the scripture of the elves, that is as graceful and elegant as their people themselves. Contrary to our glyphic system of symbols, the elves used a phonetic system, with symbols referring to sounds of the mouth rather than words or concepts. These scripts would take much longer to read and record, yet the advantage was a list of symbols shorter than a single page of parchment. After the age of the Kingdom of the Sun came to a close most of the northern civilizations would adopt this or similar styles of writing. The teach-masters of Khakesh noted multiple times that the art of the written word was only for the fully devoted mind, as the number of symbols to remember are too numerous for the common man to comprehend. I met not a single elf man, woman or child who could not read and write. I assume this to be partially a result of the simplicity of what they called their “alphabet”.

The second lands were the wilds of Arberon. For the most part these lands were inhabited by villages too small to be of any meaning to anyone. The Arberish people were simple folk, they preferred the hunting and gathering method to cultivating their own land, they grew up worshiping alien gods of the wilds, and valued their families honor more than that of their nation. The Arberish king lived in the only real city in those lands, and it was his hospitality that my king enjoyed. He did not desire to stay long, for the environment and quality of the quarters prepared for him were far below what he was accustomed to, but during that brief stay I got to know much of the Arberish tongue. They used a style of writing similar to ours, with glyphs to describe broader concepts, but their symbols were more abstract with fluent lines and patterns rather than our style of recognizable symbology.

Finally, the Dwarves of Caar Volar and Caar Saad. Both dwarven kingdoms had sprawling cities built underground. I was surprised to learn how many of the Dwarvish people had never even heard of the Sun, a thing that I would have previously thought unthinkable. Indeed, many of these stout folks spent the entirety of their lives underground, working in mines and smithies, carving grand halls and sculptures of the strongest stone, and forging masterpieces of metalwork.

I will always remember the majesty of the Great Dwarven Library of Aldar. So large as to span more than a mile in every direction, with more writings than ever collected in a single spot. And with good reason, for the dwarves placed no value in the pulp of trees or the sheets

of papyrus. The written word only had value of written on slabs of stone, which was why the Dwarves needed such great space and feats of engineering to be able to store the vast knowledge of their ancient civilization. The Dwarven runecraft was a cross between our glyphs and the elvish phonetics. The runes symbolized syllables, and their slabs of stone were adorned with masterful patterns and magnificent carved illustrations. I left the Great Library of Aldar with a thirst for knowledge far more potent than when I arrived.

Each of these visits showed me new parts of the world, and also new sides of my master. Much of the guilt I had felt for my deeds of dishonesty, such as my subtle manipulation experiments and my affair with his bed-slave, stemmed from my deep love for him as a master. I was taught that he was as close to a god as we in the mortal realm could ever comprehend, and I was conditioned to see even his cruelest gesture as benevolent and caring. He would punish me for my mistakes to make me better. His harm was intended to teach. And this would make his acts of genuine kindness seem all the more loving. The minuscule crumbs of rewards I was given felt like gifts from the gods themselves.

But with every passing year and every new conversation recorded I started to see past the veil. The real face of Uhtman started to ever more clearly show through. The Elven Queen Deranaeleth thanked her handmaidens with a gentle kiss on the forehead or a soft touch of the face, even for the simplest tasks. Her every simple gesture, her subtlest smile radiated love, and appreciation, and gratitude. The Dwarven king Varborill adorned his servants, even his servers in gold and gem embroidered garments, his wife greeted us clad in a suit of mithril plate armor and leading an armed host of shieldmaidens.

My reasoning in the start was that the immortal elves and the stout mountain folk were not to be held to the same standards as mortal men. Elves were worthy of kindness and compassion for seemingly no reason, and the dwarves had such immense wealth that they could afford to decorate their lower-caste citizens in such riches, and allow their women to bare arms and lead armies. But I had no such excuse for the Arberish, whose fathers would train even their daughters to wield sword or axe, where the wives would frequently be among the boldest hunters. Where lords and rulers hunted their own food, tended to their own lands, and had no servants to mistreat or punish. My master could not even read his own thoughts without my help. These thoughts kept me awake at night in guilt and shame, yet I could not shake them. Ever more I found myself debating such thoughts as: *“Why should he sleep among silken sheets surrounded by wives and bed-slaves? Why should I be confined to a cell with a single bed? Do I not work as hard, nay harder than he? Am I not as knowledgeable about his affairs as he is?”*

*Could I not do what he does? Why should I have to hide my love for this beautiful woman, while he flaunts his love of several? What makes him so much more valuable than myself?"*

I would punish myself at the start for thinking this way, causing myself pain to distract from these thoughts of heresy, or depriving myself of the things I took pleasure in, like the reading of forbidden scrolls and my nights with Reni, to discipline myself for my insubordination. But the more I thought about it, and the more I got to see the people of the Kingdom of the Sun and the conditions they endured as opposed to the Elves, or the Dwarves, or the Arberish, or even what I later learned about the Kelmeri, the more I saw myself as not just an equal to Uhtman, but as superior. I possessed the knowledge of the written word. Did he? I showed a desire to learn about the world and the cultures that inhabited it. Did he? I earned the love of an amazing woman through my own merits rather than my wealth and my ancestry. Did he? I had managed to learn some bits of the arts of the arcane. Did he? The more I accepted this truth, that I was not his inferior, the more rewarding my acts of disobedience felt. I had already loved my king. I had already loved Reni. By allowing my eyes to see and my mind to think, I learned to love myself. This was the most important lesson of my life, but not the last one. Not by far.

#### Love's end

One final lesson was still necessary for me to make the choice of moving away from living for the sake of others, and instead living for the sake of self. For as much of my true potential as I had come to realize, there was still Reni tying me down. Naturally I did not see it in that light at the time. Back then I adored her. I would likely have given my life for her, so blinded was I by my mortal urges. What I was forced to learn to my own detriment was that she would never have done any such thing for me in return. Quite the opposite in fact.

Uhtman had gotten the desire to choose a new wife for himself, his seventeenth to be precise. As one would expect his bed-slaves all started carrying themselves with exaggerated posture to try and attract attention to their better qualities, all wanted to be the one his choice landed upon. The advantages were numerous: aside from the right to bare his children the position meant nicer treatment, more comfortable quarters, more lavish meals, and servants of their own as well. Uhtman's wives frequently came from his cohort of slaves, so the eagerness was warranted. Reni was no exception. She wanted out of her slave role as much as the rest of

them, for if she was already lying with him, she might as well get something out of it for herself. She was not shy in voicing this to me during one of our nights.

“Will you tell me the truth?” She asked me laying at my side.

“The opposite would never occur to me.” I replied truthfully.

“I already belong to another. Would you still love me if I was wife to another as well?”

“If I had your love, I would always love you back, no matter the circumstances.” I told her.

“Please do not hate me for this, but...” she sighed. I put a hand on her cheek to coax her into finishing. “I want to be his wife.”

Her words left me cold, yet I understood where they came from. By that point I had long since learned to hate Uhtman and understood what sort of master he truly is.

“I understand.” I told her. “He would be fortunate to have you.”

She smiled and kissed me.

“Were it that we had been born in different times. Can you imagine what a wonderful pair of husband and wife we would make?”

She caught me off guard. I had actually not considered such an option. Truthfully, I was quite happy with the way things were. I got to see her fairly frequently, our time together felt like magic. It was already like something I never would have dreamed of. So, I tried. I imagined us together living in a house, raising children, plowing fields, farming cattle... the things I imagined people outside of the palace doing. Try as I might, without the time for me to pursue my writing, I felt displeased with the vision. I had known only a few other scribes, scholars and teach-masters, who had the gift of literacy, and they did not lead married lives. Indeed, making a life for myself with Reni would mean having to give up the art I enjoyed the most in my life.

“Yes. We certainly would.” I said, immediately breaking my promise to her to always tell the truth.

For the rest of the month Reni would bring up her chances of becoming Uhtman’s wife time and again. I loved her deeply, and thus wanted to help her as best I could. The king still relied on me to keep his notes. His preferences in bed-slaves was one of the many things I kept meticulous records of. In discussion with his scholars he would say at one point:

“It is hard to choose a wife based on beauty alone. After all, my cohort consists of only the finest beauties in the north, not counting Elves of the Valius. Oh, but that would certainly be glorious! To be wed to an immortal Elven beauty!” They chuckled at that jest. Though I promise that if taking an Elven slave as his own without enraging the rest of their species had been a viable option, Uhtman would have sprung at the opportunity. He continued: “No, I think we all know that the most important trait in a good wife is reliability. I do not count loyalty, since of course all my slaves are loyal to a fault. But reliability, trustworthiness, the knowledge that she will be diligent and perform to her best whenever she is needed. That is the question.”

I was not allowed to interject myself in Uhtman’s conversations, but in this moment, I saw my chance. I could help Reni by doing what I had gotten really good at over the years: alter the King’s memories.

“Thousand pardons, my master.” The room went quiet and all eyes glared at my direction.

“You interrupt my conversation with your betters, scribe?”

“I do, my master, but I do so only because I see a way I can be of great service to you in your quandary. To help free up your magnificent mind from these menial mortal trivialities.”

Slightly confused looks were exchanged between the scholars, Uhtman though remained fixed on me. He licked his lip and narrowed his eyes, seemingly thinking what to make of my sudden break of decorum. Finally, he nodded and said to me:

“Very well, scribe. Let me hear what you have to say.”

I came forward and humbly presented myself before him, so he would not have to focus his attention to his side.

“You will recall, my master, that your preference of partnership in bed is one of the many things you instruct me to keep notes on. I can say with surety that your preference of slave-girl as well as your assessment of their affection towards your magnificence is recorded as far back as I have been in your service.” By this point I could see in his eyes that he already knew where I was heading with my argument. This was good, because Uhtman would always be more open to an idea if he believed it to be his in origin. “With your permission to spend a week’s worth of time on reviewing my records, I can determine for you, by your very own assessments, which of the girls in your possession has proven the most consistently satisfactory.”

The scholars behind me exchanged surprised glances, some few nodding in agreement. Unwise, since Uhtman had not yet voiced his own, and one did not want to end up on the opposite side of an argument from him. But after a few seconds of consideration, his lips curled into a smile.

“Such an obvious idea!” he said, then looked away from me and to his scholars. “I need not make this decision. It has already been made. I need only consult my past thoughts to clarify them.” Now the agreements from the scholars poured out in droves. “Very well, scribe. You shall get to work immediately. Your eagerness to serve has been noted, and I will excuse your unprecedented breach of protocol to bring this to my attention. Now, go!”

I left without a word and got to my work. I did as I said I would. A far more significant portion of my daily duties I was told to set aside. For most of my day I would be browsing my records as far back as I could go to see how well he rated his encounters with his slave girls. My hope was that Reni would rank high on the list, and that I could serve my love using only the truth. But alas, I had no such luck. I created two separate analyses: one that counted the overall ratings of the girls, and one that rated their good ratings against their bad ones. My thinking was that if reliability was Uhtman’s preference then it would be more important to know his new wife performs well most of the time she is called to bed. I determined that my master had five slave girls he called to bed more often than he did Reni, but even in the performance ranking Reni was only the third most reliable. There was no interpretation of what I had learned that would make Reni look like the best choice. So, if I wanted to help her, I would have no choice but to lie. I certainly wanted to help her.

When my week was at an end Uhtman called me to his side in private.

“Tell me, scribe” he said “Have you completed your work as you said?”

“I have, my master, and I am ready to tell you what I have learned.”

“Very well. Tell me then: Which of my slaves have I liked the most in the past?”

“Well, my master,” I began. “There are two ways to look at it: There is the one who you praised the most often, or the one you praised the most out of the times you had them. Which of the two do you desire to hear?”

Uhtman looked confused. “Are they not the same?”

“No, master, they are not. For you see, several slaves have been in your possession for far longer than others, and thus have earned a larger amount of your praise over the time. However, many of the new slaves you have praised many times out of the times they spent in your bed, thus proving to be the more reliable to perform well. I saw it necessary to make mention of both cases.”

“I see.” He told me. “Youth is an advantage, for certain. And reliability is the most important in a wife. Tell me then who my memories prove to be the most reliable!”

“As you wish, my master.” And so, the time had come. Quite possibly the biggest lie I ever considered telling the king. “Your most reliable slave is the girl Renisenb.”

“Reni?” Uhtman looked surprised. For a brief minute I feared he would see through my deception. “Reni... Interesting. Not who I would have chosen in my present mind.” My nerves had reached their limits. I could feel my knees about to quiver. But just before I lost my senses Uhtman said this: “It is a good thing then that I keep my past thoughts on record. Well done, scribe. You have served me well! Go and rest for the remainder of the day.”

“My most humble gratitude to you for your kindness, master.” I bowed deeply.

Before I could leave though, he grabbed me by the arm, squeezed tight, pulled me closer to him and whispered: “But if you ever interrupt your betters again, there will be no service you could do for me that will keep you safe from the flogging. Have I made myself clear?”

“Absolutely, master.” I squealed.

The rest went according to plan. Within the next few suns Uhtman had announced his choice, and it had fallen to Reni. They were wed before the end of the month. The festivities were grand, the food otherworldly, and Reni beyond heavenly. No longer was she draped in scarce cloths of silk, but rather a fine silken dress that accentuated her full beauty, and jewelry of silver and gold to add to her radiant shine. But already I noticed something that bothered me. She did not look in my direction a single time. I know, for my eyes followed her all evening.

After the wedding Reni would not see me in my quarters for the whole month to follow. Before we would sometimes go months without seeing each other, but this time felt different. When she finally came to see me, it was during the day in the library. I was not expecting her, and when she was finally there before me, I realized I no longer knew how to speak to her.

“Are you well?” She asked me.

“Yes. I was beginning to wonder when I would see you again.” I said still very unsure of myself. “I did not expect to see you here at this time of the day.”

“I am Uhtman’s wife now. I can go where I wish whenever I wish.” An exaggeration to be sure. Uhtman’s wives were far from free women. But for some reason these words did seem to come from a different woman, though it was clearly Reni talking. “I understand that it was your service to my lord husband that helped him to make his choice in wedding me. You have my thanks.”

“I knew it was what you wanted. And as you know, there is nothing I would not do for you.”

“Please, this talk is no longer appropriate.”

I was shocked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I came here to say my thanks for what you have done for me, but we are not equals anymore. We shall no longer see each other as before, and I command you to stop addressing me as you did then.” I had no response to this. She spoke with such authority, and she was my queen by then. It was as though the years we spent sneaking out to see each other never even happened. “Furthermore, your manipulation of my husband ends now. If you continue this unacceptable behavior, I will make sure my husband finds out about it. I can’t have you endangering him now that I am his wife.”

“Reni, I...”

“For the last time: Do not address me as you did before. Is that understood?”

I stood before her in silence for a few moments. Only now did I understand that I had been manipulated myself. If anything she pretended to feel for me had ever been real, at one point she stayed with me only to take advantage of the power I had over the king. Now she had no more need for me. In fact, I was now a liability. I felt betrayed and heartbroken. I felt like a fool.

“As you wish, my lady.” I said. “Is there anything else you would ask of me? Or my I get back to work?”

She looked over me once, then nodded. “Carry on, scribe.” Her silken dress twirled and waved behind her as she walked out of the library.

My immediate reactions to this incident were very in line with how other mortals react. I feigned strength before her to bandage my wounded pride, then broke down in tears when I was alone. I felt devastated at the thought of never seeing her again, never to feel her touch, her breath, her heartbeat, her kiss. I was in this state of self-pity for what must have been weeks. But when emotions weakened and rationality was allowed room again, I started to see clearly. This was not a tragedy. I had been set free and taught a valuable lesson at the same time. The love of other's always fades, but the love of self must remain. It is the only constant in our existence. From that moment on my life would be about me. Not Uhtman, not Reni, but me. And as a start, it was time I started gathering knowledge other than the eating and fucking habits of the king.

### Forbidden knowledge

The time had come to sate my own curiosity for secrets. With Reni no longer in the picture I had more time to read things I was not meant to. I had seen the priests perform miracles in Uhtman's court, and I had also witnessed feats and tricks of arcane magic from wizards in Arberon and the Elves. I wanted to learn these things myself. I wanted to learn things that few others could, or even things that no others knew. But more importantly I now had a long-term desire to escape the palace and the service of my master.

For five years I would search through the forgotten corners of the library, seeking tidbits of lost knowledge. I also grew bold enough to start sneaking into the repository in the temples, where I found writings on religion and magic. On Uhtman's trips I would often try to pay shady figures to retrieve rare scrolls from merchants or travelers, using the gold coins I pilfered from the king's chambers. So many were my sins against him at this point that nothing else mattered. Still, despite all the things I did to obtain knowledge, I was never caught. Slowly I became the master of subtlety, and fairly good at stealth as well. I knew all the straights and corners of the palace, all the channels to get messages in and out. Since I did not have to worry about others reading the scrolls, I could hide my collection of forbidden knowledge in plain sight, right there on a shelf in the library. I had managed to get a hold of arcane writings, and discovered a hidden magical potential in myself. By the end of those five years I was already using magic to send messages outside the palace, and moving things without using my hand.

One day all my plans were brought to a halt. Ghremhi, Uhtman's favorite wife had suddenly grown ill, and the priests saw no way of curing her. By their estimation the fever

would claim her within ten days. I was present and taking notes when the king was planning the ceremony for her funeral. Naturally he had ordered three dozen cows sacrificed in her honor, as well as a memorial chamber arranged in one of the rooms in the palace, that would contain her sarcophagus. All in all, he had a massive memorial service planned for his beloved. But during that talk Reni also spoke up.

“My dear husband, are you certain this is enough?”

“You doubt me, woman?” he responded.

Reni adjusted her attitude instantly and continued humbly. “Not at all, my life, but you always spoke of her with such reverence. She is your favorite after all. I think she would deserve more assistance in her journey to the afterlife.”

“Really? And what do you have in mind?”

“Come, my love, let me tell you away from prying ears.”

She made eye-contact with me at that moment. Possibly for the first time in years. I knew it was no coincidence that when the day finally came, and Ghremhi passed away, it was announced that two servants would be sacrificed and entombed beside her to aid her further in the afterlife, and I was one of the two.

I could not protest. My position required that I show nothing but willingness. I was selected for a great honor. Just like that my days became numbered. The body of the deceased was being prepared for preservation as per custom, which meant that if I was to escape the palace and save myself, I had but five days to do so. My options were limited. I could not simply escape. The palace was too well guarded, and my face well known. Even under cover of dark I had practically no chance at surviving an attempt to scale the walls or pass through the gates. The magic spells at my disposal would also be of no great use. Aside from being able to possibly cause a few distractions, they had no other useful function. Overpowering the guards was absolutely out of the question. I was short by stature, and not at all strong.

More and more it was looking like I had no way of avoiding the sacrifice. All signs pointed toward this fact. However, perhaps if it could not be avoided, I could work it to my advantage. I remembered from my forbidden collection of writings, and the folk stories I heard from Arberon, some legend called the curse of the Vampyre. A condition passed to a mortal by a god, an old-world god named Lamatsu. She was a beast goddess, a huntress, and a murderer. The legends told of how she would pray on pregnant mothers and eat the babies close to birth

right out of their wombs. I read indications that Lamatsu would pass a curse of immortality to the mortal who proved themselves worthy. But Lamatsu was a dead goddess. Her worship had been forgotten long before the birth of the Kingdom of the Sun.

The thought occurred to me that perhaps this immortal condition could be granted by other gods, ones who are still actively worshiped. I would need one from the pantheon of gods worshiped in the Kingdom, the one who seemed the most like Lamatsu in nature. The closest comparison led me to Sekhmet, daughter of Ra. She was a famed huntress of the gods, a woman who took the form a giant lioness, drinking the blood of her victims. Her worship as the goddess of the hunt was common, but what I was going to do was borderline heresy. Any priests of Ra would definitely have seen it as such.

Once my research was complete, I got to work. I had merely days to finish my preparations, and they would not be pretty. The first was to create an alter to Sekhmet. I had no time or resources to build a proper one, so instead I used water and soil from the palace gardens to fashion a crude rendition of a lioness out of mud. I placed it in a corner of the library I seldom visited and used the wooden shelves to try and obscure it as much as I could. I was the only person to regularly visit the library, and any others would usually only visit the parts I instructed them to anyway.

Next: the interpretation of the text. Though I had learned elements of magical practice, I was familiar only with the arcane. The nature of gods-gifted power was a thing I knew only from text descriptions. These proved to be beyond useless, as they built their foundation on metaphor and hyperbole without providing any practical guidance, and gods are notoriously difficult to appease if the priests of Ra and Set were to be believed. My limited research pointed to the fact that I may have had a fortuitous stroke when choosing Sekhmet as the one to appeal to. Intent, purity of soul or similar priestly nonsense did not concern her, rather she would reportedly care mostly about actions so long as they align to her primary aspect: the hunt. By proving my commitment to the hunt in a sufficiently meaningful way I had hoped to invoke her favor and blessing to participate in what was the forbidden text called “the eternal hunt”. The text spoke cryptically, using phrases such as “the ultimate prey” and “greatest form of sacrifice”. The challenge I found myself in was trying to place myself in the mind of a goddess and try to anticipate her thoughts. What I concluded after a hurried days-worth of analysis was that simply hunting animals would not do. To prove myself committed to “the eternal hunt” I would have to show internal dedication. One hunts animals for the purpose of making clothes and accessories from their hide, tools from their bones, food from their meat. The source of the

motivation there is self-preservation. To appease Sekhmet, I would likely have to hunt prey that I did not intend to eat or skin, and was my evolutionary equal or more. By the time I arrived to this conclusion I had but three days left before the ceremony would be conducted.

### The offerings

For confirmation I attempted regular prayers to the goddess. She did not respond nor make her presence known. The murders I would have to commit without truly knowing if my hypothesis was even remotely correct. Nevertheless, I had no other option. To do my absolute best I would hunt one prey each day before my sacrifice, making my offerings to Sekhmet three in total. For the first I chose one of Uhtman's male bed-slaves. The servants for the most part looked at me in an admiring light for the sacrifice I was about to undertake, this made conversing with them during meals easy. I selected my prey at such an occasion. I would have to speak more lies, a notion that by that point had almost completely lost its relevance for me. As my deception I chose to make up a command from Uhtman for the slave to come to the library and assist me in my tasks. I did my best to make sure that the request was not heard by anyone. A single missing bed-slave should go unnoticed for three days if no one had a reason to suspect where he had vanished to. I told him to keep the request a secret, because Uhtman worried that other slaves would become jealous of his choice and act in an inappropriate manner. To my luck, my plan did not go astray and the slave had followed my instructions to the letter. I led him to my makeshift altar under the guise of needing his help looking through older scrolls, letting him walk ahead of me while I gave instructions from behind him. Before he had a chance to express his curiosity about the strange arrangement he discovered, I reached in front of him and firmly laid a hand on his face covering his mouth and nose, then struck the knife I concealed from him straight between his shoulder blades. His cries were muffled, but still worryingly loud. I had not expected that, nor that his body would possess such strength as it did. Instinctively he grabbed at my hand to pull it off of him, and for a split moment I felt the sudden momentum of his jerk catch me off guard and loosen my grip. I fought back, twisting the knife as I did. Eventually his struggling became weaker, and his knees began to buckle beneath him forcing him to the ground. He fell on his back speechless, but still coughing up blood. Apparently, my hand had slipped and the blade had pierced his lung rather than his spine. As I watched him lay there, his blood slowly spreading on the floor beneath his body the full weight of what I had just done hit me. I felt my hand with the dagger begin to tremble at the sight of the panic in the boy's eyes as he failed to draw breath. Before weakness could overtake

me, I mustered all my strength to summon my rational mind. *No. Remember the lesson.* I told myself. *You live now for no one but yourself.* With a deep breath I managed to get back in control. I knelt down beside the boy and slit his neck with a fast and determined motion. The blood started to pour from the vein in his throat. Remembering what I had learned about the way of Sekhmet, I leaned over him, put my mouth on the wound, and drank his life's fluids. I let the warm, iron taste flow down my gullet. I would not describe the sensation pleasant as I drank the blood from his dying body, and as I could feel through my lips as his heart beat ever faster and faster, then suddenly stopped beating altogether. But when it was done, I knelt before my first victim with a few drops of blood still rolling down my chin, and prayed to Sekhmet once again. She did not respond.

I wrapped up the body in a linen cloth and left it before the altar. I did not bother to clean up the blood, time was not on my side. With luck no other soul should visit the library without my instructions for the few days that were left, after I was sacrificed it would no longer matter if the evidence of my schemes were discovered. At that moment though uncertainty was taking its toll on me. I took a life for the first time and received no affirmation from the goddess in whose name I did so. Regardless, there was no stopping now. I had two more days to go, and I needed to make the most of the time I had left. As I waited that night for sleep to take me, I started considering my next victim.

Still trying to force myself to think like a goddess, I wondered: What would make me take notice of a mortal's actions? Countless mercenaries and assassins hunted men, and yet they were never granted immortality. At least not as common or even obscure knowledge ever recorded. Was it simply that the kills were never dedicated to the glory of the goddess? If that was the case then I was on the right track and just needed some more offerings. But if not, then perhaps the identity of the victims themselves was a factor. I was a small human by build and my muscles not trained for combat. I was terrified at the thought of hunting someone truly dangerous, like one of the king's guards or soldiers. That fear subsided when I remembered that there was no downside to failure. If I am caught and killed then I die, as I would just the same if I did not even bother to try. I was a man with nothing to lose and everything to gain if I was right. Now the only question was: how?

Two things I would need to accomplish: First, I would have to find some way to lure a single palace guard by himself to a spot secluded enough to do the deed, preferably close to my altar to be able to perform my ritual; Second I would have to figure out how I, a lowly scribe, could bring down a vigilant, trained fighter and end his life. My idea involved using a magical

cantrip to create a minor illusion as a lure. An old superstition stated that the scales of the golden pangolin when woven into the armor of warriors brought good fortune. I had recorded that belief a decade or so back. A stray pangolin inside a royal palace should be reason enough to attract attention, as they were extremely rare creatures. Any guard wanting to investigate would be likely to do so alone not wanting to share the luck from his rare find with others. Sound enough plan. I could lure him right to the foot of the altar if I was precise enough. The other half though...

In a desire to mimic the lioness, I thought it would make a good strategy to pounce on my prey from above. At night in the dim torchlight I could hide atop one of the shelves, covering myself with a linen sheet to look like a set of writings protected from the dust. When it became dark, I put my plan into action. Using my magical cantrips I made a subtle amount of noise coming from the library entrance, which I left open. A voice came from outside:

“I think I heard something, it came from... wait, the library is not locked.”

“I’ll take a quick look.” another voice said. In a place where an entering figure could easily make it out I casted the illusion of the golden scaled pangolin. As the guard walked in, his eyes inevitably landed on the creature after a short scan.

“See anything?” the voice from outside said.

A look of cunning came across the other guard’s face. “Um... no. There’s nothing here.” he said, eyes fixated on the pangolin. “Continue ahead. It’s alright in here. I’ll just make sure nothing important was disturbed then I’ll meet you at the hall later on.”

“I will help you.” The one outside said.

“No need. Really, just go. We will meet later.”

Reluctantly the guard’s partner acquiesced, at which point the one that remained got a greedy look of joy. “Come here, you little bastard.” He tried to approach the illusion, closing the door behind him as he did. “You’ve got some lovely scales. I just want to borrow a few.”

I made the illusionary pangolin scurry in fear towards the back end of the library, where my altar was situated. The guard followed along perfectly, not stopping to realize that the animal was making no sound. Bit by bit, following the sight carefully from my perch atop the shelves, hidden under my sheet, I watched as the guard approached the point. When he turned the final corner, I made the pangolin disappear from sight. He started scanning the floors

beneath the furniture, desperately looking for the critter. Then his eyes landed on my lioness figurine. He walked closer curiously, then noticed the blood on the floor. My moment had come. From a height twice the size of the guard himself I leapt down onto him, grabbing onto his shoulders from behind and shoving my dagger into his neck from the right side. I had wanted to cover his face the same way I did the slave boy, but to do so while leaping from the top of the furniture proved too difficult a feat, leaving me satisfied to have been able to cling to his body at all and not hit the floor instead. My lack of dexterity and coordination also resulted in my intended puncture missing his neck, and instead sliding off the side of his helmet and burrowing into the spot where his shoulder and neck met. Painful, but not immediately deadly. The scream he let out was the most worrisome though. Even so far back among the shelves of the library there was no telling how far that sound carried. I had clearly bitten off to sizeable a portion.

With a practiced motion the guard threw me off his back. Losing my grip on him I went flying a few feet and landed on my front side on the floor. Amidst a series of painful curses, he set about trying to pull the dagger from its spot. Without thinking I got up as fast as I could, and jumped at him again growling and hissing like a cross between a snake and a panther. The shock of the situation had worked to my advantage. He was unable to reach for the weapon on his belt fast enough, and I wrapped myself around his body, and sank my teeth into his neck right near the wound. I heard a clink as my dagger he held in his hand dropped to the floor, much to my luck, for it would not have taken much effort for him to simply stab me with it a few times and end my quest for immortality right there. He still tried to claw at my back and tear me off of him though whilst crying out in pain and surprise. In that moment I didn't even care about the noise anymore. I just kept squeezing his torso and biting at his throat like a rabid wolf until he lost his balance and fell to the floor, his scale-mail armor clinking as it hit the stone on the ground. Slowly but surely his efforts to remove me lost the power behind them. The pool of blood we were bathing in spread wider, his clothes turned red as they soaked up much of it. As before I drank his blood as I felt the life leave him, almost as if it was passing from him into me through the precious fluid. The taste did not bother me anymore. I relished it. Reveled in it. As the last bit of movement ceased and I rose to catch my breath, I felt it: This was more than just a kill, it was a triumph. I spoke my prayer to Sekhmet, to let her know of my offering to her glory, feeling much of that glory myself this time.

Before I could even listen for an answer the sound of the door on the far end of the library opening called my attention away. "Sefu! Are you here? I heard sounds of...something."

The other guard had returned, no doubt alerted by the struggle. "Answer me! Where are you?" I got up from the carnage and looked around. The lower half of my face, my entire chest, my knees and my feet were all covered in the guard's blood. Behind me was my altar to the goddess and under a shelf somewhat hidden was the wrapped-up body of the slave I had killed the day before. There was no way to hide this in time. Picking up the sheet that hid me before, that had landed on the floor some feet away, I hastily wiped my hands and feet and as much of my face and chest as I could. I managed to get the wet blood cleaned up at least. I threw the cloth to the floor and silently made my way around the other shelves to the door, circling around the guard as I did. He did not notice me, and I did not hear any reaction to finding his dead comrade before I had walked out the door, turned the corner, then bolted for my slaves' quarters as fast and as quietly as I could.

I shut the door behind me and leaned against it. I was still breathing heavily, my entire body still stained red with my victim's blood. As I managed to calm myself, I reached for my washbasin and began running a wet cloth over my bloodstained limbs. All the time I was thinking what I would do next. My ridiculous attempt just then would no doubt put the entire palace on high alert. I would not be instantly blamed for the bodies having been found in my library, but I would certainly be suspected, especially if anyone had spotted me and the slave-boy talking despite my best efforts to the contrary. On the eve of the next day would be the burial of Uhtman's wife, and my sacrifice shortly after. I had barely enough time to try and perform a final offering if even that. But who? Sekhmet did not seem pleased by my choice of prey this time, what could I possibly go looking for that would be worthy?

It was that moment that the unthinkable happened. As if a light had been ignited, I felt a presence in the room with me. A powerful presence. My heart began to race again, my hand holding the damp cloth shook with anticipation. I did not dare turn around for fear of discovering nothing.

"H...hello?" I stuttered. No answer in speech, but I felt the response in the changing of the air around me. A hand gently touched my back, caressing the bruises and scratches I had obtained in the fight. Then it slowly made its way up, then across and over my shoulder and down my arm. I glanced to the side, and there it was. It looked like the hand of human woman, though more than twice the normal size of one. It looked strong, but the touch felt gentle and soothing. It continued to move down to my hand, and lightly took the washcloth from me. A second hand on the other side gently placed itself on the left side of my face, and held it steady as the first hand came up still holding the cloth, and started to slowly clean my chin and neck.

“You certainly are a ferocious one.” a deep, resonant female voice spoke from behind me. “Like a lion cub learning to kill for the first time.”

“Is it...” I could barely muster the courage to speak. “Is it really you?”

The hand finished cleaning my face and moved back out of my sight behind me. Then I heard steps, one after the other. The figure was walking around me to the right, and when it finally came into my sight I could glance at the divine Sekhmet for the first time. She must have been 9 feet tall at least, the room itself seemed to grow in volume to make space for her. She was adorned in a fabulous golden tunic with red and white patterns, brown leather sandals and an extravagant headdress. She had the body of human woman, though one of a lean and muscular physique and a lion’s tail following behind her, and the headdress formed a frame around the head of a golden lioness. I got down on the ground with my face to the floor.

“It is you!” I exclaimed, not wanting to raise my head from the ground. “I had begun to doubt. But I was right! You have come to me!”

“I have.” She responded. “Such a meager little thing you are to seek my audience. You have demonstrated the hunter’s spirit, if not the skill. Rise, mortal, and tell me: For what reason have you sought me out?”

I hesitantly raised my body off the ground to look upon her again, still only half believing my eyes. “Oh, goddess Sekhmet!” I began. “My reasons are selfish. I am and always have been a prisoner in this palace, though the bars of the cage I only recently learned to see. I wish to be free of it. To truly live not for my master, nor any other, only myself. But alas, before the sun sets on the morrow I am to be sacrificed and laid to rest beside the king’s wife as her property in the afterlife.”

“And you seek deliverance from this fate?”

“Just so, my goddess.”

“What do they call you, mortal?”

“I am Amenrahersef.” I said.

“Answer this then, Amenrahersef: What does it mean to live for yourself?”

My answer came forth with no hesitation: “To not be bound to the will of a master. To serve the wishes of one, and only one: My own.”

“That I cannot give you.” She said. “That you have already taken for yourself without a need for me. It is why I have come.” She knelt down in front of me, still towering over me just the same. “What if I offered you the deliverance you desired, in exchange for your undying loyalty to me? Would you accept me, a goddess, as your mistress, Amenrahersef?”

I looked into her golden-yellow eyes. She had a peculiar kindness in them. It echoed through her words. The question she asked was one I had previously asked myself. It was no easy question to answer, but I had already done so to myself. So, I gave her that same answer: “No, I would not. I would rather die.”

The huntress’ feline lips curled into a smile. “Excellent.” She said. “You may just be the one.” She leaned closer to me and said in a more serious tone: “I can give you the power to transcend mortality, to overcome death. It will make you more powerful than any of your kind: A predator like no other. Stronger, faster, keener, and more aware, a true lion amongst the sheep.” Her promise was like music to my ears, everything I had ever wanted. “But like all power it will come with a price, one equal in measure to what you will receive. No longer will you walk in the light of day. Your new sustenance shall be the blood of mortals, and that alone. This hunger will drive you. You will hunt, but you will also be hunted. You will be seen by others as an abomination, an insult to the natural world. You will take part in the eternal hunt, and if you can survive then you may yet be the one to defy the limitations of your kind, and become more powerful than you ever thought possible.”

“I would be no servant of yours?” I asked.

“You would be slave to nothing but your own desires.” She responded.

“Then I accept.” I said. “I choose to become a member of this eternal hunt.”

The goddess smiled with anticipation. Gently she moved her tunic’s shoulders to the sides, letting it fall and reveal her bare bosom. Then she raised her hand and with a sudden motion flicked her wrist and her fingers sprouted long, razor-sharp claws. Slowly and without so much as a flinch, she sunk her claws into the center of her chest and created a vertical wound down between her breasts. Her blood started to flow out of the gash, and she reached out towards me again.

“Come then! Drink of the immortal blood, and gain the power to overcome death itself.”

I allowed myself to be drawn in. As I moved my lips toward the cut on her chest, she gently placed her hands on the back of my head and guided me the rest of the way. I pressed

my mouth to the wound and started to drink the blood flowing from it. The feeling of drinking the blood of a goddess is indescribable to one who has not himself experienced it. One can feel it throughout their entire being. As if the essence of existence itself had a liquid form, and upon consumption this liquid did more than just fill one's stomach and leave a taste. It merges with them, overflows them, fills them, becomes them. I will never forget what those precious seconds of pure bliss felt like, a gift like none any could ever grant. Then, the last I remember of the goddess Sekhmet is her magnificent feline visage slowly blurring away as she separated me from the font on her breast, and consciousness failed me.

### Rise from death

Whether I was under suspicion for the murder of the people whose corpses were found in the library I never found out. Regardless, Uhtman made the decision to proceed with the ceremony for Ghremhi's departure to the afterlife. One of the chambers had been rebuilt to serve as a resting place for her, torches were set, the sarcophagi were laid, and the chests of offerings prepared. The invited nobles and scholars were gathered there, as well as Uhtman's other wives, and some of his most valued slaves, me and the other unfortunate young girl chosen to accompany the departed. A priest of Set from a faraway city performed the ceremonial rituals. One by one the chests were filled with gold and other valuables, the animals were all brought in and slaughtered on the spot, and sadly that was all I got to see of the lovely proceedings, for after that came the sacrifice of the slaves, and I was selected to go first. Just as well, for it required effort to hide my eagerness, which I imagine would have caused suspicion. From the moment I was escorted in front of the sarcophagus I made it a point to keep my eyes fixed on Reni. She was present and watching me as well. I imagine she was looking for a sign of resignation from me. When she did not get one, she turned her face away from mine, no longer able to maintain her gaze. I let loose a small smile. The priest said his prayer, then stood before me. He used his finger to spread some ceremonial paint on my chest, shoulders and face, then took a serpentine dagger from a servant at his side. He gently placed the tip of the dagger above my heart, and looked to my eyes. As was expected of me, I nodded. The next thing I remember is terrible pain, falling forward and grasping onto the priest before me, then darkness.

I awoke.

I was surrounded by nothing but blackness, yet I knew I was not in the afterlife. Everything was different. The first thing I remember remarking was that my chest did not rise

or fall on its own. I inhaled. My lungs filled with air, but I felt no pressure to let it out. I exhaled. Same sensation, I felt no urgent desire to continue pumping air into my body, which made no effort to do so on its own. Just then the blackness started to turn gray. Bit by bit details started to make themselves visible, and I found myself lying on my back inside a stone box. Looking down I saw my body was loosely wrapped in cloth bandages, my hands were folded on my chest, and my fingers had sprouted sharp pointy claws, similar to what I remembered seeing on Sekhmet's beautiful fingers. There was enough room for me to move and tilt my torso up, propping myself up with my elbows behind my back. I knew it was pitch dark, there were no sources of light in the sarcophagus, yet I could still make out everything perfectly, though I could see no color. As my tongue moved around in my mouth, they came into contact with two sharp points: the tips of canines that had grown longer than the rest of the teeth in my mouth. Most of all though I was starving. I felt an intense hunger that was quite literally painful. I needed to get out.

I placed my hands on the underside of the lid. I expected a struggle, yet to my surprise with but the slightest effort I raised it and pushed it to the side like it was nothing at all. And just like that there I was. There were torches lit the room, and color returned to my vision. I was sitting up in one of the two smaller sarcophagi beside the main one. I rose. Walking, moving at all felt strange at first, akin to recovering from limbs fallen asleep, but stiffer. The feeling was gone fast though, and was replaced by a sense of strength. I walked to the large wooden door, and threw it open. The heavy wooden constructs, that would have taken a significant portion of my strength to open before, flew open at a mere push and slammed against the wall with an echoing crash. Two guards were standing in front of me. They had been watching the door and likely been bored out of their skulls having to watch over the dead. But my presence there was a perfect reason why it is at times a wise decision, though Uhtman was likely far more worried about graverobbers. The guards were startled to their senses at my entrance. They drew their weapons and held them towards me. I was still taken by how easily I threw open the doors. I felt an amazing power course through me unlike anything I had felt before. I heard a "Die, foul demon!" from one of the men, and next thing I knew a short sword had pierced my chest. It entered between two of my lower left ribs and went all the way through. There was an instance of pain, then nothing. No pain, no hindrance, just the annoyance of being tethered to the man holding the blade. As he looked up at me and saw that I was unfazed his look of horror turned to fear for his life. Rightfully so. I grabbed him by the collar lifted him into the air with a single arm, and threw him across the hallway. He hit the ground twenty feet away from me, and began

to moan in pain. I looked toward the other one, who clearly could not decide whether to fight, run or call for help. I removed the blade from my torso and dropped it to the floor. As I stared at him a smell caught my attention, and my sight was drawn to the artery on his neck that was throbbing with the fear induced rush. The instinct kicked in. I ran right at him, just as I had done the last time I faced a guard head on, though I was much faster this time. I grabbed him by the neck, snapped the wrist that was carrying the sword, which dropped to the floor as a result, then pulled him closer to me and sank my fangs into his neck. A cacophony of sensations hit me all at once. I felt his heart beating ever faster with fear, his bare-handed blows as he tried desperately to free himself from my hold, but more than that I could feel his life leaving him and entering me as I swallowed mouthful after mouthful of his blood. As I did, I also felt my own body seemingly wake up from the stiffness, I felt more strength seeping into my muscles, I felt my senses sharpen, sounds and smells came flooding in from all around me. And before I could even think to stop, the blood ceased to flow from his veins, and what I was holding became no more than a dried-out corpse. I tossed it aside. The other guard got up off the ground and after seeing what I had done to his colleague made the excellent choice of running away from me. He was lucky. Uhtman's bedchamber was in the other direction.

I tore the bandages off of me as I walked the distance to my goal. A few guards and a servant crossed paths with me on my way. The former two died fighting after recognizing and trying to kill me. The servant took one look at my blood-covered body and fled in the opposite direction. The guards who stood before my former master's quarters were taken out with similar ease. Then I kicked in his door. It splintered and fell off of its hinges, crashing down to the floor below. Uhtman and the wives he had taken to bed that night were shaken from their sleep. The wives pulled the silk covers up to their faces as though trying to hide themselves, Uhtman himself basically froze. His eyes went wide and he stumbled backwards on the large bed as I came close. The wives, seeing me approach the king, moved to the sides and circled around me to leave the room. I allowed them to, they did not concern me. I pulled Uhtman out of his bed and stood him up.

"How long have I been dead?" I asked. Talking felt strange. I had to consciously pull air into my lungs and push it out as I formed the words. The motions did not do themselves this time as they did before. The result was a somewhat raspy, scratching voice.

"You... you were only sacrificed the night before." He said barely able to speak from the shakiness in his voice. "How did you survive? I watched them embalm you!"

“I didn’t.” I threw him across the room. He hit the floor on the left side of chamber, sliding into a cabinet and shaking it upon impact. Quickly he tried to crawl towards the door. I was quicker. “I served you for twenty years. Practically all of my life. But I was nothing to you, wasn’t I? No different than a tool you simply throw away when it is in too much disrepair to be of any more use.” I was beginning to get the hang of speaking in this way. I did not sound like myself quite yet but in the situation, it really just added to my menace. I grabbed him and hoisted him to his feet again, shoving him against the wall. “Well, I’m sorry to say you made a grave mistake.”

“You cannot do this to me! I am the chosen of Ra! I am your King! Your God!”

“Ha!” I laughed. “You are nothing like a god. Trust me, I know. I’ve met one.” I tossed him into yet another piece of furniture, then walked slowly towards him as he tried to recover from the mounting pains. “Here is a lesson to take with you to the afterlife: Knowledge is the true power.” Before he could try to run, I held him firm by grabbing his shoulders, sinking my claws into them as I did. “Now answer this before you die: The day Ghremhi died, what did Reni say to you in private?”

“What?” He asked confused.

“Ra’s sake... No wonder you needed me to keep track of your memories.” I sighed then raised my voice. “The night Ghremi died, your latest wife, Renisenb asked to talk with you in private. What did she say?”

“Right. I remember! I remember!” He raised his hands. They were trembling from the fear of death and the pain in his shoulders. “She argued that a wife of that importance to me deserves a sacrifice equal in value. She said that servants would be a worthy choice for her. They two were very fond of each other.”

“Did she tell you to sacrifice me as one of them?”

“I... maybe. We discussed options and you came up as one. It was a long discussion, and all I remember is that by the end I was convinced that the two I chose were the right ones.”

“Imbecile.” I shook my head at him. “Did she tell you that she was my lover?”

“She... what? That’s impossible!”

“She used me to manipulate you into choosing her as your next wife. Then she used the death of Ghremhi to manipulate you into getting rid of me, the only threat to the security of her

union with you. You allowed yourself to be played by a southern slave-girl.” I smiled. “A sin we are both guilty of, it seems. But you see...” I pulled him closer to whisper the next words into his ear. “I won over both of you in the end.”

I pulled straight down with both my hands. The claws ran deep through his flesh, leaving ten straight, deep, long wounds down his torso. I let him collapse to the floor in pain. A pool of blood started to form beneath him, as he tried to pull himself towards the door, clinging to the smallest hope of escape. The smell was intoxicating. I chuckled, and walked in front of him. I knelt down to make sure he could see me, and licked a bit of his blood off the floor. It was already getting cold, and tasted not nearly as good as if I had taken it straight from his veins, but that was not the point. I wanted his death to be drawn out, like my servitude to him was.

“I spent five days dutifully awaiting my death.” I told him. “Be thankful I choose to make you suffer this pain for but a short while.” I thrust my hand through his back, breaking through flesh, organ and bone, reaching for his heart. When I found it, I squeezed and pulled. It came right out. I dropped it in front of his eyes, not sure, but hoping he had just enough time to see it stop beating.

The wives that ran had summoned guards to rush to the room. I had to eliminate them as well, and I did so with little effort. The cuts and wounds they left on my skin healed right before their eyes, they could not harm me. Nothing they did could. Before I left the palace, I had but one more task to see to. I arrived at the harem chamber just as a group of guards were gathering the women to get them to safety. I caught them saying they heard a demon had been set loose on the court. Then they saw me approach. A few of them tried to fight me, and failed. Others, seeing their comrades fall before me, ran to grab the wives and try to evacuate them. This was acceptable. There was only one wife I cared to see. She was inside, hiding in a corner of the room all huddled up with seven of the other wives. I slowly raised an arm, and pointed with my clawed finger directly at Reni. The rest of the wives all looked up at her.

“I thought I would find you here.” I said lowering my arm.

“Great Ra...” she said. “How is this possible? How can you be alive?”

“A just question, considering you had your lord husband kill me.”

“Please! That was his own idea, I pleaded with him not to...”

“You lie!” I shouted. This two was new. The task of managing so many more bodily functions to achieve this effect left further alterations in my voice. “I will hear none of it. You

told him Ghremhi deserved a greater sacrifice. You discussed options with him. You manipulated him into killing me.”

“I...” She wanted to lie again, but was too afraid to do so. The other wives were looking between me and her, trying to decide how to act. Fear kept them paralyzed for the moment. Reni looked down at the ground and tears started to pour from her eyes.

“Do not look away from me!” I shouted at her. “You will look upon what you have created! You will look at me and you will tell me what I want to know!” She quickly looked back in my eyes with a shiver in her wrists. The other wives all huddled closer together. “Tell me the truth!” As I said this, I felt something flow through me. I could feel, for lack of a better way to put it, my will flow from the words. And as I did, I could feel Reni’s will as I looked right into her eyes. It was weak and shrinking. Mine was getting stronger within her. As this feeling continued, she stopped trembling, the panic drained from her eyes, and her expression became blank. She started to speak in a clam tone:

“I didn’t tell him to kill you, but I did my best to lead him to that conclusion.”

“Why?”

“I saw an opportunity to have you killed without incriminating myself. I needed you gone to make sure you could never harm my marriage to the king out of spite or jealousy.” She acted as though under a spell. The other wives looked up at her with confusion.

“How long had you been planning to manipulate me into getting Uhtman to marry you?”

“Since the first night we mated. I heard you mention things to the king that were untrue. I knew you were altering his memories through your texts. I wanted you to use that power to my advantage. After the time I cared for your hurt foot I knew you found me attractive.”

None of what said was new or unexpected to me. She basically laid out the truth exactly as I predicted it to be. And yet hearing it come from her lips infused me with rage. I could feel it building up inside me. It was a deep, internal desire to tear her body into pieces. In my rage I swung wildly with my hand and sent a candle-stick flying across the room, setting fire to the silk curtains that adorned the walls. Unfortunately, one of the wives saw that as her opportunity to attempt to flee. She got up and made a dash for the door. All I saw in my peripheral was a figure making a run for it, and still seething with infernal rage I leaped at her and slashed through her neck in the blink of an eye. Panic broke out. The wives began screaming and running in all directions, while the fire in the room continued to spread. Anger drove me as I

moved from woman to woman wreaking havoc and carnage. By the time I was finished the room had become a bloody mess of mangled and mutilated corpses of women. Only Reni remained alive, still entranced in the same position I left her. I strode right up to her. She remained emotionless as I did. I knelt down in front of her, the flames getting ever hotter around us.

“Look at me, Reni. This is what I became to survive what you did to me. How does that make you feel?”

“I am afraid for my life.” She said, still without an ounce of visible fear. Whatever happened to her, I must have caused it.

“Did you ever feel any love for me?”

“No. I did not allow myself to.” These words deepened the pain.

“Stand up.” I commanded her. Somehow, I knew she would obey me. She rose to her feet and I did also. “You took my life from me. You owe me for that. I will take yours as payment.” I sank my fangs into her neck. She offered no resistance, not even an attempt. She gasped quietly as my fangs pierced her vein, after that she would let out only soft sighs with every portion of blood her heart pumped through it. After but a few seconds I could feel her veins going dry, and her body went limp. The cloth and wood around us had all burned, only traces of the fire had remained. I let her body fall lifeless to the ground amidst the rest of her “family”. And with that it was done. I looked over the devastation I had caused, at all the women I had murdered, and now that my bloodlust was sated and my anger subsided, I felt my mortal self look through my eyes as though for the first time. I was horrified. I looked down at my hands, claws protruding, blood dripping. Then before the rest of the palace guards could return with reinforcements I dashed out of the room, leaped out of a window and ran off into the night.