

The fall of the city of Hierjat, as told by Pa-nehes, second scribe in the court of Adio.

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Hierjat was once a beautiful city. Thriving, even, despite its location tucked far away into the desert. The surrounding mountains curled around it as water does a peninsula, leaving one long pathway from the city to the desert. I have been told it is a long journey to the next city, in the scorching heat and blowing winds, but I have never had any occasion to leave. I doubt you would want to leave, yourself, it was a prime location. Like a jewel out in the desert, a massive oasis that could support all sorts of life. Before we had arrived, it was a wild, overgrown jungle, and probably will be once the city has fallen into ruin, but living there, life was easy. Caravans from the desert didn't come to bring us food, we would send them away with food to sell. New travelers would arrive whenever they had braved the journey, and able working hands were never in short supply. I am only the second scribe in these courts, and I was always busy in those times, there was always a hundred different tasks. I am not sure which court I shall scribe for if I can make it out of the city. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Hierjat was built around an ancient temple that was established before I had arrived in the city. The tale I was told was that an ancient evil force was housed inside, kept locked away, but it was under so many locks and safeguards that there was no way it could break out by itself. Some very heavy work done by the people who had discovered this land, I am sure, and the people were always glad for it. The evil was said to corrupt the minds of anyone it could, twist them into a ravenous, hungry beast, no remorse from unhinging their jaws and devouring someone else...a crime punished as murder, to be sure. To be digested was only a fate given to the most heinous of criminals, and only in some circumstances. It was a special case, like an assassin managing to get into the Pharaoh's chambers and surprising him, or a guard acting swiftly to keep others safe.

The court was established inside the temple under the rule of Pharaoh Adio, where a close eye could be kept on it at all times. He was a powerful figure, perhaps even intimidating at times, being a powerful-bodied rat with near-black fur. He also held a powerful rod, an artifact from the temple, which could influence people's minds just as the temple's power could, but influence them to do whatever he might command. However, Adio never felt the need to use its power. Disputes were settled through rational argument and discussion, not forcing one side to conform to the other. Adio was simply a guardian of the rod, he never did much more with it besides fiddle with it while deep in thought. At Adio's right side was Chione, the crocodile mistress of the court. She was the wisest out of anyone, even Adio, and could nearly always tell exactly what someone's true motives were. As such, she was the deciding factor in many disputes. At the king's other side was Khnurn, the jackal. He was head vizier, but spent most of his time in research, a brilliant mind for the magicks of the temple, and using them as a starting point for other magicks, and his discoveries only further enhanced the lives of everyone in the city.

Further down the line, the captains of the guard were Thaddeus and Amsu, the cobra and chimera, respectively. Thaddeus was the more impulsive, aggressive one, guarded against anyone he doesn't know, while Amsu was the calming force that kept Thaddeus from trying to devour anyone suspicious that came along. Both stood at the entrance to the court, and served as a gate that anyone dangerous simply couldn't pass. Not that anyone dangerous really tried. Both from our location and our openness, we didn't have many enemies, and the ones we had were often dealt with by our military, led by the shiretaur Jabari. He was the deciding force in battles, and would often come back bloated on his victory, literally bloated, with the thrashing bodies of enemies packed away inside his gut.. He was often told to let his meal settle before re-entering the court. Our military was not used often, though, most battles were when I was just starting as a scribe, and after a few years and many losses, enemies stopped trying to attack us. Life was peaceful.

Our days in the court, then, were spent settling disputes, taking inventory of crops and exports, entertaining visitors, finding room for new immigrants if possible, much busywork. Our time alone, we would sit and talk in the gardens, worship the gods, or watch the famed minotaur Gahiji impress with his skills in fighting and athletics. Worships were often led by Sabra, the anteater, chief and overseer of the prophets. Sabra....now, he's the one that requires some explaining. Sabra was a strange one, at times. When leading worship, he was a charismatic figure, very devoted. But when not in the focus, he would spend most of his time alone in the temple, supposedly meditating. He was a powerful figure, like Adio, but never showed himself in court often, and the few times I would find myself alone in the halls with him, I could feel this....hunger coming from him. It never helped that I would come to him for guidance, and feel as if he was judging me, looking down on me for being less faithful than him.. I felt as if he could lash out at any time with some damning remark for something I'd done, like there was some cruel nature inside of him he kept locked away behind that fervent preaching and friendly nature. In retrospect, I have to suspect perhaps he was thinking of ways to explain my disappearance, but I was too connected to daily affairs, I would be looked into. The occasional rumors always did circulate about the others he'd taken into his private chambers, but they were always disregarded by the court. I had seen him, many times, pull entire meals into his mouth with his long tongue, and gulp them down all at once, he would show off for the court with that trick fairly often. Or the few times I'd catch a bit of drool slip out of his mouth, quickly wiped away before anyone else saw. I should have said something back then, but he was a beacon of faith for others. He damned the evils of the temple day after day, from casual statements to aggressive remarks while preaching. He either never did anything, or was never caught, I suppose.

I am sorry for rambling. He does not deserve to be spoken of above others. But how were we to know that the temple's powers could be that strong, to get into Sabra's mind like that? Maybe they were always rooted there. Though, at the same time, I do remember him first arriving....looking heavier in the belly than he usually was from that point on. Maybe it was a natural part of his lifestyle, an occasional delight that he hid from that point on, or maybe the temple's powers just exploited his desires. Either way, it

was so well hidden, nobody noticed until it was too late.

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So how did it start, then, the ruination of the city? Once the rod was used, it all happened so fast but before that point, it's hard to say. It was a warm evening, I remember that, and the perfumes were all drifting through the air so sweetly. I was on the roof of my house, a short distance from the temple itself, taking in the night air and reflecting on the day while enjoying a light meal. Then, all at once, the news was shouted from the temple. "The rod has been stolen!" came the cries. Immediately, a sense of dread hit me. There had been many attacks on us before, many intruders in the pharaoh's court, but no one had ever gone so far as to steal the rod before. Such an offense would be punishable by a lifetime in the prisons, after repairing the damage to the minds that one had done. Unfortunately for Hierjat, the damage that came was much too severe to be undone that quickly.

First, there was a tremor. Not a tremor of the ground, at first, but a tremor of the air, a surging outwards from the temple that one could see in the dust and the sand. Then, there was a building tremor, a shaking of the earth itself, slowly building. Coverings in windows and on the street were falling, small cracks appeared in the temple stone and the sound of heavy rocks shifting rang out, grating and crunching noises that made my skin crawl. But over that, a voice was starting to be heard, far atop the temple. I looked, and pointed, and others began to do the same.

On the very top of the temple, there was a lone figure, holding aloft the Pharaoh's rod of dominion, loudly speaking incantations in a voice that anyone who had ever attended a public worship could recognize as Sabra. He was speaking words none of us had heard before with a wild grin on his face, and the rod was glowing red as hellfire. All at once, there was a crack of thunder, and a lightning bolt struck him as if from the very heights of the heavens, or as if it had come from the very depths of the temple and traveled up through him. Again the thunder cracked out, and this time, the temple cracked as well, large cracks from the base to the ceiling. And flowing out from those cracks was a strange red mist that seeped out from every open spot on the temple, released from the core, now unleashed.. I had seen the guards running up the temple as fast as they could, but as soon as the mist touched them, it seemed to....gather up into a mass and flow into their nose as fast as it could, and they all began to fall over, clutching their stomachs and crying out. The people in the streets below me tried to run as the mist flowed outwards from the temple, but their shrieks were soon rising as the mist climbed up over the sides of buildings and up over my roof.. I tried not to let it into me, I covered my mouth and nose, but it flowed through my fingers like sand and burrowed its way deep down from my nose into my lungs.

Immediately, my mind was on fire, my gut burning as if I'd swallowed hot needles and they were burning a hole through the bottom of my stomach. I coughed, I spit, I screamed, nothing helped, until at last the pain faded and spread outwards throughout my body, becoming a strange, lingering blissful energy behind. I felt better than I'd ever

felt before, good enough to get back up to my feet and look around to see if anyone else had recovered as well as I had. But as I looked through the red mist, I can recall feeling a growing....lack, in my stomach, and a warmth in my loins. It only grew as I saw the others below, and I found myself drooling at the sight of them all. The red mist was still flowing into my nose, but with it came a frightening exhilaration, thoughts of ungodly pleasure from the immoral act of.. Well, I don't want to speak of it, but the people below me were unlucky enough to be by each other as the urges hit. They all began...for lack of a simpler explanation, eating each other alive. And not for any other reason than the pleasure that it brought. I could tell that they were enjoying it, for the moans of a person who had glutted themselves were only slightly quieter than the screams of those trying to escape being devoured, and those didn't last very long until they were too muffled to hear. When I looked towards the temple, I could see the guards in the same situation, either trying to fight past the urges, fleeing from another person (or the situation as a whole), or glutting themselves, sucking down kicking legs, a grasping hand, whatever was left of their prey. And mouths were not the only places that people would disappear into, some would.. I am sorry, it is too disgraceful to speak of that, above all else.

I managed to force myself to stay up on that roof, holding onto the edge with all my might so as to both stay away from the people below, and keep from attacking them, and I turned my eyes upwards to avoid fantasizing further. And so I watched Sabra, still speaking those strange words, the temple continuing to crack in places as he spoke. Some tried to approach him, but there was some sort of power bleeding off of him now, and none could get close. The other members of the royal court had all tried, but none of them except Adio seemed to be able to advance on Sabra. Thaddeus and Jabari seemed to have been hit the hardest, I could see the both of them smiling as they feasted on the guards that had fought their way up there, while Choine was shouting to Adio, trying to help him along. Finally, Adio had approached Sabra, and physically overpowered him, interrupting the spell. Immediately, the red mist started to settle as opposed to flow, disappearing into the ground as far as it had gotten, like water soaking into dirt, and I could feel the unnatural excitement in me dulling down. Not disappearing, but at least lowering to the point I could disregard it. The mist continued to seep out of the temple, but much slower now, and eventually stopped, while the rest of the royal court descended on Sabra, taking the rod away from him and subduing him. He was taken away, while Adio and Chione both took the rod in hand, lifting it up above them. It shone a brilliant, piercing white, like a hundred torches all bound together in one giant flame, and the longer they held it, the more I felt a warmth washing over me like waves in the ocean, each wave pulling more and more of the immoral hunger out of my body. I looked to the temple, and the red mist had stopped flowing out of it, while the guards were starting to recover, some trying to cough up the squirming body inside of them, trying, at least..

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Whatever Sabra had done, as I heard at the hearing the next day, he had infected the land with his own voraphilic desires. I know they were not just the temple's, for he was furious as Adio read off charges. He cursed out the gods, and spoke proudly of cursing the land, bringing it to a natural order, he said. His desires were not unnatural,

and did not deserve to be treated as such, he said. Adio reasserted that murder inside of a stomach, whether natural or not, was still murder, and Sabra fell silent once more. Sabra was damned by Adio and in the name of the gods, and the judgment was unanimous, he would be executed, and his soul would forever be trapped inside of the temple along with whatever evil he had been trying to unleash. He was silent as he was lead away, aside from very pointedly locking eyes with me as he was marched by to the dungeon.. I could swear I heard his cufflinks straining. I gave him a wide berth, if nothing else. I did not attend the execution, I don't think I could have taken seeing him again.

The city, however, the city was lost. The buildings were all intact, but the people that were still alive after that night were a third of our original population. The temple was still intact, for the most part, and the ancient safeguards over the evil inside it were still in place, but what Sabra had unleashed was a powerful projection of his will. And it lingered. It lingered in the ground we walked on, the buildings we had made, the jungle we had tamed, and despite Khnurn's best efforts, it could not be quelled. The hunger returned, much slower than before, but every day I stayed there, the need grew and grew inside me, until I found myself daydreaming about eating my friends as opposed to taking tally of the people leaving the city. We had no more caravans of food leaving the city, instead, we had caravans of people braving the harsh desert around us instead of risking another day inside. Some of the more corrupted people formed bands of raiders that would wait to stalk these caravans and devour all those within, and hungry gangs roamed the streets, at war with the guards that protected those that remained. Most fled for their safety, while others tried to escape the hunger inside them.

The royal court was soon down to the most dedicated individuals there, each a shadow of their former selves: Adio, the Pharoah who now lacked a city; Chione at his side, now lacking advice to give; Khnurn, working day and night to try and reverse the magicks; Thaddeus and Amsu, the loyal guards that kept vengeful citizens from breaking into and attacking; Jabari and Gahiji, both strategizing against the bandits.. And the spirit of Sabra, wandering the halls late at night, a dull, ghostly form of his original self. I never caught more than a glimpse of him, but ever since that night, I keep seeing him in my dreams, talking to me again as mentor to student, taking me aside into his chambers, before taking me in his arms and opening wide while I try and press against him to keep his mouth away from my head.. I never see more than that, but every day I wake up feeling weak and drained. This place is cursed.

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It has been thirty days now since that night, and the city is nearly empty. I, too, will be leaving on the last caravan out of here, and I hope that I will not be lost to bandits as so many others have. But before I left, I, and the other members of the royal court, met for one last meeting. Adio had something to ask all of them, and I attended to perform my duty as scribe. The temple must be protected, Adio said, so that no one else can enter it and finish what Sabra had started. And to do that, he asked that each member of the royal court do as he will do, and dedicate themselves to an eternal sleep,

only to wake up in defense of intruders to the temple.

There was an initial silence, then one by one, they agreed. I did not, of course, but I am not fit for battle as they all are. Unlike them, I can only hope to get out of the city and past the bandits, I cannot see myself being of much use against any intruders. Not to mention how Khnurn has been talking of magically enhancing the jungle's growth in order to completely overrun the city, but allow dangerous animals to flourish and help defend the temple. No doubt they will also take in the temple's power and prove to be as voracious, if not more, than the bandits, and hopefully I will be out in the desert before the jungle overtakes me.

I will leave this writing here, however, along with the treasure in the temple, the Pharoah's rod of dominion, and Khnurn's vast writings on all of his magickal accomplishments. It will all be sealed away at the very top of the temple, where I hope it can serve as both a history of what has transpired, as well as a warning not to abuse the power of the temple. I can at least hope no one manages to enter the temple and read this, but I don't doubt that at one day the temple will be discovered again. I can at least hope that the next person to hold that rod won't give into their desires and let the corruption of the temple overwhelm them, but I cannot predict the future. Perhaps there is much more to the power inside the temple than even we know, but given what Sabra has done, and what he could have done, I cannot imagine the type of person that would try to unseal the temple. Hopefully no one is that much of a fool.

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