

## Chapter two – fledgling

Vampyre are obscure creatures. This is true even today, but the current generation of mortals have legends and folklore to provide familiarity. I would not describe these tales as reliable, but at the very least the common peasant has some basis for what to expect. To my knowledge at the time of my turning I was the first Vampyre, certainly the first I had ever heard of. As such I had no frame of reference, nothing to found my expectations on. All I knew was what I had read from scraps of Arberish fairytales and what little the goddess Sekhmet had told me, as well as what little I had experienced in the palace.

The following is true for all Vampyre: the hardest part of our existence is by far what is referred to as the Fledgling faze: those few decades right after the embrace. The newly born Vampyre must come to terms with their new form of existence and the changes that follow, or else be hunted down by their peers, or driven to madness. Nothing that one had once known is ever the same again. Mortal creatures one once loved or feared become appetizing, the hunger skews one's vision making it harder to see them as beings of sense and emotion, and makes one see them only as vessels carrying the precious life-blood. As a walking corpse, one's visage is also altered from its original look, and make no mistake; for all intents and purposes we are walking corpses. Mortals shun us. They wave torches and scythes, call us abominations and monsters, tell their children frightening stories about us. They are right to do so.

In the modern day the Fledgling Vampyre is the most commonly known. Those village gatherings of pointy-hatted hunters armed with silver weapons and wooden stakes boasting about having killed a dozen Vampyre, their notches usually represent newly born Fledglings. Only a fraction of Vampyre live past their fledgling years, and even fewer leave them behind with their mortal personas preserved.

### Outcast

I remained close by after the massacre I committed at the palace. In the dark of night, I watched as the guards scrambled to remove servants, guests and scholars from the court. Amidst the chaos one could hear the cries of “The king has been murdered!” and “The demon has taken him!” Only a few of the terrified wives and slaves even bothered to mention that eight of the wives and numerous guards were also killed. I suppose that was implied. As I hid in the dark and watched the event a voice from behind me called out.

“You there! Quick, this way! It’s not safe out here. A demon has murdered the King!” It was one of the palace guards. In the pale moonlight he probably only saw the outline of my clothing and my stature. If he had also seen that much of my body was covered in his king’s blood, he might have been less helpful. I snapped my head in his direction and he immediately recoiled at my sight. I was still too far for him to see me properly, but the sight of my eyes and fangs must have been enough to make him realize who he was talking to. “No...Stay back!” He called. Something about the fear in his eyes at the very sight of me stirred my inner mortal self. I looked away, trying to hide my face from him as I disappeared from his sight into the darkness. I left the palace behind me and ran for the wilderness.

The whole time I ran through the trees, images of the inside of the palace haunted me. I had known for quite a while now what I was willing to do to survive. The two people I had killed while I was alive did not leave any scars on me. They needed to die for me to live, and survival is nature. Even the first guard I killed after I rose, he died to sate my hunger for blood and quell my pain. None of the others who died that night needed to. They died because I willed it. Because I enjoyed it. I despised Uhtman with all of my being, but even when I killed her, I still loved Reni, much as I wanted to deny it. Even though she never loved me. A feeling is still a feeling even if its roots are buried in falsehoods, and my love was real. I know to this day that she deserved to die. Feeling the life leave her body nevertheless left a painful taste after the deed was done.

The black sky was beginning to turn blue; the sun was coming up. The words of Sekhmet came to the forefront of my mind: “No longer will you walk in the light of day.” A sudden fear overcame me. What could such a statement mean? Will I vanish during the daytime? Will I turn to stone? My first inclination was to quickly search for some shelter. I wandered the forest searching for a cave or something of the like. Finally, I found a hole dug by a fox under the roots of great oak. I got down on all fours and frantically started to dig through the earth with my bare, clawed hands, so as to make the passage wide enough for me to fit in. I had managed to do so just as the first rays of sunlight started to creep over the horizon and filter through the leaves. I was covered in shade, but a ray of light still managed to touch my side before I could scramble into the hole. The pain was unbearable. I was no stranger to the sensation of burns, it was a common tool for discipline both in Uhtman’s court, and the school of Khakesh. This burn though was far greater. As if the hatred of the gods themselves was being channeled through that one tiny ray of sunlight. I felt it still as I curled up inside the abandoned foxhole. What a pitiful sight I must have been. The most powerful creature for miles around, slayer of the Sun

King and all his guards that would dare attack me, huddling inside a tiny hole underground in the dirt. I got used to it fast, for this became my life for years to come.

Time became a blur. My first few months were a torturous mess of climbing out of my hole in the ground, hunting for food, and crawling back in. I stayed in the wilderness hunting animals. I tried sating my hunger with the blood of deer, boars, and rodents. It was enough to quell the pain, but the hunger remained. My days were sleepless. I would lie in my hole in the ground with my eyes closed, but despite this I was always awake. Maggots would crawl out of the dirt and try to feed on my flesh, thinking me no more than a lifeless corpse. The bites they gave me would not heal, even after weeks, and the burn I received from the sun showed absolutely no sign of going away.

My misery ended when I chanced upon a group of three hunters camping in the wilderness possibly years later. I approached the light of their fire, and found them drinking wine and laughing at each other's tales. I had long since lost track of time, but I assume at least a year had passed since I last tasted human blood. Because of this, their scent drew me in like their campfire drew in the moths. They noticed me approach. I can only guess how I must have looked and smelled, but in the dim light of the fire and the moon, my sight first invoked curiosity and concern. They spoke to me. I cannot recall their words, for even at the time all I could make out was muffled sounds. Whatever they may have said was overpowered by the sound of their beating hearts. The desire was too potent to dismiss. Both my rational mind and my mortal self were silenced, and the beast arose. I looked at the one whose blood smelled the most appetizing, and jumped on him. I held him down to the ground and sank my fangs into his throat. And so, I drank. My victim's friends took out their slings and spears and tried to fight back against me, but the blood I had consumed was already enough to revitalize me. Their projectiles bounced off my flesh with no effect, and I caught their spears out of the air as they flew towards me. In a bloody rage I lashed out at the hunters and impaled them both before they could react. I then turned around to see my first victim stumbling away as quick as he could, clutching his neck. My first thought was to chase after him and finish what I had started, but by then with my hunger sated and the beast satisfied, the others within me awoke. Once again, I looked upon the two dead hunters in the camp as if they had been dead by the actions of someone else. Alas, their blood was both figuratively and literally on my hands.

As I retreated back to my hideout, and spent the coming daytime in thought. Quickly inspecting my body, I could see that the wounds and bites had vanished. I put a hand on my side. The burn was there, and I still could not sleep. I clearly learned the lesson that night that

animals could not serve as a true substitute for the blood of mortals. I needed human blood. Only that would truly satisfy the hunger. I could not just sit around in the forest waiting for more hunters to venture into the woods, especially after the events of that night. The surviving hunter would no doubt begin to warn his people of the danger he encountered, as a result mortals would no doubt avoid that part of the woods for a good while. I inevitably began also thinking of that one survivor. My bestial instinct demanded I drain his body of every last drop of his life's fluid, but I was more than able to sate my hunger without doing so. He had enough blood left in him to run back to his village. Perhaps I should try and track him down, and see how he fares. If the encounter did not kill him, then perhaps this could open new avenues to approach.

After a few nights of contemplation, I decided to try and visit one of the local settlements, the one I believed the hunter had escaped to. I approached under cover of night. In my rags and dirty skin, I must have looked like a beggar. I chose to observe the population from the shadows, I had become quite adept at remaining unseen. The feeling I had was that of being in the middle of a new hunting ground, the people around me potential prey. I watched the odd person walking down the dark streets, and peeked into open windows to spy on family lives. Even as a mortal these scenes had been quite alien. I knew about the lives of the common folk only through texts, which I discovered were rather far off from practice. Conversations were mostly about coin, but also often work tasks: farming, sales, crafts and the like. While the men of the houses were out in taverns drinking away their days coin, women would meet in their homes and discuss the habits of their spouses. I learned more than I ever wanted to about the sexual pursuits of strangers, even got to observe on a number of occasions. Commonly I found people having affairs with individuals outside of their marriages. One thing I found rather peculiar, was that while some of these trysts were even the subject of boasts, sexual encounters or even relationships with members of the same sex seemed to be kept in secret. I noted this especially because it puzzled me, as Uhtman often took male slaves to his bed with him, and his wives would also commonly "entertain" each other. He liked to talk about these encounters in length. As I studied the villagers, I discovered the secrecy was a necessity because if a person was discovered to prefer laying with members of their own gender it sparked ridicule and even disgust among their peers. I remember upon this discovery thinking this to be extremely petty. But it was just the tip of the pyramid. Common folk would find the most trivial reasons to dislike each other. One woman I recall would not stop talking to her friend about how the woman next door wore boots rather than sandals. A man I discovered slogging off his mate

behind his back to others for eating turkey rather than pork. Any difference in behavior from their perceived norm was a reason for dislike. How ever would they react to me?

I spent up to a year stalking the streets of that village and the others in the region, learning several things about my condition along the way. I quickly found out that I could climb on walls, since I would try and make my way up to the rooftops to be less visible to the folks on the street. It was only a matter of time before I experienced the fact that I could crawl along vertical surfaces and even later ceilings as though I was crawling on the floor. This became a useful tool to me in avoiding detection and evading the occasional search.

Sometimes I would stretch the bounds of my hiding by sitting on street corners pretending to be a beggar. At times guards would try to chase me away, at which point I could easily disappear in seconds. By trying to blend into the streets my goal was to find isolated people at night who I could feed from. The first time this succeeded was when I saw a woman leaving her house at the night to collect the washing. I crept up behind her and placed a hand over her mouth and nose, and bit into her neck. Her muffled screams quickly changed to half painful half excited moans as I drank from her. I forced myself to pull away well before her heart stopped beating, though my craving to drink her dry was overwhelmingly powerful. She was alive, but her body was held up only by my arms. I laid her down on the ground. She was in a dazed state, only half conscious. Before the others in the house began to find her absence too curious, I vanished into the shadows. The next day the attack she had suffered and the wounds I left on her neck attracted attention, and guards would be extra attentive the in the nights to follow. Nevertheless, I managed to find sustenance through mortals in similar fashions, wondering from one village to the other and back, spreading them out as far as I could. For the most part I was able to control my inner beast. Not a single one of my feeding victims died from the loss of blood, though at times when a guard discovered me, smaller battles and mortal casualties could not be avoided.

After praying on people on the streets and in the alleys, the next big step was to try and sneak into their homes and feed from them in their sleep. Trying to do this was where I first experienced what folks in later centuries would call the rules of forbiddance. Windows and back doors would be left open with just a single mortal left in the house, but try as I might, I simply could not force myself to enter. I would hang from the wall by the window, and when I wanted to climb inside, my body would simply not obey me. Same when I stood at the threshold of an open door. I would desire to walk into the house, command my body to follow my instructions as I would any other simple movement. But there would never be a response, no

matter how much willpower I tried to summon. Then one day, as I was in my beggar's guise, an old woman took pity on me.

"I've never seen you around here before." She said to me. I remained silent, not sure what to think of her. Then she came right up to me and gently grabbed my wrist. "You look starving. Please, come with me. I'll give you something to eat." As she touched my skin, she let out a slight gasp and added. "You're cold as the grave, young man! Quick, come warm yourself inside!"

Apparently, I had chosen to play my part at the corner of her house, and for some reason she chose to take me inside rather than just walk past, or shoo me away, like others would. As she opened the door and walked inside, I once again froze before the entrance, and mumbled silently. "I'm afraid I can't..."

She cut me off. "Nonsense! Please, come inside. I insist." And just like that, my body obeyed me once again. I crossed the threshold without incident. I closed the door behind me.

"I'm sure I have something here I can give you. Go ahead and rest yourself by the fire while you wait!"

"My thanks," I replied looking around. "But that will not be necessary."

"Don't be ridiculous!" the woman barely even looked at me, just went straight for her pantry. "You must be freezing. I'll get you some food in an instant."

"I don't eat your food." Something about the way I must have said that was enough to catch her attention. She turned towards me with a quizzical look. "And I honestly can't even feel the cold. It's almost second nature to me, really."

"What..." She began to stutter. "I don't understand."

"To me food has no taste. It satisfies no hunger." Only now did she notice the fangs. She grabbed at her chest and backed up to the wall.

"Oh, my Ra!" She spoke almost in a whisper. "It's true what they said. The demon that killed the King last season... it's you!" I said nothing, just let my eyes speak for me. "What do you want from me?"

"I need your blood." I started to advance on her.

"Please... I'm not ready to die. I do not want to die."

“And I have no desire to kill you. You have taught me a valuable lesson after all. But I have not fed in days, and my hunger grows strong.”

“Stay back!” She called out. “Leave now or I will scream!”

In a dash leapt at her and placed a hand on her mouth. “No, you won’t.” I said. And proceeded to feed from her.

After I had left, I continued to watch her and to listen to conversations around her. She described the occurrence to others in her family, who dismissed it as a demented dream. At that point rumors of the other attacks from neighboring villages had not yet spread too far, so they did not yet have any additional dots to connect, but there was some concern raised about the strange wounds on her neck. I would have to be more careful in the future if I did not want whole communities alerted to my presence.

There was also one other thing I wanted to get to the bottom of. As much as I hated thinking back on my awakening and the events that followed in the palace, the one thing that kept me deliberately going back to those memories was what happened to Reni when she looked in my eyes. For some reason I had not yet grasped, she was completely unable to resist my commands, and did not even try to fight back when I fed from her. If I could figure out what it was that I did to provoke this reaction, and learn to recreate it, that would mean I could possibly feed on locals and more effectively cover my tracks. To experiment I would seek out isolated people and catch them in areas well out of sight of others. At times I would track hunters outside the bounds of the settlements. I would get up close, prevent them from being able to call for help, then force eye-contact. Many ended up obeying me, but they did so out fear, not compulsion. A few of my attempts ended in deaths as the mortals would inevitably call for help and arouse the attention of others, some of who would be inspired by surges of heroism and a desire to claim having killed the fabled demon king-slayer. They never had a chance of success. Not until I chanced upon a young girl bathing in the stream in the woods. She was more pale, and somewhat less slim, but her dark hair and fair face brought back memories of Reni.

“It is rather late for a young girl to be out in the woods, little one.” I had managed to approach her without gaining her attention. I stood up straight and called out to her. She turned to me and covered her chest, and said nothing, just watched me frightened. “The huntsmen say a terrible demon stalks these woods; a monster responsible for the death of the king.”

Somewhat hesitantly she waded out of the water to pick up her clothes. “I’m old enough not to believe in fairytales, sir.”

I smiled. “Why would you be out bathing at this hour?”

“I don’t see how that concerns you.” She responded without looking at me. She hurriedly put on her tunic and wrapped her belt around her waist.

My memories of the night I killed Reni started to swirl in my head. I started to recall my feelings; how strongly I wanted her to tell me the truth. Channeling that memory, I called out to the girl. “Look at me.” She did. Her eyes met mine, and once they did, she could not look away. Once again, I felt my will and hers. I felt mine grow and hers shrink. Her face went blank. I asked my question again. “Why are you out here at this hour?”

“I’m waiting for a boy.” She said. There was no fear in her voice, nor any other emotion for that matter. She was in a trance. “Our families don’t like each other. We must meet in secret.”

“And, where is he?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I assume he is on his way.”

My mortal self forced me to feel sympathy for her, having been in the position of hiding a love-affair when I was alive. I came close to compelling her to forget seeing me and just leaving her to wait for her lover, but at that time I had not fed in days, and the scent of her young blood was too good to pass up. I swept her hair to one side to expose her slender neck, and gently pushed her head to the side. She offered no resistance. I was about to bite into her neck and quench my thirst, but given the calm nature of the situation my rational mind was still functioning. She did not have to die, but in the past the wounds on the neck were always a reason for suspicion. But the human body had other large veins in places less visible. I pulled back.

“Lay down on the ground.” I told her. She obeyed. I gently pushed her leg to the side and sought out the large vessel of blood in her thigh. As I bit into it the blood flowing through was just as potent as through the neck. After I had my fill, I licked the droplets from my chin and looked her in the eyes again. “You have been waiting here for your lover all evening. You never saw me. I was never here. Do you understand.”

“I do.” She said, still breathing heavily from the feeding. I walked away and hid in the darkness nearby to observe the results of my experiment. Less than an hour later the lover showed up. The girl greeted him with a loving embrace, and they proceeded to make love in the light of the moon. At no time did the girl in any way act as though anything was wrong, until they had finished, when she laid back in the grass, panting heavily and barely moving. When the boy noticed he shook her.

“My love?” he said, slightly worried.

The girl blinked back to consciousness, and with long, heavy breaths responded: “I’m sorry, Ghen I... I just feel so tired.”

“That’s normal. You...”

“No, my darling, I mean... I’m exhausted.” She tried to sit up, but found she could not. “My body feels... drained.”

Hurriedly, the boy helped prop her up and said he’d help her get back home. I learned later that the boy showing up at the house of the girl’s family caused the father to immediately suspect the boy of having poisoned her. Nothing could be proven, but nevertheless the father forbade them from ever meeting again, and put the daughter under a strict watch. In all there were no casualties to my woodland escapade, save for a young romance. From that night forward I was able to summon this power of compulsion at will. I would use it to turn my feeding victims willing, and make them forget the encounter the next day.

I learned much about myself and my new form, as well as the tastes I had buried away back when I was mortal. Every opportunity I got I pushed the limits of what I knew to see just what laws I was bound to. The blood of animals was not nearly potent enough to keep me sated and at my best, but the most acceptable substitute came from pigs and boars. A single feeding from a fully-grown human was enough to sustain me for at least two days. Human blood was the most filling from healthy subjects at the height of their life, older than 25 winters, but younger than 40. Any older than that and the taste would be flatter, and far less filling. Young blood was similarly more thin and required more to fully sate the hunger, but admittedly it tasted far better. None of the villages I stalked ever had members of the other mortal races visit, so I never got to sample any of them, though as my thoughts occasionally drifted away to my long-time visits to Car Saad and Valius, I started to fantasize about the possibility. With no morality to constrain me save that of my own mortal self, I allowed myself to hunt the prey I

fancied the most: women. I would gladly feed from men any time, but I found that my appreciation of female beauty was allowed to freely grow in death. How I savored the moments I had with those victims. How I would kiss and caress those beautiful bodies which could not but welcome my touch. The mortal within me tried to constrain me, yet with every pierced neck I felt less and less motivation to go on pretending to be more virtuous than I truly was. They would never see me as anything other than a demon. More and more as the years went by, I would feel like one, and the more I did the more I acted like one.

Yet all through my time spent as a newborn Vampyre, as I stalked mortal villages and fed on their inhabitants, I was still unable to find rest. My body did not grow weary so long as I was able to consume blood, but after years of endless nights hunting mortals my mind started to yearn for rest. Try as I might I could not. I laid in the ground in my foxhole, I laid in bedrolls left behind by the hunters in the woods who no longer needed them, I even compelled mortals from time to time to allow me rest in their homes while they watched over me during the day and provided me uninterrupted sleep. But sleep never came. In my attempts to find respite, I would feel a strange, subtle force drawing me to... somewhere. Somewhere familiar. After meditation and consideration, I pinpointed the location to be the royal palace. For the years I had been away, the villagers would say only that the place is cursed, and would warn all their children and friends to stay well away from there. As time went on, I knew: soon the day would come when I would have to return to the place of my birth, and see where Sekhmet's eternal hunt would take me next. After seven years, it seemed that the time had come.

### Homecoming

Much had happened in relation to my rise from death at the palace grounds as I had learned. I started to grow bolder, and actually walked into some of the village inns in the guise of a wondering stranger. I would order a drink and pay for it with copper coins I took from those dead at my hands. I saw little value in coin in general, since what I needed most I would never find for sale in the stalls of human merchants. But as I started to crave social interaction, I found it had its uses. I would take small sips from the drink, which had no taste to me at all, just as a measure to blend in. The purpose of these visits was to listen to local conversations, to see how much talk my actions were stirring. There was always talk of the demon in the woods, and how he now stalks the area preying on women left alone at night. When such talk turned

from stories of horror to serious concerns, that was when I would know it was time to change towns or fast for a week or so.

One particular night I overheard a conversation that would lead to me finally making the choice to revisit the scene of my transformation: Sun King Uhtman's royal palace. In the tavern a group of local men had gathered to have a hushed meeting. Naturally I listened.

"It happened again. I met Merhu at the smith as he was collecting his repaired plow, and he told me he found the marks on his daughter."

"The marks?"

"Aye, the marks. The marks of the demon. Two small bloody marks, like the others."

"Wait... my wife had marks like that."

"When?"

"I noticed them three weeks ago. They looked like insect bites, and she said she had no idea how they got there."

"None of them do. They just appear and they never remember getting them. It's how he does it."

"Besa..."

"Don't give me that tone! You know as well as I do that ever since the King died things have been going downhill. All those people at the palace dead, and now the curse has spread to us!"

"The curse? The curse of the dreadful demon that leaves tiny bitemarks on women?"

This was followed by a chuckle from others in the group.

"How can you laugh at this? Do you have any idea what is going on?"

"Yes, Besa. Some insects are acting up and biting people, and you see demons everywhere because of what happened to your brother."

"I'm looking for demons everywhere, because of what happened to my brother. The demon attacked him and his mates, drank of his blood and killed the others. He was lucky to escape with his life. And now the demon is stalking our streets corrupting out women!"

“Corrupting them?”

“Where was your wife bitten, Khai?”

“Well...”

“Go on. Don’t be shy.”

“That’s really...”

“She was bitten on the inside of her leg. High up on the inside of her leg, was she not?”

“And just how would you know what is high up on the inside of my wife’s leg?”

“Because this has been happening to others too, you moron! And not just to us. People from Hak-pet tell the same stories. Tell me, Khai, the days after she was bitten, how was she acting?”

“I’m not sure why my wife is of so much interest to you.”

“If I’m so wrong and so delusional, Khai, then just answer the fucking question and prove me wrong. Was she acting tired? More tired than usual? Getting weak seemingly at random during the day? Dizzy or fainting at times, perhaps?”

“Well...yes, but...”

“As though her body had been drained of blood and was recovering from it?”

“Besa, I think that’s enough. Leave Khai and his wife out of...”

“*He* won’t. The demon will return and he will feed on you, or your wives, or your children. And one day he will no longer be satisfied with just a bit of their blood. Soon he will grow strong and he will stop leaving bites on peoples necks, and legs, and wrists, and he will instead start leaving corpses, sucked dry and mutilated.”

“And what can we do to stop him?”

“Oh, Meri, please! Don’t tell me you see truth in this nonsense?”

“He’s right. My mother saw the demon with her own eyes! He attacked Zhara in her own home and cast a spell on her to forget.”

“What has gotten into this town?”

“What can we do, Besa?”

“We have to find him and kill him before he grows so strong that we no longer can.”

“How can we kill such a thing? If it was able to kill the King and so many of his protectors, what chance do we stand? I’ve only ever hunted once and my mother straight up told me I would never be good at it.”

“We have to work together, as many of us as possible. We have to trap it inside its lair and finish it off.”

“This is ridiculous. I have better things to do than listen to this drunken madness.”

A number of patrons exited both the conversation and the tavern. Some few though seemed convinced by Besa and chose to stay behind.

“Glad to see that some of you have the sense to listen to reason. We need to act, and we cannot do it too soon.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Yes, I do. Some others from Hak-pet are planning to go raid the palace in three days’ time.”

“The palace? That place has been abandoned for six years. No one dared return after...”

“The demon is hiding out there. It’s why so many never return from that place. But if we show up in sufficient numbers, we can overpower him, and send him back to Set where he belongs.”

“I don’t know, Besa. I believe this demon is out there, but this seems like a bad idea to me.”

“Well if you have a better solution, I’m all ears. If not, come to the town hall at Hak-pet in two days. And bring your father’s sword, or a pick or sickle, or anything with a point or a blade. Before the sun rises on the new month that demon will threaten none of us ever again.”

I got up from my seat as the man named Besa left the tavern. I waited a second or two then went to follow him out. Less than a house’s length after leaving I called to him.

“Excuse me!”

He turned, then his eyes found me. I had hidden my face under a hood as much as I could, common enough thing to do, and the dark of night should have concealed my undead features enough. He did not seem frightened. “Yes? Can I help you, my friend?”

“I heard you talking with the others back in the tavern. This palace you speak of intrigues me.”

“Well, unless you are looking to join me and my mates in hunting down the demon I’d stay far away from that cursed place.”

“Why do you say it is cursed?”

“You are not from around here, are you? The Sun King himself lived in that palace, until he was killed by his own servant risen from the grave as a vengeful demon.”

“Yes, I am aware of this.” I responded, still doing my best to keep my distance from him. “But that all happened years ago. Yet it is still regarded as a place of evil. How is this so?”

“After the King’s death soldiers from Mar-Ak-Khot arrived to help provide aid and recover his majesty’s body for burial. But they were all killed. Every time they tried to clear the halls more warriors just ended up dead. They eventually just decided to leave the place be, and have not returned since. Many people thought to loot the riches left behind in the deeper parts of the palace, but none have yet returned.”

Curious, I remember thinking. Long after I had left the palace lives were still being claimed within. I found myself wondering if perhaps Uhtman’s actions summoned other evils to the palace. Perhaps my actions had led to the rise of something else. Maybe Sekhmet had passed on her gift to others, like the slave girl entombed on Ghremhi’s other side? Whatever it was, it wiped out trained soldiers from the city of Mar-Ak-Khot. These peasants wouldn’t stand a chance.

“And you think that you have the cunning to deal with a being that decimated scores of hardened fighters?”

“Look, we have to do something. We can’t just let this thing keep preying on us.”

“All you will accomplish by trying to take it on yourselves is turning your wives into widows and your children into orphans. You do not want to go there.”

“It’s clear to me, my friend, that you are not from around here. If you don’t think it’s your problem then feel free to move on. We have our people to protect.”

I pulled back on the hood and stepped closer to Besa. For just a brief second a look of realization and terror came over him, but as his gaze met mine, he quickly calmed down. His panicked breathing slowed, and the fear dissipated from his eyes.

“You do not want to go there.” I let my will pour through and overwhelm his. He said nothing, as did not command him to. I hid my face again, and walked off, knowing that I would never see him at the palace. It was clear to me now, that my time to revisit my home had come.

Despite the odds I somehow managed to completely avoid the palace for all of those seven years after I died. Yet as I said, every day I still felt drawn back, though I only truly realized where I was being drawn to years into my undeath. Even when I finally understood I still had no indications as to the why. The nature of my condition was new even to me, and like my time spent in the surrounding villages my journey back home to the place it all began had a few more important lessons in store for me.

The place was dead. The gates to the massively large palace grounds were wide open and unguarded; not a soul in sight. On the long path leading up to the entrance of the palace itself I got a good look at what the years had done to the place. It was unclear just how long ago the Mar-Ak-Khot soldiers had fully abandoned the site, but it must have been fairly early after the incident, for looters have had plenty of time to ransack the grounds. Gold and silver ornaments that would have been decorating pillars and statues were noticeably absent, depictions of warriors and priests would be missing their swords, shields, staffs and scepters. Indeed, many of the larger than life size statues would just be missing entirely, removed from the pedestals that once supported them. The same could be said for ornamented pillars and many bits of plain iron as well, like gates and fences. The vegetation was left unattended and had grown wild. What’s more, contrary to my memories of the place the vibrant greens of the garden had turned dark, with the colorful flowers replaced by sharp thorns, and I was quite certain it was not just the night time lighting. Much to my surprise, I found the atmosphere unusually soothing.

I ascended the steps leading up to the main hall. Evidence of looting was still present around me, vases, busts and other objects small enough to fit in sacks were gone from their

respective spots. It seemed that some had still the courage to venture this far into the cursed grounds. Uhtman's throne stood still in its spot covered by years' worth of dust. I walked right up in front of it and stood there in silence for a few moments. In my mind I would picture him sitting there holding council, barely able to muster a care for the meager plights of the common folk. I glanced to the left side of the throne where I would be seated on thin cushion on the ground, attentively listening and taking notes. When the memory became too much of an annoyance I moved on, desperate to understand what it was that was calling me here.

Exiting the main hall, I began to wonder the other corridors. My assumption was that this mysterious force would likely be pulling me to a place of importance to me. Such a place might have been the quarters I slept in, the hall in which I dined, the library where I worked, or most likely Ghremhi's tomb, where I was laid to rest. Alternatively, the location of significance could be the sight of one my many murders, Uhtman's chamber or the harem. Those I very much did not wish to revisit. I had no shortage of time at my disposal, I would eventually come to understand what brought me there. As I wondered the halls and ventured ever deeper into the palace, two feelings began to materialize: Many of the décor and valuables in this area were either untouched, or disturbed but left behind, moved or dropped on the floor, which led me to believe that looters had made it this far but were unable to make off with their spoils; and also I felt a presence, the sense of being watched. In one of the bedchambers I discovered the first in a series of old corpses. They were clearly not the corpses of soldiers; they had no armor or weapons lying about them. Rather it seemed I had come across the remains of some of the unfortunate souls who thought they could make some coin gambling that the curse of the royal palace was myth. I did eventually find the corpses of the soldiers in a state of decay far more advanced than the others. Elsewhere I found corpses that were less than a year old. Where there was skin or rotting flesh left, I could see evidence of claw marks as the killing wounds, and on some of them I noticed the familiar mark of the Vampyre's bite. Clearly then, I was not the only one who had turned.

From far in the direction I had come from I began to hear echoing footsteps. Clumsy, loud footsteps accompanied by rustling of clothes and the occasional sound of clinking metal. I walked straight towards the sound, knowing fairly certainly what the source was. As I entered back into another corridor, I noticed the light of torches start to hit the walls from around the corner. At the same time the sounds were now becoming louder, and were accompanied by whispers.

“We’re in it now. Look! The treasures were left behind. This is as far as the others got before...”

“Calm yourself! They were unprepared. We are not. We know what we are dealing with.”

“Do we? What about the soldiers? Were they unprepared? Maybe Besa was right not to show up.”

“We all knew this would be dangerous. If you want to run back out on your own, fine.”

“We can take him. The demon won’t know what hit him.”

As they rounded the corner, they found me waiting. They stopped in their tracks. In the dim torchlight I imagine they saw only a cloaked silhouette in the center of the hall. A few of them whispered: “Is that him? Is that the demon?”

“Who goes there?” One in the front called out. “What business have you in this place?”

They stood tense with their hands firmly gripping their swords, or mostly farmers tools. Their eyes darted between me and their surroundings, looking to see if perhaps more danger was lurking in the areas untouched by the light of their torches.

“I am... tired.” I spoke wearily. “I have found no sleep for years now. Leave this place with your lives, take some of the trinkets from the halls if you wish. Begone, and do not return.”

They must not have expected this. They looked quizzically at each other, the one in front spoke up again.

“You are the one, aren’t you? The demon who’s been terrorizing our lands! We’ve come for you! To put an end to your foul actions once and for all!”

“Amusing.” I sighed. “But you are too little for such an undertaking. You are sheep trying to fight back against the wolf that preys on your flock, and I respect that. It is why you still stand. Don’t try my patience. Leave now, or be destroyed.”

I had hoped that the promise of treasure would convince that rabble to leave me be. They represented no threat to me, but as I had said, I was weary. The years without sleep and the memories that place brought back to the surface had taken their toll. I just wanted them out of my hair. I would have no such luck. For a brief moment it seemed as though the crowd was going to abandon their foolish pursuit, unfortunately however, the leader got a sudden gust of

bravery and rushed at me with a loud cry. Several of his friends followed, and soon enough I had another battle on my hand. I was still hoping to knock some sense into the leaders so that maybe the followers would come to their senses. But when one of the peasants managed to jab a spear through my thigh, the beast awoke, and all bets were off.

Instinctively I let out a long hiss, the claws came out and blood was spilled. Despite my fatigue the mob members presented no real threat. I took more cuts than I normally used to and my attacks were less precise, but any wound on my flesh would knit right back together in an instant and there were only so many attacks they could avoid. Their numbers were the most frustrating. No matter my heightened senses, there was always at least one man outside my view. My enemies mistook my lack of form for losing, and became emboldened. In the end it did not matter. One by one the rabble fell in a bloody heap throughout the corridor, it was not long before the more apprehensive members began to run.

The leader was the last one left alive. My mistake of not just killing him at the start meant that he was able to survive until the fight neared its end. He was clutching a gash on his side, and holding up a short sword in my direction with a vengeful sneer. His friends were all dead or gone. After having refused my mercy and provoking my inner beast I had no intention of offering him a second chance. But before I could close in on him and finish the job, a figure emerged from the shadows behind him, and a pair of pale, slender, clawed hands reached around him from behind and held him tight. He cried out in surprise and tried to break himself out of the hold, but seemed unable to overpower his opponent. Then a head of a similarly pale skinned young woman materialized from the darkness, sinking a pair of long, sharp fangs into his neck and drinking deep. She slowly wrestled him to the ground her face clinging to the neck of her prey like a leach. Eventually he lost the strength to put up a fight, and then stopped moving all together.

I stood above her while she finished her meal. Only when she released the by then dead villager did I recognize her face, that had been distorted by undeath. As she drank the blood, I noticed some slight color start to return to her skin, and her greyish locks begin to darken. She was dressed in elegant silks that looked like they had not been cleaned or mended in years. She whipped her mouth with the back of her hand, then rose and hissed with her fangs showing at me. I threw back my hood.

“Reni?” I said with what surprise my weary self could express.

Immediately her sneer vanished as she recognized my face. Her eyes went wide and her mouth remained open in shock. I presumed to discover a small amount of fear in her, but in that same instant she was overcome with a look of utter joy, and she dropped to her knees at my feet.

“It’s you! It’s really you!” She called out ecstatically. “You’ve returned! At long last you’ve returned!”

She crawled closer and wrapped her arms around my legs in what I can only describe as a worshiping embrace. Still too suspicious of her actions I reached to pry her off of me, but she released me at the slightest amount of strength exerted. She backed up, still on her knees, looking up at me with a look halfway between admiration and confusion.

“Forgive me.” She said. “I did not wish to offend you. We’ve waited so long. I was beginning to doubt you would ever return.”

I slowly started to pace around her, examining what the transformation had done to her. Though the blood she just drank seemed to rejuvenate her to a degree, she was still looking rather sickly. What used to be Reni’s slender but healthy build became waifish and fragile. Her shoulder-blades, hip-bones, elbows and knees left sharp protrusions on her skin, which had a lifeless pale color. She was waiting with bated breath for me to respond.

“How did this happen to you?” I asked more with curiosity than concern. I then added with barely contained jealousy: “Did the Goddess appear to you?”

“Goddess?” She looked genuinely confused. “Which one? I remember no goddess.”

“What do you remember?”

“I remember you.” Her eyes wandered away from mine in no particular direction as she got lost in the story she started telling. “I remember you and your word. You told me to speak the truth, and I did. I spoke all my truths to you. Telling you everything you wanted to know was all I could think of. Then you killed the other girls. I watched. I saw everything, but I stayed there. Then you returned to me. You said you would claim my life for the one I took from you. I gave myself over to you. I wanted nothing else. There, in your embrace, I remember... weakness, then nothing.” She trailed off. Her head slowly leaned from one side to the next, and she continued. “I awoke. I was on a medicine table, surrounding me were knives and embalming tools. I did not breathe. My heart was still. My body yearned for... something. The mortician walked in. He looked ... ripe. I could smell his blood and I knew that I wanted it. I killed him

and took it for myself. Others came. They wanted to kill me. I killed them instead. Then I came back here and waited.”

She looked back at me, as though the explanation had come to an end. I was not yet satisfied. “Waited for what?”

“For you.” She said with wide eyes. She made a motion to reach for my legs again, but pulled back just before touching me, no doubt remembering my reaction. “I knew so little, but what I did know, I knew for certain. I needed blood. I feared the light of the sun. Most importantly though, I needed you.”

“Needed me for what?”

“Not for something. I just needed you. To hear your word again. To feel your will.”

This entire situation smelled of deception to me. Reni had clearly become like me, struck with the curse of the Vampyre. She spent the past number of years stalking this haunted palace feeding first off of the soldiers who arrived to cleanse the site, later from the occasional looter, wanderer or explorer. From the state of her body, even after her latest feeding, it was clear that she had gone without blood for quite a while, possibly almost a year, if the youngest corpses I had found earlier were any indication. How this had happened to her, and why she was suddenly acting the way she was, I could not explain, but knowing her, I suspected trickery.

“You have been starving before tonight. Why have you not fed?”

“I drink the blood of those who wonder into the palace. None have dared for a long time.”

“Why did you not leave, go looking for prey elsewhere?”

“I did not dare leave. I wanted to be here if it should happen that you would return.”

I knelt down beside her and looked her in the eye. “I don’t believe you.”

She looked distraught. “Not a day has gone by that I had not dreamt of seeing you again. Even with all the human blood within me, I still felt empty without you. Please, I beg you! Don’t leave us again!”

“Us?”

“Yes. Hosep and I. He is like me as well. We have both been waiting here together for your return.”

“I don’t know this Hosep. Who is he? Where is he now?”

“He watched over your tomb when you slept. He probably doesn’t know you are here. Were I in his place I would be going after those peasants that got away. Do you wish for me to go find him for you?”

“Reni, why are you doing this!?” I stood back up and shouted at her. She fell backwards and raised her hand to protect her face.

“I... Have I angered you? I beg your forgiveness!” She looked scarred but she did not turn away from me. Her eyes were pleading.

“Do you not remember who you were? What you have done? How you played with my naiveté, used my love and orchestrated my death?!”

“I...” She looked away again, but not in fear. Rather a sincere attempt to recall. “I do. I wanted marriage with the King. I witnessed you scheme and saw an opportunity. You found me attractive, so I planned to give myself to you and get you to help me. When I became wife, I knew you could undo what you had done. I chose to have you killed rather than risk it.” She looked back up at me. “I remember. I had not thought to recall the life I had before your embrace. It is... it is like remembering a dream from a long time ago. I am unable to recall what it felt like to want to bring you harm. I would never dream of hurting you. I adore you!”

I looked at her quizzically. Try as I might to find it, there was not a shred of dishonesty in Reni’s eyes. Still I could not shake what she had done to me in our mortal lives. I needed proof. Fortunately, I could see through the window that the sun was coming up, and I instantly had an idea to see if my influence had really stuck with her as much as she indicated.

“You adore me?” I asked.

“With all my being!”

“You would do anything for me?”

“Anything you desire.”

“You would endure torture, suffering and a second death if I so commanded?”

“Without hesitation.” The reply came instantly.

“I wish to see proof. The dawn is here. I command you to go stand atop the steps to the grand hall and remain there until your body burns to ash.”

Reni defied my expectations. Without a single second of thought she first caressed my leg with a grand smile on her face, nodded profusely, then rose, and straight up ran towards the grand hall. I followed. She walked all the way up to the grand hall's archway, right up to the edge of the shade casted by the walls. She then took one step into the doorway, placed her other foot beside the first and turned to face me. She had a pleased smile on her the whole time, if there was any fear within her, she made no showing of it. Slowly but surely the morning sun rose over the horizon. I saw but its rays hit the back of the grand hall first, then slowly move downwards, until it first touched Reni's head, and expanded ever lower. Her pale skin seemed to shine almost like metal, but already at its slightest touch of dawn she winced, tightened her muscles as one does when experiencing immense pain, and her entire body shook. Within seconds her skin emitted a heavy smoke. She shut her eyes and screamed in agony. Horrifying red burn marks spread across her, bits of her skin started to crack and peel off, leaving gaps of fresh embers in their place. Her face and body contorted in pain, her silks and her hair caught on fire. After much of this she became unable to stand, dropped to her knees still screaming without end, yet she took not a single step, or even a slight crawl back towards the safety of the shadows. She remained there and endured it.

I watched with fascination. It was hard for even me not to be convinced that Reni had now become a true slave to my will, compelled not just by her birth and station, but by her own inner self to fulfil my desires. I would likely have begun pondering the reason for this, but the sight of her emblazoned state was mesmerizing. This was an excellent way to see just what would have happened to me had I not heeded my instinct about avoiding the sun. Before she could completely disintegrate, I reached out to grab her hand, and with all my might yanked her back into the shade. My own hand and arm had become burned in the light ever so slightly as I did this, even through the cloth that covered it. As she fell to the ground back in the shade, the flames that engulfed her went out, but the damage to her skin remained. Previously she looked like a corpse. Now she looked like one removed from a burning funeral pyre. But she was still moving, though barely.

“You...” She struggled to speak. “You no longer... desire my death?”

“I very much desire your death.” I responded. “In life you betrayed and killed me. I desired satisfaction. I did not get it when I killed you, but now...” I looked down at her still gripping my hand with the burn. “...having you as a willing slave to my every desire sounds like a much more satisfying recompence.”

She propped herself up with her arms. They made awful crunching sounds as she moved them. She then slowly rose to her feet, and managed to stand with stumbling steps.

“Your willing slave I shall be then for as long as you desire.” She said smiling even through all the char and soot. “Do you wish me to stay like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like I am? Burned by the sun? If you hate me for what I did in life, will it bring you satisfaction to see me charred and disfigured?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “The touch of the sun does not heal from our skin.” I revealed the burn on my side. “I have had this since the night I killed you, and no amount of mortal blood has ever made it go away.”

“I was burned by the sun on my first morning as well.” She said. “All the way down my back. When I woke up it was as though nothing had happened at all.”

“Woke up?!” My eyes went wide. “You have been able to sleep?”

“Of course.” She said. “I sleep through every day.”

Still grasping my hand, I stepped up close to her. The smell of her burnt flesh hit my nose as I inhaled, and to my surprise, I did not find it unpleasant. “Reni, I have not slept in seven years. I have grown weary over that time, but no matter what I did I could not rest. I need to. Tell me how you found peace!”

“As you desire.” She said. With crunching sounds on her limbs, she began to walk down a corridor. “Follow me.”

I was impatient to learn how Reni was able to rest, but after what she had endured, she had become rather slow in movement. After a number of turns and stairs I realized she was taking me towards the royal wing. This area of the palace had been almost entirely undisturbed as far as the treasures were concerned. The halls were littered with armored skeletons, the soldiers made it quite far it would seem. Eventually Reni would lead me towards the harem chamber, and inside it. Everything was left just as it had been that night. The burned bits of curtain and furniture were all still there, the cushions and matrices though worn and in disrepair were all still in their proper places, even some of the wives corpses were there, left right where I had felled them, their wrinkled leathery skin wrapped tightly around the bones with nothing

else in between. Reni walked over to the end of the room and laid down in the exact spot I left her after I drained her.

“This is my favorite spot.” She said. “I have been able to sleep anywhere in the palace, but none feel more...right than this one here.”

I looked around and tried to contemplate the meaning of this. If my theory was correct, then the place I was being drawn to was the place of my death or entombment. “Rest then, Reni.” I told her. “Let your wounds heal. I prefer to see you in a visually pleasing state. I must go and seek out my sarcophagus.”

“As you wish.” She relied. “Please, say you will be here again when night falls! I could not bare to be separated from you again.”

“We shall see.”

Though I’m sure that was not the answer she was hoping for, Reni nodded nonetheless. She then laid back, folded her arms over her chest and closed her eyes. She was so motionless that to look at her, one could easily have mistaken her for one of the many corpses in the room with her. When I saw that she was really asleep, I left the chamber to find my way back to the tomb where Ghremhi was buried.

I found it in the same state as I had left it, as though no time had gone by at all. The room was enveloped in darkness, and more than any other in the palace, this room had a hellish chill emanating all around. It was also the first place in the palace that felt truly peaceful. I paced slowly towards my old sarcophagus; the lid still propped against the side as I had left it. Walking up to it, I placed a hand on the cold stone. To mortal perception I could describe it as feeling like the touch of a silk sheet on a feather-bed at a time when one is most deprived of rest. Unable to stand the fatigue any longer, I stepped inside the stone box, comfortably reclined within its confines, covered up the top with the lid, closed my eyes, and for the first time in seven years, had a long and peaceful sleep.

### Dreams of the Dead

I did not dream in the mortal sense. I had no visions or stories play out in my mind. But I did experience something akin to it. I hesitate to call it dream only because it involves nothing but senses and feelings. As I rested, I could feel the land around the palace. Dark energies were

spreading throughout them. The trees, the grass, the waters, the stone walls... the soil, all of it was being soaked slowly in a mire of corruption of which I was the source. I felt the living creatures of the surrounding areas either revel in the atmosphere, such as the owls, rats, bats, ravens and crows, or flee from it in fear, as did the faun, the boar, the hawk and the sparrow. There could be no doubt: The land was transforming as a reaction to my presence.

In this state, which I later chose to call the Dreams of the Dead, I could sense the setting sun, and falling of dark. When the time came, I was instantly awake again. I was there, lying in my sarcophagus in the exact same position I had closed my eyes, as though I had made not a single move in my sleep. I could hear sounds coming from outside of the stone. Though muffled I could still make them out quite clearly.

“You would not lie to me about such a thing, would you?”

“Of course not. How could you even ask me that?”

“Considering the lengths you would go to be Uhtman’s wife...”

“I would never lie about our master. He is there, sleeping inside his sarcophagus. You think I would dare touch his sacred resting place for the sake of a joke?”

“Why then is he not awake? The sun has set, has it not?”

“He had not slept in seven years. He must have been exhausted. Just let him sleep. I will call you when he awakens.”

“No. I’m waiting right here with you. If he really is here, I desire to see him the moment he rises from his slumber.”

I chose this moment to throw open the lid. The stone flipped on its side and fell to the floor with a loud crash. I sat up slowly, propping myself up on the sides, I arose and stepped out. “Good evening.” I said.

I looked out to see who the two figures I heard talking were. Reni was one, of course. Her body was her beautiful, but still slightly sickly shape again, the burns from the sun had all vanished. The other was a fully-grown adult male in good strong shape, at least a foot taller than myself. He was dressed as a palace guard from when Uhtman was still on charge. At my sight he fell to his knees and gazed upon me.

“You were not lying...” he said looking at me, but no doubt talking to Reni.

“She was not.” I answered in her stead. “Though I do not fault you for doubting her. She was a master manipulator in life.” I stared at her with contempt as I spoke. She lowered her head in shame. This gave me great pleasure. “You must be Hosep.” I said looking back at the guard turned Vampyre. “I remember you now. I remember your face. You were one of the two the king had watch over Ghremhi’s tomb.”

“Just so, my master. You will recall you drank of my blood after ...” He stopped talking, his words trailing off into shame.

“After your friend tried to kill me.” I finished.

“We did not know. Only when I awoke with your gift did I fully realize what you were.”

“All is forgiven, Hosep.” I placed a hand on his shoulder. “You share in Reni’s adoration of me?”

“My adoration for you is my own. All I share with that harlot is a mutual contempt, but I shall kiss her on the lips, if it is your will.”

“Fear not, I would never curse you with such a command.” Reni was still occasionally glancing at me from under her hung head. “And you need not fear either. If what I suspect is true, you will have an eternity to make up for your betrayal.” I walked over to her and with a single finger of my hand raised her chin. She exhaled and parted her lips as reaction to my touch. “You do wish for me to love you again, I assume?”

“I wish only to do your will. I am not worthy of your love.”

I smiled. “Good answer.” I caressed her gaunt face with the outside of my hand. She closed her eyes and rubbed her face against it. I have to admit, the power I had over her was intoxicating. She quivered at my every touch, and would willingly walk into the sun for me. She never acted like this when we were together before. Only now did I truly understand how little she wanted to be with me, if this was how a woman in love truly acted. This was the perfect revenge. She took everything from me, now I owned her. I owned her like Uhtman never could have dreamed of owning anyone. But... why?

“Why what?” Reni replied. We must have shared a bond of the soul, for she sensed my thoughts. An effect of her attachment to me perhaps?

“Why you two?” I spoke out loud this time. I pulled back from Reni, feeling her head instinctually follow my hand a bit before shaking off her lust. I walked through the halls of the

cursed palace. I could hear the two of them following me. They did not speak, just silently followed in my steps as I walked through the king's chambers, the harem and all the halls between. Save for a select few, every corpse that had fallen to me the night of my awakening was still lying in the exact same spot, and more had been added to their ranks over the years. So many dead by my hands, yet only two of them turned. Why them?

“Hosep, tell me. Do you remember seeing the Goddess at the time of your turning?”

Hosep's voice came from behind me. “No. Which goddess should I have seen?”

“Sekhmet.” I replied.

“She did not appear to me. Though I never had any goddess show herself to me before, so I may not have even recognized her.”

“Trust me, if she had been there, you would have known.” I continued to ponder till I posed the question out loud. “I have killed many over the years. Only the two of you have turned. Why you?”

Reni was first to respond. “While I was still alive, I remember feeling my will become yours. Perhaps that could have done it?”

“No.” I answered. “I did no such thing to Hosep, but he still became like you. Unless I have more followers I am not aware of, there is something unique about you two, or your deaths.”

“When you killed the other women, you did so with your hands.” Reni said. “You drank of my blood alone.”

“And you drank of my blood as well, but not that of Chafkem, the other guard who watched over you.” Said Hosep.

I was about to dismiss this as well. I had drunk from the blood of many mortals over the last seven years. But then I started to think, and remembered an important detail. From the first night I fed from the hunters in the forest, to the night before I left for the palace again, all of my prey had survived the feeding. Sure, I had killed many attackers, but only Reni and Hosep died as a result of me draining them of their blood completely. “Yes.” I said out loud. “You two are the only ones I drank dry.”

“But there must be others then.” Reni said.

“I have drunk from many, but never to the extent of death.” I replied. “I was living among human villages. I did not want them alert to my presence.” I trailed off into thought. “Interesting...”

“So, does that mean you can pass your gift on to as many as you please?” Reni asked.

“You could raise thousands!” Hosep said. “You could rule over an entire nation of eternally loyal followers!”

“Yes...” I said. “That...certainly sounds like a possibility.”

I let the thought take root, but did not dwell on it at the time. What my mind was truly full of there and then was curiosity. There was so much I felt like I had yet to learn about my true power, and I had only yet taken a small step into this new world. What else could I possibly do? How, other than sheer chance, could I learn? Could Reni and Hosep do the same things I could, or were they more like imperfect offspring? All the questions came into my mind at such a pace that I needed to... I needed to write them down.

“Reni. How is my library doing?”

“The library has remained untouched since you left. Soldiers and looters never made it that far, I did not think to disturb your work.”

“Very good. Hosep, did you manage to catch yourself a meal last night?”

“Indeed I did.”

“Excellent. You are well fed then. It seems I must return to this spot to rest so it is important to make it hospitable. I shall leave for a few days and while I am gone, I wish for you to work on that. Start with the library. Recover and organize any and all materials and tools you can find and prepare a place for me to work. Once you are finished start cleaning out these corpses.”

“I shall do as you wish.” Hosep said, and took his leave towards the library.

“Shall I assist him?” Reni asked.

“No. You shall accompany me.”

She grew a broad smile, her fangs shined as she did. “It will be my pleasure, my master.”

I enjoyed her unwavering loyalty, and when she called me her master, it awoke something else primitive inside me. I had repressed it in life, but every time Uhtman was called that by his slaves, servants, or myself, I would feel a jolt of jealousy. I imagined what being in that position must have been like, and now... I was there. When others spoke it, it was with learned obedience. They called Uhtman that because they were told to. Reni did it on her own, and she did it with joy. I liked having power over her. Goddess help me, I reveled in it. And much more than this, I wanted more.

“Where will we go?” She asked me.

“We must learn about our limitations and the rules that bind us. I have already learned some, but I have a feeling there is much more to come. You must also hunt and feed. I prefer you restored to your former beauty so your sight may always bring me pleasure. That is the purpose of your existence from here on out.”

“It is as you say.” She said. “Are we going to the local villages? I had never dared leave this place long enough before.”

“I hunger for new hunting ground.” I replied. “I think perhaps we should go and visit a larger settlement. I hear Mar-Ak-Khot is lovely this time of year.”

### High society

The journey went by fast. The city of Mar-Ak-Khot was a full day’s travel away for the king’s host. We, however, did not grow tired as we walked. At one point we started to run, and could do so for the entire rest of our trip without needing to stop and rest. We passed by several camps of resting travelers. Reni wanted to stop at each and sample the local delicacies. I instructed her otherwise. We could have our fill once we reached the city, but I did not want to do anything on the way there that would cause alarm. I did allow her to indulge a one moment though. We met a couple traveling with a cart away from the city. We stopped them, I mesmerized the husband and then the two of us shared the wife. She was a younger woman, and her blood was delicious. Reni had never tasted young blood before that, I believe she instantly developed a taste for it, as she was the one to drain her dry. She almost instantly regained some mass to her form as she dropped the corpse to the bottom of the cart. I then instructed the husband to keep following the road, but to go to the cursed palace instead. I gave him a message to Hosep that he should feel free to feed on the mortal delivering my words. I

had to look after my followers after all. I could feel my mortal self getting disgusted at my disregard for their lives, but the voice was weak, and held no power.

Mar-Ak-Khot was a massive settlement. The city was built alongside the Bara-Hotep river in a valley surrounded by great grassy hills. A small number of outlying farms preceded a massive sandstone wall with great golden gates. We avoided the gates entirely, choosing instead a relatively secluded section of the wall, and just climbing over. Reni watched me climb up the wall like a lizard, and successfully imitated my actions without issue. We managed to avoid the sights of guards or watchers and descended to the other side. Mar-Ak-Khot was a dense city, with houses atop houses built close together forming narrow streets. Even at this late hour there were a fair number of folks up and about. This was the first time I walked the streets of such a large city. I had been here before quite a few times, but always in the service of Uhtman, and most of the time we spent here was in his personal royal estate. This experience was different. Exhilarating. I grew curious how the population of this city differed from the folks of the neighboring villages.

“What do you have planned, master?” Reni asked me.

“I want to spend some time here and get to know the place. Learn about its culture, its people, its life, its death. I need to teach you how to walk among the people in a subtle way, so you can hunt, feed, and continue to be of use to me.”

“I understand.” She said. “I will not let you down.”

“Also, before we return to the palace, I wish to try and turn another. See if draining a mortal of their blood to the point of cardiac failure will truly produce another... progeny, I suppose.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“First things first, we should find some place we can call ours. A place to retreat to for the day. Remember that we will be unable to rest while we are away from home.”

“I would stay awake for a century if it was at your side.”

“Yes, you would.” I said pleased. “Now be silent. I must search for a suitable location.”

We walked the streets in search of a place to occupy. It was my belief that there would be a number of abandoned houses in some of the more squalid quarters of town where we could move in and not draw too much attention during the day. I was very wrong. The slums of the

city were filled beyond the brim. The poor were overflowing into the streets, sleeping in gutters and alley, and the majority of houses were filled with several families-worth of people. I had never noticed this in my life.

“We could take one of these houses for ourself.” Reni said. “Eliminate the humans within.”

“In an environment like this that would get noticed too fast. We want to stay hidden for as long as possible.”

“Then what should we do?”

“Perhaps I had this the wrong way around. I have a different idea, but we must hurry. The sunrise is not far away.”

I decided to take us towards the wealthy quarter instead. I had an inclination, an idea that if the poor in the city were overflowing, then perhaps we would be better suited seeking an empty house on the wealthy quarter. My theory proved to be correct. As we stalked the rooftops of the temple district, we saw numerous houses with sealed entrances and guards placed at the door. It would seem that the city had a bad season or the like, forcing the wealthy to abandon their houses and move lower down the pyramid.

“Well, my pet.” I said to Reni. “Do any of these suit your fancy?”

“Very much so!” She exclaimed looking over the several vacancies visible from our vantage point. “Oh, how about that one? The one with the pillars shaped like maidens.”

“I like your taste.” I responded. Indeed, the same house had caught my attention too as one of fine architecture. “Let us go and have a look around.”

Staying in the shadows, we slunk through the streets out of sight and sound. We snuck past the guards who were watching the home, climbed up the walls and searched for an open window. They all had protective shutters, closed and locked, but none of these material obstacles concerned me. Reni and I hung from the wall on either side of a window facing away from the street. I tried to open the shutter. I met resistance; it was held shut by a metal hook on the opposite side. I looked at Reni and smiled. With a firm tug I pulled open the wooden shutters, the cling of breaking metal accompanied the move. I listened towards the street. There was no sound of approaching guards. They must not have been paying attention. Now came the true test. I wanted to enter the house. I commanded my body to climb inside through the

window. It obeyed. Silently as a cat I landed inside the second floor of the large house, the landing was accompanied by a wave of dust taking off.

“That is a relief.” I said.

Reni followed me inside. “What exactly? The house is empty?”

“Better.” I said. “Unowned.”

“I don’t understand.” Reni cocked her head to the side.

“You will the next time you try to walk into someone’s home.” I brushed off the dust that had gotten on my skin. Only a few pieces of furniture had been left behind. We explored the rest of the house. It had three floors and a cellar, empty of anything of great value or use to mortals. All we had within were a few unused cupboards and shelves, two wooden bedframes, and two empty barrels.

“Do you like it, master?” Reni asked. She was never more than three paces from me. “Will we make this our new home?”

“I think we can make this an excellent base of operations.” I answered. “Only a few things we shall need to do.”

“Such as?” She asked.

“First, I must make the home my property. At any moment someone could purchase it from right under our noses, and given our... limitations that could land us in a bad situation.”

“You want to buy the house?” Reni asked sounding confused.

“Nothing so primitive.” I responded. “It is late now, but when night falls next I shall pay a discreet visit to the House of the City. There they keep their records of home ownership. If they keep their documents in proper order then it should be a simple matter to add a scroll to their records saying this house is already owned. I shall have to make up a false identity, but there are advantages of having a name. We will be able to walk openly in the streets, and converse with the people, that should make it easier to hunt without arousing suspicion.”

“Amazing!” Reni exclaimed. “What power your ability to read and write grant you on their own!”

“Indeed.” I said. “Secondly, we must secure this cellar. It is where we shall hide from the light of day. We must find an adequate way to hide it, so that none shall gain access to it but us. I wonder also if there is some way for us to make this place hospitable to us.”

“Some silk curtains and soft cushions, perhaps?” Reni asked smiling.

“If that helps, but my goal is to recreate whatever it is about the palace that allows us to sleep through the day. I must look into this.”

“And how may I assist you in these, master?”

“I have one real desire, Reni. I wish to learn.” I sat down in a corner of the cellar. I motioned for her to sit in my lap. She did so licking her smiling lips with pleasure. “For now, you are still an embodiment of my foolishness and naiveté. But perhaps over time that can change. You are similar to me, kept alive by the same force, blessed with the same instincts and urges. Yet you are also different in many ways. You don’t share in my strength as much as I do, you are weaker in body and ability. You and what happened to you are of great interest to me, and might just be the key to understanding the full nature of this blessing Sekhmet has bestowed upon me.”

“Last you still called it a curse.” Reni said as she leaned in closer to apply gently kisses to my neck.

“A condition is a condition.” I said. “It is what you do with it that determines whether you are cursed or blessed.”

I caressed the beautiful dead body, from her face down her neck, over her shoulders and down her arms. I lusted for her, but this lust was not the same as when I was alive. Back then I had been driven by the mortal urges that motivated us to procreate. I wanted to penetrate her, to be inside her. I had no such desires any more. Indeed, while I still had the necessary organs intact, they did not seem to react at all to my feelings of desire. I wanted not so much to be inside her, to become one with her, rather to feel her in her entirety, to experience her, to dominate her, to own her. How fitting it was then that her only desire seemed to be the inverse: to give herself over to me. Every motion of her body, every reaction to my touch confirmed this. And while in the back of my rational mind I would always still be weary of her trickery, there was another link between us. In certain powerful moments I could feel her soul. Her thoughts were inside me presenting themselves in full, and I could see that she truly had not even the slightest idea of making a fool out of me. The confidence this gave me! The knowledge

that I could do anything I wanted and never lose her full devotion. I could satisfy my every urge, my every curiosity on her, and soon... on anyone I pleased.

I felt her cold tongue caress my neck, and in an instant, I made the conscious choice to let the beast loose. I stood up holding her firmly in my arms and thrust her up against the cold stone of the cellar wall. Her hands were on my chest, and when my motion was complete, she began to passionately feel it with her palms. Either out of habit or remaining mortal instinct she raised her legs and wrapped them around me, making it easier to enter her. That was not my intention however. I grabbed her hair in a fist and tugged, pulling her head backwards. She moaned in pain and pleasure, but not as loud as when I bared my fangs, let out a loud hiss, and sank them into her neck. I could feel her legs tighten, and her claws sinking into my chest as her muscles tensed. I took a deep drink from her. With mortals the blood would flow through the veins and pour down my throat with little effort. But Reni had no heartbeat. So, I had to put extra effort into sucking the blood from her. With every mouthful of blood I took from her she cried out in ecstasy, louder and more passionately than she ever had when we had sex. The blood was... everything. It did not taste like Reni did the first time I drank of her. I imagine it was because this was no longer strictly hers. It tasted slightly of her, slightly of the woman we shared on the road, and many others. It was as though the blood of many mortals had been mixed together into a single vessel, and given to me the most enticing of goblets. I found myself wondering what would happen if I drank her dry again. But such experimentation would have to wait. I pulled back and looked upon her face. Her arms were up against the wall at her sides, waving and curling in slow motions as the excitement coursed through her. She gazed at me through half closed eyelids, then proceeded to tilt her head back and sigh deep sighs. She needed not to breath, but seemed to find joy in pumping her lungs into sighs and emotions anyhow. I wanted to ask her about this, but the time was not now. I simply let go of her and let her fall to the ground where she continued to pant for a short time. For now, I had my fun with my pet. There would be time for more later. An eternity.

We kept a careful eye out for the arrival of dusk. There was no rest for either of us until we would eventually return to the palace, until then we needed to be extra careful. Reni had lost much of her fullness of form after I took her the other morning, her skin had lost color and her hair became grey. A result of the lack of blood no doubt. I preferred her looking beautiful, so I instructed her to remain in the cellar as I went outside to find her someone to feed from. I managed to find a washerwoman who was unfortunate enough to leave her window open. I

compelled her to sleep using a magic spell, and carried her over the rooftops back to the house, entering once again through the window. I brought the sleeping woman straight to my pet, who sniffed at her with hungry anticipation.

“Thank you, master!” She said, planting kisses on my arm as I laid her on the ground.

“Feel free to drink as much as you wish.” I told her. “Remain down here. Keep the door sealed and open it for no one but me. We can deal with the body later.”

As I ascended the steps, I could just barely hear as Reni’s fangs sank into the unfortunate prey, and she started to drink her fill. I had managed to learn a fairly strong mastery over my hunger, I was able to resist the urge to feast without control. What I felt in Reni told me that the only reason she practiced any restraint was to remain obedient to my orders. In essence that motivation was all I needed from her.

I started about my evening’s tasks. There were still some few shops that had yet to close their doors, so I figured starting there would be wise. As quickly as I could I visited a chemist to purchase ink, another merchant sold me a quill and a leather bag filled with sheets of papyrus. Coin did not concern me. I had the wealth of an entire palace at my disposal, coins of all metals and other valuables were in my possession in abundance. I continued by searching for the House of the City, the place where all matters concerning the cities governance were handled. I had expected to need to compel someone on the inside to invite me in, but when I tried to enter through a balcony door, I was met with no resistance. For then I simply made note of this, but I would of course later piece together that forbiddance only applied to buildings considered a residence, and no one lived in the House of the City. By moving along the ceiling, I was easily able to avoid the detection of the patrolling guards, and eventually find the room of records. In them I recognized the marks of a fellow student of Khakesh, the writing had most of the characteristics, with a few personal touches. I could make out the work of at least seven different scribes over the last century for as many documents as I could examine. Such things always brought me joy, and while most of the things I found pleasure in while alive no longer meant much to me, the art of the written word was still a source of intellectual passion, even in death.

The records of property were easy to find, and eventually I found the description of the house we chose. I learned from the records kept that two families had owned the home before. Ownership changed hands once 70 years ago from one family to the next. The reasons were not listed, but the last record of ownership was 5 years old. After that it had remained empty. Carefully attempting to mimic the style of what I made out from other writings I examined to

be the current scribe, I drafted two documents: a certificate of ownership, and royal permit of residence. Both of these I wrote out to myself under a false name, the first of many names I would collect over the centuries. The identity I would wear in that city from here forward would be Har-Benen, a man of noble lineage from Khakesh. I had crafted a detailed history for this made up individual, and a reason he was seeking new property in Mar-Ak-Khot: to grow his own personal power by moving closer to the new Sun King, but his excuse would be to start a patronage investment into the arts of the city. This was a good enough cover for the time being. I was eager to involve myself in mortal life, to hunt from the light rather than the shadows, and to satisfy my other appetites at the same time, such as my lust for women, my desire for social interaction, and my need to make the rulers suffer.

Over the next few nights I would visit and re-visit the House of the City to plant other documents in the library to help cement my cover. I would also instruct Reni in the ways she was allowed to hunt on her own. Much as we tried, it seemed she did not possess the ability to compel mortals to her whims like I did, not yet at any rate, so she was relegated to either use her feminine charms or her strength. I gave her detailed guidance on how to select her targets, what circumstances were ideal for feeding, and what to do if she gets spotted. She followed everything perfectly. After only a few days I felt confident in leaving her to hunt unsupervised, and no longer needed to tend to her nourishment myself. In between my tasks I would, of course, also feed myself as well, and twice during the six days we spent in Mar-Ak-Khot I also compelled humans to make the journey to the cursed palace, and offer themselves to Hosep. By the end of the week I had laid the groundwork for eventually becoming a visible resident of the house, making it so I would no longer need to enter from the window, and my time living and hunting in the city could truly begin.

There was but one final thing I wanted to learn before returning to my place of rest: how to spawn a new Vampyre. Each night when I was instructing Reni on how to hunt, I was also searching the area for someone to test out my theory on. Ideally my new progeny would be someone who could vanish from their mortal life without being missed by many, one who had few friends and did not leave home much. By my taste I also preferred women to serve in my company. During a hunt I chanced upon one such candidate. She was 42 summers of age, and recently widowed. I observed her for a few nights before making my first visit to her home. She had no trade or profession, spent most of her days at home, save for when she visited the temple grounds to pray at her husband's grave. She spoke with only the merchants she regularly shopped from.

“Good evening.” I greeted her as she answered the door to my knocks.

“Good evening. Can I help you?” She said.

“Yes, I think you may. *May we speak inside.*” Short bursts of compulsion often proved useful to get mortals to act according to my whims without putting them in a trance.

“Y...Yes, of course. Please... Come in.” She opened the door wide for me and stood to the side.

“Thank you.” I stepped inside. She closed the door behind me.

“How... What can I do for you?” She asked. She was shaking of the effect of my gaze. She must have been confused as to why she felt so comfortable letting me in, but she still remembered it as her own decision.

“I would like to talk to you about your husband.” I said. “He died in the war with the Kelmer, correct?”

“Yes, he did. I’m sorry, are you...did you know him?”

“I did not, but I would like to know more about him. How long ago did he pass?”

“Two summers ago.” She responded and walked past me to sit down on a chair by the fire. “But he had been away at war for two more before that.”

“So, you have not seen him for four years.”

“Yes, sir. Why do you ask? What is this about?”

“It is about you.” I answered.

“Me?” She said. “What interest could I possibly be of?”

“Let me tell you who I am.” I said, and sat down in a second chair in front of her. “You may call me Har-Benen, but that is not my real name. For the past seven years I have been more than man, I seek to grow even further. I would wish to enlist your aid.”

She looked at me with absolute confusion. “More than man? I don’t understand. What help could I possibly be of? I have no skills to offer.”

“Skills can be learned. But what makes you unique, Sati, is the circumstances of your life.”

“How do you know my name?” She asked.

“You spend your days at home, you speak to no one, for all intents and purposes, you do not exist. You would be perfect for me. You could help me learn about myself.”

She started to look frightened. My purpose with confronting her in her lucid state was to gauge her personality, her reactions to situations. In the end, her preference would of course, not matter at all.

“Sir... Har-Benen. I don't think I can help you.”

“How do you feel about death?”

“Excuse me?” She strengthened her grip of the arm of her chair.

“Your husband has died, you spend many days praying at his grave, these things must be on your mind. How do you feel about death? What thoughts does it raise within you?”

“I... Fear, I suppose.” She answered, her voice starting to shake.

“You do not want to die?”

“No.” She said, then lowered her voice to whisper. “Is that who you are? Have you come to claim me too?”

I smiled. She could perceive the aura of death that accompanied me, not many mortals could. “I suppose I have come to see if you are worth claiming. But I'm not here in the name of death. I'm here in my own name.”

“You... want to take me for yourself?”

“Tell me, Sati. What would you say if I could offer you a chance to overcome death?”

“Is such a thing truly possible?”

“It is. I let me show you.” I stood up and walked over to a table with some cutlery laying out. I picked up the knife and walked back before her. I could see the curiosity in her eyes, the anticipation in her breath. I could smell her blood as her heart began to race. I placed the point of the knife on top of my chest, and shoved it in. A small stream of blood started to flow from the wound. Sati let out a small scream she quickly muffled with her hands, then let them both down slowly to reveal a mouth left agape at the sight of me standing before her as though all

were perfectly fine. I then removed the knife and handed it to her. She took it with shaking hands, and looked back at my chest, as the wound slowly closed back up. “What do you think?”

She let the knife fall to the floor.

“How is this possible?”

“I will tell you how. I am Amenrahersef. I am the demon who killed Uhtman, Child of the Sun. I have been blessed by Sekhmet to walk in the shadows without fear of death, as it has no hold over me.”

She dropped to her knees at my feet. “I have spent the past four years in constant fear. My future is unsure. I am too old to bare more children; none desire me as wife. I have no skills, nothing to offer for coin. Fear is my life. Fear of the shadow looming over my head, of the day when I run out of the means to feed myself. I have no family, no one to turn to. I would give anything to make this fear go away.”

“Will you offer yourself to me in exchange for an eternal life of darkness?”

“If such is what it takes, I will. What must I do?”

I motioned her to stand. She did. The I said: “When the wolf submits to the new pack master, it does so by presenting its neck to them. Do so, and prove to me that you will entrust your fate to me.”

Slightly hesitantly she brushed her hair to the side, and turned her head the other way. I walked closer, placing a hand on her shoulder. She was quite beautiful; one would never have guessed her age from her features alone. I bent over her neck. I could sense her heart start to race. Gently I placed my fangs on her throat, and put just enough pressure on it to pierce the skin. She let out a slight gasp, then let the ecstasy take over as I sampled her blood. When I finished, she was breathing heavily, the fear had vanished from her eyes. I put a hand on her cheek.

“Before this week comes to its end, I will return for you. Then you shall be rid of your fear once and for all.” I took a few steps back towards the door. “Await my return.”

“I shall.” She said. And there I left her.

I returned for her as I promised, one day before the week came to an end, before my return to the palace. She was sitting in her chair anxiously, and rushed to the door when she heard me knock.

“You came!” She said. “I was beginning to wonder if I did not imagine the whole thing.”

“Are you prepared?” I asked her.

“I am.” She said.

I escorted her to the house. We entered through the window as always, still managing to avoid the eyes of the guards. Once inside I brought her down to the cellar, where Reni was waiting.

“Another feast for us, master?” She asked.

“No Reni, not tonight.” I said. She continued to watch while running her tongue across her teeth as I brought Sati downstairs. “The time has come, Sati.” I told her.

“I’m ready.” She said, and before I even had to ask, she offered me her neck again, the marks from a few days ago still visible.

I grabbed her firmly this time, and drank deep. At first, she grabbed back hard as well, her body fighting to stay alive. But as her blood ran out, she became less resistant, and started to let out deep sighs. Her heart sped up, then it slowed, and finally stopped. Her body ceased moving all together. I finished drinking her blood to the last possible drop I could suck out of her, then looked up at her face. She looked like she was in a deep and peaceful slumber. I laid her gently on the ground.

“Now we wait.” I told Reni. “And see the results.”

All day long I sat motionless before Sati’s body, waiting for anything. Over time I noticed slight changes. Her skin turned pale, and the bitemarks vanished, but she still remained motionless. Reni would occasionally try to invoke my passion as the night we arrived, but my attention was preoccupied. I enjoyed her expressing her need for my lust, so I allowed her to persist, but I never let my sight stray from the subject of my experiment.

Night fell. This was the moment I hypothesized she would awake. And I was not disappointed. Without any gasp of air, or additional movement of any kind, her eyes opened. They scanned the ceiling first before moving down to her own body, as she raised her hands to

examine herself. Her nails had grown into sharp claws, and her fangs had grown out to. She then realized where she was, and found me sitting in the side of the room with Reni at my right. “Good evening.” I said.

“I...” Her voice came out strange, as it did for me when I first spoke.

“Your lungs need to be pumped by yourself now. It will take some time to get used to.” I said.

“So... bright.” She said.

“Yes. Your eyes can now much easier penetrate the darkness. You will discover many new strengths as well. Tell me, has the hunger set in yet?”

“The hunger?” She said, and started to feel her teeth with her finger. “Yes, I... hunger.”

“Well, you don’t yet know how to hunt properly. I will teach you, in time. For now, Reni, perhaps you could offer your new sister a drink?”

Reni eagerly strode over to Sati and knelt down beside her. Placing a hand on her cheek she planted a soft kiss on her lips before leaning back and turning her head up to the ceiling. Sati seemed to know what to do without a need for instruction. She kissed Reni’s neck a few times before allowing the fangs to show, then bit into her with a hiss. Reni embraced her new sister as she gave of her blood to her. Their passionate sounds and touches were attractive to my eyes as well. When I judged that Sati had enough to eat, I ordered the two to stop. I called Sati close to me, and licked some of the remaining blood from her lips and chin.

“Are you ready to serve me?” I asked her.

“I am.” She said, much in the same tone as Reni used to.

“Good. My task to you is this: You shall stay here and look after my house for me. See to it, that if anyone should enter, they are silenced. You can store any bodies down here. For now, refrain from leaving the place, unless your life is at risk. If your existence is threatened, your sanctuary will be the cursed palace. Do you know it?”

“Yes, master.” She replied.

“Very good. When I return, we shall learn how to find sources of mortal blood safely.”

“I eagerly await your return, my lord.”

Having a new caretaker for the house, and in the knowledge of how to reliably create more loyal spawn, I left once again for the palace to rest, and to continue setting my plans into motion.

In a single night Reni and I managed to travel all the way back to the palace. Hosep was waiting for us, he was standing atop the steps when we arrived.

“Welcome home, master. I trust your journey was fruitful?”

“It certainly was.” I responded as we walked into the palace. “Among others, I have unraveled the mystery of your birth.”

“So, it was the feeding then?”

“It was.”

“You have a new progeny?”

“I enlisted someone to take care of my new house.” I was walking in the direction of the royal wing. The corpses had been removed from the halls, disturbed objects had been returned to their native positions and Hosep himself seemed to be in good shape. “Judging from the color of your dead skin, Hosep, I take it my gifts to you arrived without trouble.”

“They did. And my I say, I felt especially honored that you did think to care for my hunger even while away, master.”

“Have you made progress in the library?”

“I dare say so. I searched high and low and collected all tools of the writing trade left within the palace. You will find them in the working table ready for your use.”

“Very good. I have a special reward for you. Reni. I command you to escort Hosep to the village of Hak-pet. There you are to instruct him on the methods of hunting I imparted to you. Go find yourselves something tasty. Return before dawn!”

“As you command, master.” Reni bowed before me and took Hosep’s hand to lead him out of the palace. Hosep bowed deeply before following her out. By my reckoning they had a good four hours or so before sunrise. That should give them plenty of time to find some easy prey.

Though I had not rested in a week and was drawn to my sarcophagus by the weariness, I still wanted to look over my precious library with my own eyes. Having once again engaged in the art of writing back in Mar-Ak-Khot rekindled my love of the craft. It was time to start work on it once again, but this time I would collect knowledge that pleased me. I would start keeping detailed records of the people I come into contact with, rulers and nobles, priests and merchants, anyone with power and influence in the region I could twist to my own ends. I also started formulating plans to return to the study of the arcane, go deeper into its secrets this time, that I might learn to cast spells with greater effects and a wider range of uses. I would create a new library. The library of Amenrahersef, filled with the knowledge of an immortal being. I even entertained the thought of teaching some exceptional individuals among my progeny who I would educate in the craft. After all, they would have more than enough time to dedicate to its mastery, and I could always make use of some more capable servants.

Though the bodies of my first victims had been removed by then, I noticed that my little mud statue of the lioness was still sitting on the shelf I used as the altar, the candles on both sides burned down to their stumps. A nearly decade old dried up bloodstain was at my feet, only barely visible as a dark outline on the stone floor. Mortal eyes would never have been able to see in that dark, but as I scanned the area with a somewhat melancholic nostalgia, I happened upon another personal treasure I had long forgotten about: the dagger I used to take my first two victims. It was laying at the foot of one of the shelves well enough hidden that the servants who carried away the bodies would have missed it. It must have fell there when I leapt at the guard. That was the last time I saw it. Remembering the Mage's Hand cantrip I summoned the dagger back into my hand, and looked it up and down as I gripped its hilt. Memories of my hunts as a mortal started to run through my mind, as well as my first times tasting the precious blood, and the end of life. This tendency for sentimentalism was something I would exhibit many more times, I dare say it became one of my main characteristics as an undead being. One that we all share to various extents; despite our immortality in death, we still cling to the memories of our lives for fear of forgetting where we came from.

I spent the hours examining my old writings to see what, if anything, had been lost or misplaced. Nothing but dust seemed to have made its way into this part of the castle in the many years it spent abandoned. Most everything I found in the exact spot it was left, perfectly organized. Eventually my body started to communicate to me that the sun was rising, and I decided to return to my place of rest. In my dreams that night I had visions where I was flying over treetops and running through the wilds under the night sky. When I was mortal, I would

have interpreted these visions as nothing other than the strange ravings of a sleeping mind, but for reasons of instinct I was convinced that this was the world trying to convey a message to me.

When the next night fell, I took my leave of the palace to investigate. I wandered the woods surrounding the grounds, all around me howls of wolves and the cawing of ravens. I felt a strange kinship to these creatures. We were all members of this eternal hunt, feeding off the life of other beings. As I called out to them in their own howl to the best I could, the beast within me began to stir in a way it had not before. I could feel it within all of me; under my skin, the tip of my tongue, the roots of my hair. I chose to let it free, and within moments I was roaring from the maw of a great dire black-furred lion. In this new skin I ran through the trees all the way to the edge where the lights of Mar-Ak-Khot became visible. This signified to me that I had gone half way through the night, and would have to make my return soon. Mastering the inner beast, I was able to revert to my humanoid form, and take a glance at the sleeping masses from my vantage point on the hillside. Honig my senses I could make out sounds of snoring, the beating of hearts and the chorus of other sounds of a night time city. Remembering my dream, I leapt into the air expecting the beast to speak to me again. It did. As I set it free once more, I felt my body shrink in size, my arms and fingers grow longer, and before long I was flying through the streets and over the rooftops of the city on the wings of a large bat. In the form of this creature I could move among the population and the patrolling guards without any suspicion at all. My efforts to enter human residences were still unsuccessful. It seemed the rules of forbiddance did not cease just because my form had changed. But this was of no matter. I chose a pleasingly delicious looking man to feed my hunger that evening, and flew off to return to my home, eager to discover just how much else I would eventually teach myself to do.

### Har-Benen of Khakesh

Over the long, long time I have existed I collected quite a few names. Some of them great and widely remembered and used, some small and obscure by design. As someone with a very strong sentimental streak, Har-Benen will always be a special one to me, because it was the first one that many people used. He was also the first fully fictional individual whose skin I occupied. In the present day crafting a personality is a much greater undertaking, as travel is easier and a much larger portion on the mortal population can read. Back then, however, all I had to do was plant a small number of specific documents in key places, compel a few runners

to deliver spoken messages to specific individuals, and I could rest assured that I could go on living in with that identity for decades before suspicion was even aroused.

So, who was Har-Benen? He was a relatively low-born noble from Khakesh, meaning that he was not so world renowned that everyone would have heard of him, but of sufficient wealth and standing to be able to purchase property in the highborn district of Mar-Ak-Khot. In fact, gaining in power and reputation was precisely his reason for doing so, for moving his home from Khakesh to the city in which the new Sun King resides. Utilizing the somewhat large wealth left behind in the cursed palace, I could provide him with a reasonable amount of wealth for someone of his stature, which he intended to use to support artists and scholars in his new home, portraying himself as a patron of culture.

As part of my preparations I acquired finely made silk clothes for Reni, and various nobles travel garments from Mar-Ak-Khot's merchants. Initially I wanted to hire a cart pulled by an ox, but as I was forced to learn any animal that was not a hunter or a predator was severely uneasy in my presence. Instead I opted for a simple hand pulled cart, and had Hosep pull it. This was all only for the proper appearance on arrival. My host was made up of just myself, Reni as a servant, and Hosep as a bodyguard. It was rather small for a traveling noble, but I could claim to want to avoid drawing attention to myself on the road. I filled a few trunks and chests with coin and valuables, with the desire to make new purchases for clothing and furnishings rather than bringing old ones from Khakesh. Har-Benen was "starting a new life", so to speak.

My arrival at the city gates was already enough to attract attention. Upon arrival at my house, I was greeted by the city guard, who were still guarding the house completely oblivious to the fact that I was coming to occupy it. When I told them who I was and what I had come to do, they were forced to send for a city official.

"Har-Benen?" the short and stout man said to me. "Never before have I heard that name."

"I do not blame you for not knowing who I am." I told him. This entire conversation took place right outside of the house. "But you must have at least heard the name spoken, considering I have been in correspondence with your city for a whole year. I was informed that the purchase of my new home had been secured."

“Scribe!” The official called to a middle-aged man with a hunched posture. He was carrying a leather case for parchments. “Do you have the documents regarding this house?”

“Yes, master.” He replied.

“Read them then. Does this man’s name show up in the records of ownership?”

The scribe started to look through parchment after parchment trying to find the most recent document. Upon reading what he found, his brow furled, as he seemingly could not believe what he was seeing. “Y... Yes, master. Har-Benen of Khakesh is listed here as the most recent owner of the house.”

“What!?” the official shouted. “You are certain?”

“Yes, master. I... also found a parchment confirming a payment of 14 000 golden coins to the Mar-Ak-Khot treasury.”

“This is preposterous!” He shouted at his servant. “Why was I not informed about this?”

“I...” The scribe started to shake. “I have no explanation, master. All of the documents are here and valid, signed and stamped, but I have no recollection of having written any of it.”

“You old fool!” He slapped the scribe across the face with the palm of his hand. He then turned to me. “My humble apologies on behalf of the city, my lord. Had I known of your arrival I would have prepared a suitable welcome.” Then leaning in closer to shake my hand he also whispered. “I also might have requested you bring a new scribe with you from your city.”

“No harm done.” I told him. “The old man must have much to write in his day-to-day.” Despite my recently cemented contempt for the mortal races, my mortal self was still speaking to me at times, and it became particularly strong when I saw the suffering of a fellow scribe. Taking his side was not characteristic of a noble, but in this case my empathy won over my desire to keep up appearances.

“You hear that?” The official said to the scribe again. “Be thankful that you are dealing with one so forgiving! It’s better than you deserve.” Then to me again. “We need only then confirm your noble status and that you possess the deed to the property, and you may then take ownership of your new home, my lord.”

“Naturally.” I said, and handed him my counterfeit writings. The shaking scribe did only look them over, and nod to his master, not daring to say anything else out loud. Soon after the guards removed the chains and sign from the door, and I was handed the keys.

“Allow me to be the first to officially welcome you to the city, lord Har-Benen.”

We bowed at each other, and I proceeded to occupy my new home. Once I was inside and Reni and Hosep had unloaded the cart and brought all the chests inside, Sati emerged from the shadows and fell to her knees.

“You return. I am so pleased to be in your presence again!”

“Greetings, Sati.” I said reaching out hand to her, and pulling her up to her feet. “I trust you ran into no unfortunate complications?”

“None, my lord.” She said. “Your home was left untouched. Though I did pray for the occasional prowler, so that I may sate this hunger.”

“I understand my dear.” I said caressing her cheek. “The time has come to for me to show you the way to properly feed on mortals. I feel like a midnight stroll anyway.” I then turned to my other progeny. “Reni, go forth into the streets and see if there are any carpenters still working at this time, and commission some furnishings from them. The essentials for now, beds, tables, chairs, cupboards, and the like. Take what coin you require. Hosep, I want you to return to the palace and keep watch over it, especially my library. I have plans to make some reconstruction efforts, expect to hear from me soon. Hunt for blood in the local villages if you feel the hunger, but never forget your duty. For now, I desire to take a walk through the night streets with my new home-guard.”

They both bowed to me. “By your will, master.”

I consider my entrance into the Mar-Ak-Khot noble circle the end to my fledgling faze. No longer was I creeping in ruins and wilderness, hiding from the sun in the cellars and holes and feeding from villagers and vagrants. Within a short period of time I was engaged with a wide circle of noble men, influencing city affairs and earning the admiration of the masses, and feeding the blood of well bread men and women of the highest birth.

Early on, following the news of my arrival I was invited to balls and to converse with other wealthy families eager to make my acquaintance. My refusal to leave the house during

the day drew some curiosity, I explained to my guests that I was stricken with an ailment that made the light of the sun hurt my eyes. For the most part this excuse was accepted by my new peers, even though I did have to compel a local healer to confirm my alibi. Soon enough I transformed the house I “bought” into a place worthy of bringing guest, which I did even during the day, though I kept the windows shut and the interior lit with candles and torches. I placed Sati in charge of the house and its safety, a move many objected against, since she was a woman. I never held the belief that women were less capable than men, but even if I had, she was a woman no more. She was a Vampyre. So, I mostly just ignored their ignorant comments or quickly pointed out their own failings to bring them down to earth. I also hired mortal servants to attend to house’s needs: cleaning, repairs, maintenance, and so on. I attended balls after sundown, conversed with the nobles of the city, and quickly became familiar with the major figures of Mar-Ak-Khot politics. My new favorite sustenance were high-born women. I would engage in casual conversation with the wives of nobles at balls and as a guest in their homes, allowed myself to engage in casual flirtation, and when I had an opportune moment, compelled them to present themselves to me. I left them with memories of pleasant trysts behind their husbands backs, and left myself with the exquisite taste of the blood of a woman who was raised on plentiful, wealthy meals and in good health.

Over the years I kept in contact with architects and builders to make improvements to the house. I commissioned sculptors to provide decorative elements, painters and other artists also contributed their work. I enjoyed works of art, and gladly paid mortal artists to continue pursuing their craft. I employed a stonemason of a somewhat more shady reputation to help reconstruct the cellar. I had the entrance hidden with a door made of stone. He initially installed a pulley system to open the door, which was of considerable weight, but I removed it myself later, since I more had more than enough strength to open it on my own, and other mortals would not. After I managed to get a sense of his character, and became convinced that I could trust him to see his own interest in keeping my identity a secret, I shared the truth about me with him, started to discuss my ideas for the cursed palace. Over half a decade we plotted to have shipments of sandstone and marble moved to the site, and he hired groups of dispensable workers to do the actual work, namely having all the windows removed and sealed with stone. Hosep oversaw the work effort. He guarded my library with zealous discipline and removed any threats to my secret. I regularly visited the palace to inspect the progress being made and to rest, as I could still not relieve my weariness at any other location.

I continued to expand my library, adding new scrolls with knowledge I had gained almost every single day. I would write for hours on end, sometimes for several days straight. I also spent time reading the scrolls in the library I had not dared before. Though they were mostly inconsequential details of the lives of Uhtman and his predecessors, I did occasionally find bits of knowledge I managed to turn to my use. I also selected the first of my servants to be taught how to read and write. For the years that he had served me, Hosep had proven to be most reliable, and as the guardian of my palace he was closest to the library in my absence. He could make the most use out of the knowledge. Unfortunately, I ran into a number of problems when educating him. He was bright and diligent, obeyed my instructions to a fault, yet he was held back from achieving mastery over the art. He could recreate symbols and read sentences well enough, but even after 15 years of practice he could still not form coherent texts without my guidance. I was forced to discover that the full control my will had over his was the cause of this, his inability to separate himself from my desires made him incapable of reaching his full potential. I had no solution to this quandary at the time.

Complications with my identity as Har-Benen would not start to arise until slightly more than twenty years after his inception, when his lack of aging became very apparent. A new approach to this would become needed, but there were events before that time had come which are far enough from the mundane events to be of note.

For one thing, I made the choice of embracing two additional servants. Members of the city guard were obligated to maintain watch of the noble residences and I had hired personal guards to take care of my home during the day, not to mention Sati on the inside. I had come to the conclusion though that it would serve my advantage to have some immortal guards at my side as well when I traveled places. Trusting my security to mortals had too many risks, even if I did compel them into my service. For this purpose, I selected a pair of northern mercenaries, one man and one woman. They had traveled to the south from the Arberish lands in search of a legendary artifact belonging to one of their long dead heroes. These plans would be abandoned after a visit to my home.

Sati greeted them at my doorstep after sundown.

“Evenin’!” The man said. “We’ve come at the behest of the lord Arbenin’. Said he wished to discuss a job. Said he would pay well.”

Sati looked the two over with a look of disgust. She had been embraced, but she was still a woman of Mar-Ak-Khot by origin, and the unwashed, unkempt and odious presence of

the Arberish guests did not please her. “The lord *Har-Benen* has been expecting you.” She made sure to clearly enunciate my name in the proper Sun Kingdom dialect. “You may await him in the salon.” She then escorted them into my home and left them by the fireplace.

I observed them from the shadows as they looked around at the wealth I had on display in the house. The woman, a tall one with braided red locks made a move to examine a case with dancing maidens depicted on the side. I chose this moment to make my appearance. Without making a sound I walked up behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“The mid-summer festival of Khakesh.” I said loudly. The woman spun around startled, as did the man from the other side of the room. I enjoyed playing with my prey like this. The looks and feelings of fright my talents brought out in others served to please the beast and make me feel all the more powerful. “The maidens of the Temple of Isis gather on the main square to perform a fantastic ceremony. Went and watched them every chance I had as a child.” This was not actually a lie. One of the few moments of solace I was allowed from my training in Khakesh was to leave to watch the festival.

“Ah...Lord...” The woman was still breathing heavily, but slowly moved her hand away from her sword-belt. “My lord, you startled me.”

“Good to see you again, Olwyna.” I said admiring the tattoos on her neck. She was rugged and rough, unlike women of our parts, but I found myself strangely drawn to her for it. I adored most women, but few more than the women of ancient Arberon and Kelmer empires. “And you, Derec.” I then turned to the man, who still had his hand firmly on his sword. “Careful with that. I might get the wrong idea.”

Derec gave me a murderous glance, but even he slowly eased off his weapon. “Apologies, Lord. Gave us a start, is all. Didn’t see or hear you enter.”

“That is because I was already here.” I made my way to the chair by the fire. “I take it you found my offer to your liking after all?”

“That we do.” Derec said as he and Olwyna moved to stand side by side. “Potentially. But we wish to pose some questions afore we accept.”

“I would be more than happy to satisfy your curiosity.” I said as I took a seat.

“All your woman told us was that you would pay us more handsomely than we could imagine. That sounds nice and all, but we’ve heard it often enough from your kind. So, we want to hear the metals and the numbers.”

I smiled at them. “I can promise you this: You will have everything you desire. If that is coins of any metal and in any quantity then that is what it will be. If it is treasure, excitement, women, men or anything under the moon, you shall have them all. But in my experience, anyone who comes into my service eventually wants only that: to serve me. And that I shall provide.”

The two looked at each other confused. Olwyna was the first to speak. “So, your sayin’ we get to name our own price?”

“If that is how you prefer to hear what I said, then yes.”

They looked at each other again, and nodded. Derec spoke next: “The woman told us you needed fighters to protect your person. How long would this be for.”

“A long time, master Derec. I need permanent bodyguards. The position I seek people for is a lifetime long, and I intend to live a long time.”

“Oh.” Olwyna spoke up. “That simply won’t do. We have nothing against helping out for a time, and there is no foe we fear to stand afore, but we have business of our own to attend to.”

“Ah yes, this business with your kings ancient crown.” I said, then in response to the looks on their faces I continued. “My servant had been looking into you for me since you showed up at the city gates. You were sharing tales at the inn you stay at.”

“We never spoke of no crown.” Derec said.

“Amlodd the Wild was the only Arberish warrior king to ever advance this far south. I am well familiar with his legend, and you might be interested to hear that my people’s records tell a very different tale of his fall on the battle field than the legends your bards sing.”

“Well... if you know of him then you could help us uncover his resting place and the location of his belongings.”

“As you already said: you name your price, master Derec. If knowledge is the coin in which you wish to be paid, I can tell you things you will find no place else. But I’m confident that before you know it you will lose all interest in this legend.”

What I told them clearly cause offence, but they refrained from insulting me in my home.

“All the same...” said Olwyna “we cannot stay till the Morrigan claims you. If life-long bodyguards are what you seek, we are not the ones for you, we fear.”

“Oh, but you are.” I said. “You’ve already accepted.”

“Listen here. I don’t know what game you are playing at, your lordship, but...”

“You became mine the moment you crossed my threshold.” I cut him off.

“Derec.” Olwyna said. “This wrecks. I think it’s time we left.”

“I agree.” He said to her, then turned to me. “You’ll have to find someone else.”

“Interesting.” I said as they started to walk away. “Did I give you the impression you had a say in the matter?”

They both turned to face me with alarmed looks on their faces. I rose to my feet, waved my hand, and with a simple magical cantrip extinguished all the torches and candles in the room as well as the fire in the hearth. Unable to see the two drew their weapons and stood at the ready calling out in their native tongue: “Sorcerer! Beware!” I, naturally, saw perfectly fine in the dark, and since I could move without them hearing, it was no challenge at all to overpower Derec and sink my fangs into his neck. He cried out and tried to struggle but it did not matter.

“Derec! What is going on?” Olwyna shouted in his direction.

With a wave of my hand the flames were lit again, and Olwyna was greeted by the sight of me letting her friend’s corpse fall to the floor with a massive bite on his neck and his blood dripping from my chin. I grinned and growled as the lion does, then wiped my face with the back of my hand. She was shocked, but her sword remained in her hand and pointed at me.

“What in hell’s name are you?” She said, barely able to mask the terror she was feeling.

I looked deep into her eyes. “Lower the sword!” I commanded her. I felt the compulsion channel through my gaze. Slowly her shaking hands calmed down and fear subsided. She was about to lower her sword when I felt something I had not felt before; with a surge of her will she shook off my influence and steadied her sword hand. I stood there astounded.

“Impressive.” I said. “No one has ever resisted my will before.”

“Answer me, devil! What are you?”

“You I simply must have!”

“Fell me if you must, strike me down, but an Arberish sword-woman belongs to none!”

I let subside the rage of the beast, and straightened out my posture. “I think I might be able to convince you otherwise.” I said and sat back down in my chair. “My name is Amenrahersef. To most people in this city that name means nothing. They know me better as the demon who murdered king Uhtman, Child of the Sun.”

Not letting her sword rest for an instant, she followed me with her stance. “Aye, I’ve heard of that. That was you? And you live among these people, in this city?”

“The product of years of work.” I said. “I have transcended death, and I now offer this to you as well.”

“Like you offered it to Derec?” She said.

“Derec already belongs to me. When next the sun goes down, he will rise as one of my loyal servants. He will be stronger and more efficient a hunter. He will live forever at my side.”

“If all you need do is kill me, then what was the point of all this talk?” She said, and her voice began to quiver. “What is the point of what you are doing now?”

“Make no mistake, Olwyna: you will not leave this place alive. Before the night is over you will belong to me. Your transformation, however, it can be a moment of immense pain like it was for Derec, or a sensation of great pleasure, as it was for my dear Sati. I do so prefer it when they give themselves up to me willingly.”

“Well...” a note of resignation came into her words. “You shall get no such pleasure from me. If you want me for your slave, you shall have to fight for it.”

“So be it then.” I smiled. I leapt from my chair at her, not fearing her sword. I let it pierce me as I dived for her neck, knowing that it could never kill me. I came face to face with her as my blood flowed onto her hand gripping the sword, and hissed at her through my smiling teeth. I bit her on the neck and drank her dry, then let her join her friend on my floor.

“Sati, my dear.” I said to my servant as I passed her in the hall. “Be so kind as to carry our guests into the cellar. And if you would please procure a pair of fresh mortals for them to feast on when they awake.” I didn’t even wait for her to respond, knowing she would obey me

regardless. True to my experience, the next nightfall they arose as Reni and the others did. The only thing they desired in all the world was to serve me and keep me safe.

I also devoted much time to the procurement of new knowledge. I had travelers carry the word far and wide that Har-Benen in the city of Mar-Ak-Khot would welcome any folks who've seen the far regions of the north or beyond so that I may hear their tales and learn of the world. As it would happen many travelers would show themselves in taverns across the city. Reni was under constant orders to listen for such people and suggest visiting us in our home. There, while enjoying fine meals prepared by mortal servants I employed in small number, I would engage in conversation with them, memorize their stories, then later during the day I would retreat to a secret room I had constructed to put them down in writing while the memories were still fresh. I had to keep these activities of mine secret, as if the local nobility were to discover my talent for writing it would only draw questions to which I may not have been able to concoct convincing enough lies. Also, I would use my talents for compulsion to make sure these adventurers were not just taking advantage of my hospitality and inventing wild tales in the hopes of fooling me into thinking they had visited faraway places. I caught quite a few rascals who thought they could pull off such a con. While the truthful ones left with full bellies and a fair bit of coin, the liars themselves became supper. Whenever I would return to my palace to rest, I would also carry with me the new scrolls I had written up with my new found knowledge. Hosep would help me organize them, thus my library continued to grow, this time with actual relevant knowledge.

One further specific area of knowledge I wished to master myself, however, was the art of magic. Not the magic practiced by the priests, the allowance they received from their divine masters for their blind service. No, the power I wanted to master was that of the arcane. Through the simple magic scrolls I collected when I was alive, I had managed to perform a small set of simple spells, which I had committed to memory. But in the tales told by the Arberish folk there were wizards who could set entire armies aflame with a wave of their hands, who could summon creatures from other planes to do their bidding, disguise themselves as others or become invisible all together, and even to raise and control the dead. From what little I knew about the arcane arts it was clear that blind, random experimentation would take an eternity to produce the slightest results, and even I was not that patient. Such skills would require a master from whom I could learn.

Arcane spellcasters are fairly common these days, in the sense that one can be confident that every major settlement will have at least one practicing mage or sorcerer within its walls. In those days though, at least as far as the Sun Kingdom was concerned, they were practically non-existent. Any man who could wield spells received that power from a deity, and ever since I had been posed the question by the goddess Sekhmet it had become clear to me that I did not want to borrow power from an otherworldly patron. Besides, as I would find out decades later, joining her “eternal hunt” had not exactly put me on good terms with most of the gods of the world, her father in particular. To draw on the powers of the Arcane would require the teachings of someone who had already done it, and they were in short supply. They tended to stick to realms far away, for in the lands in which I lived practice of magics not of godly origin was frequently looked down on in better cases, outright punished in worse ones. It took me many years of vigilance, coin placed in the right palms and the nurturing of underworld contacts to finally find an individual who could serve me in this endeavor.

He was called Sethos, a man in his early 40s. My contacts in the city’s criminal underworld delivered word to me about how he was apparently performing necromantic experiments in secret, while using knowledge of alchemy to create concoctions he sold to support himself. His neighbors saw him as a strange recluse, only rarely leaving his home and seemingly never working a trade. Reni reported to me that the man did have large sacks of unidentified goods shipped to his home in the late hours when most were asleep. After having gathered enough information on him I chose to send him an invitation to visit me. I had Reni deliver him a promise of patronage, along with hints that the person whose message she carried knew what sort of activities he was engaged in. His initial reluctance was to be expected, but when I finally chose to pay a visit to his place myself, and observe with my own eyes that one of the things he was having brought to his house were fresh corpses, I was able to change his attitude quite fast.

Sati answered a knock on the door.

“Excuse me. Is this the residence of Har-Benen?”

“Indeed.” Sati answered in her usual elegant manner. “Sethos, I presume? The master has been expecting you. Follow me please.”

I did not make a show for the man as I did for the Arberish pair. He was not prey to be played with. I simply awaited him in my armchair by the fire. Sati showed him into my parlor. He was modestly but tastefully dressed, and his short hair and full beard were well kempt. His

hair and eyes were dark and his face had one of those looks like he was always tired. He was carrying with him only a single black leather bag.

“Good evening.” I greeted him.

“I take it you are the one I came to see?” He said, shifting around a bit uncomfortably.

“Please, master Sethos, there is no need to be at unease.” I smiled, and gestured towards a seat.

“I quite disagree, my lord.” He responded. He was quite reluctant to look me in the eye, but took his seat all the same. “I receive multiple invitations in your name from the most unsettling beauty, who claims to be in your service. The latest of which coming with a literal hand having gone missing from my stash. Next thing I know I’m visiting a noble, whose home has all its windows sealed, well after sunset. I do believe I have every need to be at unease.”

This brought a smile to my face. “Are you implying you do not trust a man of noble birth to take care of his guests?”

“Not to cause offence, my lord, but if my information is good, you have likely *taken care of* quite a few guests in this house.” I allowed a small sign of surprise to show at this insinuation. “I hope you don’t mind that I did some research before accepting your invitation. People have died in this house while you have been living here. There is no need to hide it from me. Death has an... aura. It leaves more than just an unpleasant smell in the air. To those with the proper senses it radiates and lingers. Your servant lady was surrounded by it, this house is full of it, and you, my good lord, are positively swimming in it.”

I leaned back in my chair and touched the tips of my fingers together. After giving him a few seconds of a death stare, I smiled widely, hoping he would notice my canines. “Well what can I say? Death and I have a very intimate relationship.”

“You’ve surely deduced, my lord, I have no intention of reporting anyone for anything. Whatever goes on in this house is none of my business. I am a man with skeletons in his own closet after all.”

Sati arrived from the kitchen carrying a tray with food. It had been so long since I had eaten mortal food, that I was not even sure what she was carrying. Though I once did it myself, and found great pleasure in it, in undeath I could simply not understand how mortals could

stand eating things that were so dead. Sethos looked at the food laid before him then looked to me expectantly.

“I have already dined.” I told him. “But fear not. There is nothing poisonous cooked into that meal. It was prepared with care.”

“Perhaps my hunger will come if this conversation succeeds in alleviating my concerns.” he said ignoring the food for now. “Tell me, what can a humble alchemist do for the prestigious lord Har-Benen?”

“Alchemist? Is that what we are going with?” I said with a sly grin.

“It is my primary source of income, after all.”

“But not your primary source of purpose, correct?”

“Are you going to answer my question, my lord, or do you prefer playing riddles?”

“Ha.” I chuckled. “Mortals... so eager to hurry to the point.”

“Mortals?” He crossed his arms. “There is a word I have not yet heard the nobility use to label the common folk.”

“Trust me, master Sethos, I am being quite literal. If you insist on skipping the pleasantries, then so be it. It is my understanding that you possess the skill to manipulate arcane powers. I wish to learn this.”

Sethos squirmed in his seat and gave me a quizzical look. “I see.” He looked down at the floor pondering a bit. “Assuming I really do have the skill you accuse me of having, do you understand what you are asking of me?”

“I do.” I told him. “If there is one thing I understand, it is the true value of knowledge, especially knowledge few others possess. You can expect that the compensation I have planned for you will be equally great in value.”

“I’m afraid it is not that simple, my lord. Arcane spells, I’m told, are complex and nearly impossible to master through memory. They need be written down on parchment so as to be at the ready all the time.”

I smiled again. I had a set of parchment and ink set aside in the far corner of the room for the theatre I had planned for him. Using the Hand of the Mage I summoned the sheet onto the table before me, and had the ink float casually at my side. I used the pointy tip of the claw

on my index-finger to write the following onto the parchment: “My aptitude is not in question.” Then I had the inkbottle returned to its place, and the paper float over to him. He took it out of the air.

“Hand of the Mage.” he said. “Very interesting.” He then proceeded to scan the symbols on the parchment, which I imagine was a harder task for him with the dim light from the torches and candles. When finished he looked at me, held the sheet in his hand, and without breaking eye contact summoned a flame around his fingertips which engulfed the dry parchment in seconds, leaving a small collection on ashes to drift to the floor. He then finally let out a smile himself, and reached out to break a leg off of the turkey on the table. “Very well. Let’s talk.”

“My proposition is this: I desire to learn the secrets of the arcane, all that you are able to teach me.”

“And the compensation you mentioned? You seem very convinced you have something of equal value to me. If you are hoping coin can...”

“Please...” I waved a hand in the air. “Give me some credit. What I have to offer you is hard to put into words. Let me provide you some insight.” I reached out to him with my hand. “Will you feel me?”

Taking a few seconds to finish chewing his food, he hesitantly reached out to touch my hand. When his finger came into contact with mine his eyes first widened in surprise.

“You... you are cold to the touch!” he exclaimed, then got out of his chair to kneel before me and continue to feel my hand and the rest of my arm. “There is blood in your veins, but it does not flow.” He then put a hand on my chest, ignoring any and all form of proper manners, completely taken over by his fascination. When he felt that I had no heartbeat and that my chest did not draw breath, he sat back down in his chair, his eyes and his mouth open wide. “I’ve never seen such a thing. Completely seamless! The outward signs of black magic are all but invisible. No wonder your aura of death is so potent. You ARE dead!”

“I beg to differ.” I responded. “I did die, mind you, but here I am.”

“Who was the sorcerer to accomplish such a feat? How is this possible?”

“And now, master Sethos, you understand the value of what I offer in return.” I reached out a hand to him once again. “What say you then? Shall we begin this partnership?”

With a smile on his face and a nod he gave me a firm shake of the hand.

Sethos was my first teacher of magic, and I learned quite a fair amount from him. He was the one who first introduced me to the concept of the book. Common enough practice today, but I remember being fascinated by the techniques he was familiar with used to bind parchment together into a tome. It was a far simpler way to manage the spells I learned in written form than simply carrying them in folder or individual scrolls. Crafting of the materials needed did not come cheap, but coin was never an issue for me. Over the years I spent studying and practicing with Sethos I ended up with quite a large collection of spells, focusing mostly on the school of conjuration, tempting as it was to pursue the arts of necromancy as he did. We spent almost 40 years together as teach-master and student. Though my friend was not always in the city to be of service to me, he would always return and work together with me before long. In return for his service I gradually let him in on the secret truths of my existence. During the decades I spent in Mar-Ak-Khot, though there were a select few who knew my true nature, nobody knew as much about my past as he did. My condition fascinated him. Every chance I gave him to study some aspect of my body or my abilities he reveled in. He observed me as I fed on the blood of my victims, studied the effects of my compulsion on its targets, took note of my strength and speed, my ability to hide in the shadows, and my heightened senses. He would travel back with me to the cursed palace and observe the state my body entered when I went to sleep. He eagerly watched and compared all these to the same effects on my spawn. I allowed him to witness the few occasions when I chose to create more progeny, and he also managed to convince me to permit him to study samples of my own blood, something I felt most weary of. At one point he asked me to allow him to experience what it was like to be fed from, both from myself and one of my spawn. Another request I was reluctant to grant, worried that if something went wrong, he might end up dead, or that he might be trying to trick me into granting him immortality as my slave. He assured me that he had no such desires, but none the less I remained skeptical. He was far more valuable to me with his critical thinking intact.

I admired the rational, empirical approach Sethos had to me as a subject. His experiments and ideas ended up teaching me many things about myself I had not yet known. Limitations and weaknesses I was unaware of, herbs and remedies that could protect mortals from my gaze, and also one truly remarkable discovery: the power of my blood. Sethos had experimented with what little amounts of my blood I provided him, and determined a few interesting things. Apparently, my blood had regenerative properties like I did myself, and when consumed in small amounts it healed otherwise critical wounds. But the subjects that he tested out his theories on started to exhibit signs of turning; irritation from sunlight, lack of hunger for

mortal sustenance, pale skin and the like. He would always end up decapitating them to prevent them from turning completely. For if his hypothesis was right based on the experiments performed with my blood, they were not turning into spawn, but actual fledgling Vampyre. After that discovery I became very cautious as to how much blood I would provide him.

Finally, there was one further event that though seemed fairly ordinary, I will still recount here, for it had consequences that would lead to a major development in my evolution as a Vampyre. I committed many things my mortal self would have look upon as atrocities. I lied, I manipulated, I killed and I stole, not just things, but people to, and I don't mean in a kidnaping sense. And despite what you might be thinking, I regret very little. The mortal attitude to the taking of life is dual by nature: it is shunned by every major religion and philosophy in the world, and yet actively practiced by them at the same time. It has been my observation that mortals spend a majority of their existence on this plane convincing themselves of things that are not real, such as the fact that entropy, feeding on life is the most basic aspect of nature. If there is one thing I regret from this period, it is that I allowed myself to become complacent. I grew powerful, very much so. Enough that I became accustomed to getting anything and everything I desired. With the passing of time I allowed my lust and my desire to dictate my actions, headless to the results further down the road. And in my case a long-term consequence is something studied by historians.

People were just as much subjects of my desires as knowledge and things. In this I am no different from many mortals, however, I also possess the power to get what I want, what others only dream of. One subject of my desire was named Rashida. She was a noble's daughter, bespoken to the son of another family. At balls I would converse with her, listen to her speak of her dreams of seeing far away places. I would dance with her to the tune of the minstrels. And unbeknownst to her elders I would take her on walks under the night sky, and feed from her sweet blood.

I was careful as to how many mortals I turned. Every new spawn was one more hunter in the city, and too many could mean attention I would rather be without. In her case I simply did not want to resist. I wanted her for myself. So, I took her. I drained her in the temple graveyard and hid her corpse in a disused coffin. The family was distraught, and I was the most sympathetic towards them, eager to offer my condolences with the rest. But from the next night forward it was I who enjoyed her conversations and her kisses, and me alone.

## Old age

Har-Benen had been living in the city of Mar-Ak-Khot for over twenty years, but it did not show. For all intents and purposes, I still had the face and the appearance of a thirty summers old man, and people were starting to grow suspicious. Ever more as my usual circle of acquaintances started growing wrinkles and watched their children grow into adults, I would frequently receive kind compliments to the sound of “My lord, how fresh you look this fine day!” and “You are looking mighty fine for one of our age!” This hindered my ability to appear in public.

During my magical studies I learned how to create illusions to disguise myself for short periods of time, but these would not last me long and prevented me being able to perform certain things. I learned how to use powders and masks to make my face appear more aged, but this would require tedious preparation and constant consistence lest someone should see through the façade. From remembering what Reni looked like when I first found her in the palace, and from my discussions with Sethos, I had the idea of fasting on blood. After long periods of time, weeks or months without feeding, I found that the mass of my body began to shrink, my muscles would atrophy, my skin would turn leathery and my face would go gaunt. The effect was perfect, but it affected my mood in ways I hated to even think about. I was sour and spiteful all the time, incapable of even looking at a mortal as a living creature and just a sack of blood, and I felt constantly weak and sickly, just as I looked. In the end what all this resulted in was me reducing the time I spent in social gatherings and becoming more reclusive. People would start to talk behind my back, conjuring new fictions of the eerie old man and his nocturnal exploits. I heard everything from stories about how I was growing ill to how I was abandoning the social life to lay in bed all day with my slaves. To make matters worse I had taken no wife and had no children, which I had no intention to, but also made my absence from public life curious. As the years went by it started to look as though Har-Benen’s days would soon come to an end, and it would be time to seek out a new life in a different city as someone else.

I had begun to plan for this event, but ran in to numerous problems. My instinct told me not to move far away from the palace, yet there were no major cities besides Mar-Ak-Khot in the region. After four decades of the life style I had, I absolutely detested the idea of living in small towns or villages. I needed the rush provided by a populated hunting ground. I needed the rich blood of highborn nobles. I needed the easy access to ample resources to continue

gathering knowledge and learning magic. If Har-Benen was to disappear, I would not settle or the role of anyone lesser than he was.

But as plans tend to do, mine got diverted yet again by the ripples I left throughout the lives of others. In the last years of Har-Benen's life, one day news arrived to me that Sethos, who had lived to the ripe old age of 82, had collapsed on the market square on his way home, and was being cared for in his house. After the four decades we had spent in intellectual partnership, this news brought sadness to my dead heart, and I endeavored to pay him a visit. Having summoned my illusionary disguise, I left the house after sundown to travel to his part of the city. Derec and Olwyna, as always, were right at my side, though shortly after their embrace I elected to clothe them in more local attire. My knocks were answered by a young lady in white robes and yellow headdress. I recognized her to be a nurse healer from the Temple of Ra.

"Good evening." I said to her.

"Good evening, my lord." she replied in a shy tone. "How can I be of service?"

"My name is Har-Benen. I am a close friend of the master of this house, and I received word that he has fallen ill. Is the time acceptable for a short visit?"

"I suppose so." She said. "I had just finished preparing him for the night's sleep, but I see no harm. A friend is likely precisely what he needs right now."

It was refreshing not having to compel a mortal to permit me entrance. On her own, she opened the door wide and stood aside to let me inside. I waved at my guards to remain at the door and entered on my own.

"My lord..." The nurse said once she had closed the door. "I fear you will not like what I have to tell you. Master Sethos is already with one foot on the raft. After what happened to him today, he may not even live to see the next sunrise."

"I know." My response was instinctual, more of a thought that was uttered out loud by mistake.

"You...?"

"Sethos has lived well beyond the scope of most men. This last decade I watched his health go from bad to worse. The mortal body is not meant to go on for so long."

“I see. You are very correct, my lord. A friend to provide him comfort so close to the end would likely be most welcome. Your arrival at this time may be a blessing from the gods.”

I chuckled.

“What did I say to amuse you, my lord?”

“Nothing, miss. My arrival has... never been looked at as a blessing before.”

I walked up the steps to Sethos' bedchamber. There he lay in his bed, tucked in with thick covers, looking pale, and fragile, and old. Stopping on the threshold I turned to the nurse.

“Would you permit me some time in private with my friend?”

She bowed her head and walked back down the steps. When I heard her reach the bottom, I walked in and closed the door behind me. With heavy breathing and slow movement, the old grey head turned in my direction and smiled a nearly toothless smile.

“Well, look who it is!” He said wheezing.

I removed the illusion to reveal my true self, and walked closer to his bedside. “Good evening, my friend. Forgive me the disturbance, but I heard you had fallen in the street.”

“It was bound to happen eventually. I have been in bad shape for far too long now. I can barely see well enough to read, my hands shake too furiously to handle my tools, and without my ability to do my research life is utterly pointless. I've been living in pointlessness for so many years now. This feels almost welcome.”

He smiled when he saw the fake confusion on my face, then continued:

“Oh, come now! Do you think I, the man who dedicated his life to the study of black magic, would not sense the approach of death when it is near? I'm in my last few hours, Amenra. Do you think it is a fate that brings you to *my* doorstep for a change? What I learned to sense about death you feel like you were born to.”

“You are not wrong.” I pulled up a chair to sit at his side. “Even as I sit here, the life departing from your body is almost potent enough to leave a scent. You have little left in you I fear.”

He turned his head to the side with a melancholic smile.

“Such a pity. So much left to learn. Questions left unanswered. Ah, the confines of the mortal...” That last bit he said looking back at me, as though he was trying to say something amusing. “And here you are, looking not a minute older than the first day I walked into your house. My entire life passed away right before your eyes, and yet it all must seem little more than a moment to you. Heh... Now you know how an elf must feel!”

He let out a hearty laugh, that ended in him coughing aggressively for a few seconds. I tried to smile, the jest was legitimately amusing, but given what I came to tell him, my thoughts were elsewhere.

“I have something I would like to tell you, my friend.” I said leaning forward. He turned his head towards me and raised his eyebrows with what looked like exaggerated curiosity. I continued: “From the moment I offered to you this partnership I had been contemplating how it would end. To be honest I expected you would eventually betray me and try to steal my secrets. But you have been nothing but the most trustworthy of companions to me in this new horrifying path I am on. You are an exceptional specimen of the mortal race, and you have my utmost gratitude.”

“Oh, hush!” he said, gently reaching out to pat my hand. “We are all selfish creatures at heart and I am no exception. I learned so much about the nature of death and undeath from what I saw of you, I received my fair payment several times over. I would never have betrayed you to anyone, and lose all those precious secrets to someone else.”

“I have no doubt.” I laughed. “Nevertheless, I had many trying times these last few decades and having a person I knew I could rely on was a true gift. You spent a lifetime helping me, and I would now return the gesture. I have one last thing to offer you. One final experiment.”

Put out my hand over his chest with the palm facing upward. He took it in both of his and looked first at it then at me curiously. I then made a fist and squeezed hard, sinking the claws into my palm and piercing the skin, as deeply as I could. When I opened my palm again there was a deep wound in the middle with a small pool of blood trickling out at slow and calm.

“Sekhmet let me drink of her blood, and if you want it, you may now drink of mine. If what you believe is correct, you will rise again after death stronger, and have an eternity to continue your work.”

He looked at me with wide eyes in disbelief. Moving his gaze back at the wound he slowly licked his lips then swallowed. I gently moved my hand closer to him to eb him on. Sethos closed his eyes, let out a deep sigh, then with all his remaining strength pushed my hand away. I was not alarmed, in his condition he posed no threat to me, but the suddenness of his action caught me off guard.

“Get that away from me!” he snapped. “Hah! Could you imagine? I dedicated my whole life to understanding death. It has been my one and only passion since I first learned how to read. And in my dying weakness, you would tempt me away from experiencing it myself? The one and only chance I will ever get, and you would gift me immortality to keep me stuck here, always wondering, never knowing...?”

This was the first time in half a century I felt flustered. “I... Forgive me, my friend. I had not considered this offer in the context of your life’s work.” I relaxed the wounded hand as the cut knit back together and sealed itself.

“Bah...” He said, still frustrated. “Me! An immortal! Never to know death. Pff.”

“It’s alright.” I said. “The wound is healed. The blood is back where it belongs. No need to work yourself up over it.”

“Well... I’d say you’ll understand when you are this old and cranky, but it would seem you won’t now, will you?”

I laughed. “No, I don’t think I will.”

“You will live forever.”

“Indeed, I intend to.” Then the smile faded. “But without this gift, I now have nothing else of value to give you in return.”

“That, my friend, my not be so. There is one thing you could do for me.”

“You need but name it.” I told him.

“I don’t know if you are even capable of this, it is very much a human thing, but...” he let out a long sigh. “What I could use right now is some compassion. As exciting as this next big step is, it is still the greatest unknown in the world and I might be a little...”

“Nervous?” I said, when he failed to finish the sentence on his own.

“I’m fucking terrified, Amenra.” he said, and though he was smiling, I knew it to be an understatement. “We all must make this journey alone, but it would help me a great deal if you were to see me to the gate at least. Is that something you can do? Do you have enough humanity in you for this task?”

I smiled at him, then stood up from my chair, gently bent over him and kissed him on the lips. I then sat back down with my hand holding his. “For you, my friend, I will pretend to.”

Sethos passed away peacefully in his bed not three and a quarter hours later. He had fallen asleep and his heart stopped beating. Once he had become simply a corpse, I paid my final respects, covered his head with the sheets of the bed, and left the home of my late one true friend. After I took a nice deep drink from the nurse, of course.

### Leaving the shadows

The five last days of my life I was in the greatest hurry to get as much done in the little time I had left as I possibly could. In fifty years of undeath I had practically forgotten the feeling of urgency. Time I now had in abundance, and I spent it all in careful contemplation. But despite this I still lived in the mortal world and found myself surrounded by their kind. Thus, the rhythm of the humans was often forced upon me whether I wished it or not. I had spent a great deal of time plotting my next step after Har-Benen, only to have a course of action forced on me thanks to a long reaching effect of an act I took in the past.

I was in the middle of binding a tome filled with Kelmer legends, when I was first startled by sounds of banging from the lower floors, then Derec barging in.

“My master!” He called. “There is a disturbance below!”

Calmly I closed the bound tome and placed it on top of a stack of five others. “What sort of disturbance?”

“A mob, master! Folks from the city have gathered and are trying to break in! They’ve killed the city guards protecting the entrance!”

“What in the…” I rose from my chair and strode past Derec, who followed in my steps. Olwynya had been standing just outside the door and followed on my other side. On the ground floor I now heard the cause of the commotion: sounds of some blunt instrument crashing against

the entryway door, and people shouting. Sati, and Reni had also gathered below. As I arrived, they turned to me:

“Master!” Sati said. “There is unrest in the street. Several guards have been killed, and now they come for this house.”

“What do they want? Have they said anything?” I asked.

“An incoherent jumble of shouts and cries. We heard a few cries of ‘monster’ and ‘murderer’.”

“Hmm...” I pondered for a second. The crashes on the door kept coming, I could see it start to crack. “Well then...do not trouble yourself, Sati. I will answer the door, see who is knocking at this late hour.”

Clearly confused, but not daring to question me, my servants cleared me a path, and I went to open the door. I first applied my old man’s illusion, then I placed my hand on the latch, and waited for the next hit to come. When it shook the door, I undid the lock and pulled the door open at the exact moment the next hit was meant to make contact. A large, burly man with a simple linen tunic was carried by the weight of his swing and stumbled through the door, falling on his hands and knees to the floor. I looked down at him then to the crowd before my door that had suddenly gone silent. “Good evening.” I said as threateningly as I could.

They were about twenty men, all simply clothed and armed with what looked like craftsmen’s tools, cooking implements and other common improvised weapons. A single man in the front stood out. His clothes were finer, his skin better cared for, and his right hand held the grip of soldier’s short sword.

“Har-Benen! The time has come to pay for your crimes, murderer!” He called out to me.

“Crimes?” I said calmly and pointed to the clearly visible corpses of two city guards. “You might have wanted to speak to them about that.”

“You can’t hide behind the nobility’s protection any longer! Your corrupt friends cannot save you from us!” The man’s shouts were followed by cheers from the crowd.

“And just who might you be to make such accusations?”

“Do not play the fool, monster! You know who I am and what you’ve done.”

“You are right, I do know exactly everything I have done, but I honestly have not the slightest idea who you might be.”

This was followed up by angry shouts at me from the mob.

“Oh, so is that all then?” The leader pointed his sword at my face. “You stalk my love, the woman I was destined to marry, steal her innocence, then murder her and take her body for your own sick perverted games, and expect me to believe you don’t even remember my name? Or are your crimes truly so many that you can no longer distinguish on from another?”

“Good sir, rather than ramble on about these insane ravings, perhaps you would be better served giving me a name?” I was trying my best to remain calm, but the crowd seemed to be getting agitated.

“Very well. Know then the name of the one to deliver you to Anubis. I am Heri, son of...”

“Son of Amenneht. Yes, I remember now. Forgive me for not recognizing you, but the last time I saw you was almost twenty years ago. You have grown, your features have matured. I also now know the woman of which you speak. She was Rashida, daughter of Pai-Netem. I remember her well; she was a delightful young lady filled with aspiration and wanderlust. I was very sorry to hear what happened to her.”

“You lie! Do not try to deny it! I saw you take her out that night to the temple! I saw you tear out her throat with your teeth and carry her body away! I spent twenty years planning for the day I could finally look you in the eye and put an end to your miserable existence!”

“Son, I do not know what you think you saw, but this has clearly gone too far. Send these fair folks back to their homes, and I we can calmly discuss this issue without any more people dying needlessly.”

“You will not delay your end with words today, monster. These fair folks are all here because they too have witnessed your attacks of people on the streets of Mar-Ak-Khot.” the crowd cheer at this. “If those meant to protect us will not rid the city of your curse, then we shall do it ourselves! Submit!”

I let out a long sigh and shook my head in disappointment. He was right: there was no way for me to calm the situation with words. The boy was a fanatic. No mistake, he was correct

in his accusation, but had he known what I was, he never would have come to my house after sunset. I spread out my arms and looked him in the eye.

“So be it.” I said. “Just make this quick then, will you?”

His mouth curled into a vengeful grin. “Absolutely not. I have been waiting far too long for this to make your death a quick one.”

He then lunged at me with his sword, which was initially aimed at my chest, but then after what he said he lowered it to my stomach height. The sword pierced my gut and went all the way through, to the joyful applause of the mob. But when he backed away and yanked the blade back out, no doubt expecting me to fall to the ground, instead what he saw was me; not the illusion, but the real me, with my young skin, strong body and dark hair, standing straight and looking him right in the eyes. The mob let out a collective gasp. Heri looked back down at his blade that was still covered with my blood, then back at me, and the red stain on my tunic.

I took a step closer and put my arms out again. “Care to try again?” I asked with a smug grin.

He took his sword in both hands and this time shoved it through my heart. Once again, I offered no resistance, as I knew there was nothing he could do to harm me. He started to draw breath faster as panic increased, and the crowd was getting uneasy. He stepped back again pulling his sword from my chest. The blood stained yet another spot on my tunic, but there I was, still unfazed.

I stepped even closer to him, and said: “How about one last attempt? Best make is count!”

He sneered at me and wrinkled his nose. His eyes went wide and he let out a loud cry as he once more stabbed at me with his sword right in the direction of my face. The blade entered just under my left cheek, and came out the back of my skull on the other side. There was a moment of intense pain, but following that all I felt was irritation as I could not move my jaw properly to let out a mocking laughter. This time I did not let him keep his blade. I grabbed his wrist and twisted it until he was on his knees and shouting in pain. To the absolute horror of the mob, I then removed the blade from my face with my free hand, dropped it to the ground, and looked Heri directly in the face as the scar sealed itself and vanished before his very eyes.

“My turn.” I said, and with but a single backhanded slap, Heri fell to my feet and lost consciousness.

The rest charged in. Wielding the weapons of a peasant uprising they came at me trying to succeed in numbers where their leader had failed alone. But I too had numbers behind me. Dashing out from the shadows of my house came first the Arberish pair, wielding their barbaric fury in battle for the first time since they had been in my service. And was it ever a sight to be hold! Following behind them came Reni and Sati, like two feral felines, rushing in to protect their master. Before long a skirmish broke out in the streets before my house. Twenty peasants had risen to fight me, thinking I was just some elderly noble who took pleasure in the murder of innocents. They were not prepared to take me on in my true form. Amidst Arberish swords and Vampyre's claws it was not long before the majority of the mob was either dead, dismembered or squirming on the ground in an ever-growing pool of blood. My servants feasted well that evening. Soon the brighter members of the mob started to break off and run for their lives. As they did, and I watched them leave, my servants followed my example and did not pursue them.

“Are you hurt, master?” Olwyna asked me sheathing her sword.

“They had not the means.” I responded. I looked around on the ground for a wounded but not yet dead peasant. Finding one, I quickly picked him up off the ground, and sank my fangs into his neck, replenishing the blood I had lost in the battle. The peasant fell limp, so before I returned him to the earth, I made sure to tear his head off to avoid him rising from the grave later. My servants took this as a sign that they too could sate their hunger, and started hunting for fresh blood from the pile. Sati, like a cat, climbed atop Heri, who was lying face down on the stairs to my front door. She turned him over and prepared to sink her teeth into him, but I called out at her first. “No, Sati, not him!”

Sati snapped her head at my direction, then hurriedly got up off of him.

“I'd like to save him for someone special.”

People on the streets, looking out from windows and several of the city guard had been witness to either the fight itself, or the aftermath. No one dared to approach us, but after the events of that night it was clear as could be, that Har-Benen would no longer be welcome in Mar-Ak-Khot. Once the feast had concluded I ordered my servants to load all the important items, books, scrolls, parchments and documents into bags and prepare to leave the city. Before the night was through, we had emptied the house off all but the furniture and mortal food

supplies. Under cover of night we fled the city and made our way back to the cursed palace with all the valuables we had stored at the house, as well as a special guest, who spent the trip to the castle in a deep slumber.

By then my palace had been completed to my specifications. Every single window had been walled up and filled with stone. Every doorway leading to the outside or to a terrace or a balcony was replaced with massive steel doors, making the interior of the palace a complete haven from the light of the sun. In addition, statues and works of art I had commissioned in the city had been moved here to replace missing ones and add to them as well. The new décor gave the Cursed Palace a truly macabre feel to it worthy of its name. Every new Vampyre spawn I had created over the decades I had sent here to serve under Hosesep's supervision, including one in particular, for whom I had something special planned.

Heri awoke to the feeling of manacles binding his hands together and chaining him to a wall. He did his best to rub the drowsiness from his eyes before looking around to examine his surroundings. He then saw me standing before him, screamed and jumped back.

“What in Ra's name?!” He shouted.

“Sekhmet, actually, if you insist on bringing the gods into this.” I said pacing slowly around him.

“Where am I? Why have you brought me here?”

“You are a clever highborn boy, I'm sure you can figure it out.”

“What... What in the hells are you?” He asked still gripping his chains in fear.

I bared my fangs at him just to watch him try to back further into the wall, then laughed at him, and spoke: “Proper introductions then. My name is Amenrahersef. You may know me as the risen demon that killed king Uhtman fifty years ago.”

“The...the demon? But then that means that this is... No... It can't be!”

“You are my guest in my true home: the place you know to be called the Cursed Palace.”

“Gods help me...” He mumbled beneath his breath.

“You stand a much better chance praying to me than them.” I said, and I changed my pacing direction to move right up to him. “And in that prayer, I recommend you start by giving me a good reason not to kill you.”

In a move that honestly surprised me with how quickly it came, Heri fell to his knees and crawled before me. “Please, my lord! Show mercy! I did not know who you were, or I would never have even thought of trying to kill you.”

“And what about your Rashida? Does she not even matter any longer?”

“I am not foolish enough to think I could take vengeance for her on someone like you. I thought this was an affair between mortals. Please, my lord, I did not know!”

“Enough! I am not convinced. After that scene you put on at my front door you succeeded in leading twenty odd people to their certain deaths, and caused me to reveal my true nature. I had to leave behind my life of 40 years because of your idiocy!”

“I...Please! I beg forgiveness!”

“Well, fortunately for you, I am willing to give you chance.” As I said this his eyes lit up with hope. “There is someone here I would like you to meet, someone I believe you have been longing to see for a long time.”

I motioned to the side and out from the shadows, dressed in flowing red silk, was Rashida. Heri blinked a few times to be sure he wasn't dreaming. She strode over to him, all the while the keys to his manacles dangling in her left hand.

“Rashida?” He exclaimed. “Is it really you? You... look just as I remember! I thought you were dead.”

Rashida did not say a word, just walked up to him and placed her arms around his neck in an embrace. She then smiled, and ran her tongue across the sharp fangs.

“Oh, Ra... What has he done to you?” He cried.

“Here is my offer.” I said from behind her. “All you need to do is convince your love to unlock your shackles, and the both of you shall be free to leave and live your lives however you see fit.”

He looked into her eyes, and pleaded. “Please, my love! You must do this! Set me free!”

Rashida bit into her lower lip and tilted her head, but made no move to free him.

“Please, my darling! I don’t know what he did to you, but you can fight it! I believe in you.”

I crossed my arms and chuckled softly at the scene.

“Rashida, please! He is going to kill me! You loved me once! Do not let this monster control you!”

“That will do.” I said. Rashida released the embrace, turned her back to him and walked over to my side, leaning her head against my shoulder, as I wrapped my arm around her waist. “I’m sure I have made my point.”

“What have you done to her?”

“A matter of perspective, I suppose. Enslaved her, liberated her, bewitched her, empowered her. Take your pick. Ultimately though, she answers to me now and nobody else.”

“What is the point of this cruel game? I am no danger to you, you made that much clear. I have lost everything. What purpose does it serve to torture me like this?”

“Torture? Oh no. The torture has not yet begun.”

Rashida then walked back up to Heri, and undid his manacles, but restrained him before he could try to escape.

“When I asked you to kill me quickly, you went for the gut. If you had your way, I would have been lying on my doorstep for hours bleeding out, is that not so? Well... Why don’t you see what that is like?”

Rashida bared her fangs, hissed and shoved several claws into his gut, as I had previously instructed her. Heri collapsed onto the floor in pain grasping at his wound. I looked up at Rashida.

“Have some fun, why don’t you. Don’t let it end too quickly. I have business to attend to. Notify me when you are done.”

As I walked away, I listened to the sounds of Heri’s painful cries get ever more quiet through the corridors of the Cursed Palace.

I spent the following few days in deep contemplation. Much had changed in the past few decades and even more in the most recent years. For better or worse my life was about to turn on its head. My existence was now out in the open, my latest appearance had far too many witnesses. Soon word would spread about the humanoid monsters who were attacked by a mob of townsfolk and responded by massacring them, mutilating the corpses and drinking their blood. There was also a possibility that a connection would be drawn between Har-Benen and the king-killing demon. I found myself facing a number of possible avenues to head down.

One possibility was to do what I did the first time: relocate myself to another city, concoct a new persona, forge documents, rebuild my connections and start the noble life all over again. My primary concern with this plan, as I mentioned before, was that there were no other cities of relevant size within such a practical distance from the palace as Mar-Ak-Khot. Fen-Ak-Hal was the nearest large city to my home, and even that would be a two-weeks walk away. Faster for myself, for certain, but still farther than I could travel in single night, and any place I could not reach before the next sunrise was too great a risk. All it would take is a single mishap and I could end up stuck outside in the sun.

Beyond the risks though, there were other questions that carried weight. Chief among these was the question of: Why? Why should I rejoin mortal society? At this point what did I have to gain? I needed to learn magic. But did I need to be a member of a noble social circle for that? Most arcane wizards were disconnected from these groups anyway, disliked for using power not gifted by a god. It is the approval of the wizard I needed to gain, what society thought of my associations was entirely irrelevant. As long as I had secrets and wealth to trade for magical knowledge, I could attract wizards to my company fairly easily. I needed to expand my library. Again, was society really necessary for that? If I could attract wizards with the right incentive then bards, travelers and adventurers would be no more difficult. I could still have agents watch the taverns in various cities and collect information for me, like a network of spies. I could easily gather more than enough material to fill several libraries using nothing but resources of my own. I needed food; mortals to feed on. So long as there are villages and the one larger city nearby, I should have plenty to hunt. Sure, I would miss out on most of the games of high society, but the people themselves would still be accessible to me. All I needed to do was knock on the door, or fly up to the balcony, look them in the eye and if I so desired, from that moment they would belong to me.

The more I thought about it, the more I came to realize nothing I needed, wanted or lusted after required an active presence in mortal social circles. The only real reason I was

locked in this dilemma was a pointless, unconscious attempt to preserve my mortal life as I wish it had been. But the cruel truth of the matter was that I would never be mortal again, and any attempt to cling that old form of existence was a just a hopeful lie I tell myself, serving no purpose except to hold me back from fully embracing the Vampyre. This thought took root and sprouted out over the few days I spent locked away in my palace with my Vampyre servants being the only company. I was fairly certain I had reached my decision, but it would require more competent, freely thinking allies.

I summoned my full court of Vampyre minions to the grand hall. I sat in the newly installed throne I had made for myself, and awaited the presence of all. When they had all assembled, I began my speech.

“Today I have come to the decision that Har-Benen of Khakesh and Mar-Ak-Khot will be permanently laid to rest. My days of living among the mortals masquerading as one of them are at an end. The obvious question now is: Where shall I go next, and Who shall take his place? I am here today to tell you that there shall be no other. There shall be no more attempts to blend in. The mortals chose that I should be revealed to the world. If that is what they want then that is what I shall give them. From this moment forward my permanent home shall be no other than this; The Cursed Palace. I shall be known as I am: Amenrahersef, the mortal scribe, slave to Uhtman turned trueborn master Vampyre. Let them all know, and let them fear me. Let them stand in the way of my ambitions at their own risk. Let them try to drive me from my home if they think they can. They will serve only to feed us and our immortal strength. No longer shall we hide in the shadows! We shall rule them!”

“All hail the master, Amenrahersef!” Reni shouted.

“All hail! Eternaly may he reign!” Came the shouting in chorus from Sati, Hosep, Derec, Olwyna, Rashida and all the others.

“From here forward let the Cursed Palace be known as the Court of Amenrahersef, and you all, my loyal servants, its members. You shall all receive your training, you will all have your duties, and I intend to grow your numbers significantly. Let the mortals learn their place as our food and cattle. Let them learn how hazardous it can be to try interfering in the business of the immortals. Let them learn they are beneath us. Let them learn to fear us. Let them learn to serve us!”

“All hail the master, Amenrahersef!” It was as if they knew what I wanted to hear, which was likely the case.

“But the one thing that is clear, is that I will need all of you at your best, and some of you even better. The time has come for me to no longer be the only Vampyre of pure blood. It is time for some of you to ascend to the next level.”

My followers were looking over each other in anticipation. I waited a few second for tension to build, then called out two names: “Hosep! Sati! Step forward!”

The two took several steps away from the others to stand closer to my throne, then both knelt in my presence. I stood up, and walked over to them. I placed a hand on both of their shoulders. “You two have been with me for the longest. I entrusted the both of you with the guarding of my homes and the things I treasure. You have both proven capable servants, but you both share the same weakness: Your unquestioning loyalty to me hinders your free thought, which in your case is holding both of you back from reaching your full potential. Today let us hope that is to come to an end.”

I removed my hands from their shoulders, and clenched my fists yet again, strong and firm. The wounds on my palms began to bleed again. Then I opened my hands, and presented them with the scars.

“Fifty years ago, Sekhmet granted me the gift of her immortal blood. The blood of a goddess. Today I grant you the gift of my own blood, so that it may give you the same power it gave me. Come and drink!”

The two both reached for my hands and placed their lips in the wounds. As they drank of the blood from my body, I felt for the first time what the feeding felt like from the other perspective. It was the sense of the life leaving my body, and taking root in another. With every sip the two seemed to grow hungrier, drinking more and faster. Eventually I had to remove my hands from them by force when I started to feel the blood-loss to be too great. The two looked at me expectantly. I myself was unsure what was to come next. After a few moments of silent anticipation, I saw both Sati and Hosep start to convulse in pain. Their muscles became tense, and their faces twisted in agony. After a good several seconds in what seemed to be terrible pain the two, almost at the same second, fell to the floor on their hands and knees. I could feel it. That mental link that connected me to my spawn through the power of my will had been

severed. Hosep and Sati had successfully ascended. So confident was I in my observation that I then said loudly: “Rise, Vampyre!”

As they did, I caught their eyes for the first time. They were filled with raw strength and determination. As they looked around the room with their newly heightened senses and freed will, I spoke to them again:

“Are you ready to rule over the realm of the mortals as members of my court?”

Sati and Hosep looked at each other. Their gazes betrayed confusion, as though having spent a long time engulfed in a dream and waking up to their true senses only now. They then looked back at me, and Sati speaking first said: “Yes, Amenrahersef. I thank you.”

“Yes...” Hosep was somewhat slower to awaken. “I do as well, my lord. I am ready.”

“Good.” And I then turned to address the others. “Welcome your new masters, Hosep and Sati, Vampyre of the court of Amenrahersef.”

“Hail to the newly blooded!” The others called out in unison.

“From this day forward let the mortal cities tremble in fear from their new masters! The reign of the Court now begins.”