



Praise for the writing of Lacey Savage

Take on Me

Ms Savage creates wonderfully rich, detailed worlds, full of history, myth and fantastic races...[A]n absorbing, sexy tale of swashbuckling pirates and mythical beings, all bound together with a gossamer thread of magic.

-- MichelleNaumann ,*Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

First, if you plan on reading this story, be sure you have a cold shower ready. Or better yet, send your lover to bed early and tell them to wait up for you. They won't be disappointed.

-- Kathy,*Fallen Angel Reviews*

This diverse world of pirate like-treasure hunters is an exhilarating and fantastic read. There are many races depicted within this novel, not to mention the different cultures. With tons of action, this story rolls along so quickly that I didn't have time to get bored.

-- Francesca,*Enchanted in Romance*

The story is exciting and the sex is very hot and intense. The characters are vividly drawn. Lacey Savage spins a story filled with humor and interesting plot twists.

-- Candy,*Coffee Time Romance*

Take on Me by Lacey Savage is a swash-buckling fantasy fairy-tale romance lover's wet dream! Pirates, treasure maps, mysterious creatures, elves, magic, dragons and the talking dead all come together in a story packed with action and surprising moments of human tenderness.

-- Keely Skillman,*eCataRomanceReviews*

Take on Me is now available from Loose Id.

I, NEFERTITI

Lacey Savage



www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (exhibitionism, voyeurism).

I, Nefertiti

Lacey Savage

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29

Carson City NV 89701-1215

www.loose-id.com

Copyright © July 2005 by Lacey Savage

Excerpt of *Take on Me* copyright March 2005 by Lacey Savage

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 1-59632-121-0

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket , and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Jill Shearer

Cover Artist: April Martinez

Author's Note

This is a work of fiction. The timelines and historical characters have been altered to suit the story. I hope you will enjoy my vision, although I took some obvious liberties with historical events.

If you want to find out more about the real Nefertiti, read *The Search for Nefertiti: The True Story of an Amazing Discovery* , by Joann Fletcher, and *Nefertiti: Unlocking the Mystery Surrounding Egypt's Most Famous and Beautiful Queen* , by Joyce Tyldesley .

Chapter One

Nell dreamt of him again.

He hovered over her, his cock pressed against her swollen folds. When his image began to fade, she reached out to him, willing him to stay.

For once, she thought he might.

Her labored breathing turned raw, savage. She panted and grasped his shoulders, pulling him near, watching with despair and relief as he shifted from a shimmering spirit into solid, breathtaking flesh.

“Stay,” she murmured against his lips.

He didn't answer. He never did.

Instead, he propped himself on his elbows and ran his tongue along her lower lip. Nell opened to him, her soft moan urging him to dive deeper, to thrust his tongue between her lips, her teeth, filling her with his taste -- sweet and decadent.

Nell craved more, and as her orgasm neared, she thrust her hips up and arched her back, silently pleading for him to fill her. His passionate kisses overwhelmed her, but they were never enough. Her pussy remained agonizingly empty, his cock poised just at her entrance.

An anguished sob broke free from her throat, echoing off the walls of the small room, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him to her. He chuckled against her mouth, his body trembling with mirth, but his cock remained out of reach. The more she wanted him, the less he was willing to give, and she struggled to contain her growing panic.

He wouldn't fuck her tonight, this encounter a repeat performance of every other night of the past year. He toyed with her as if she were nothing more than a source of perverse amusement.

Anger, swift and consuming, rushed through Nell. She deserved better, even from a dream lover.

“If you leave tonight, don't bother coming back tomorrow,” she said. Even as the words tumbled out, she sighed, remembering a thousand similar threats. He came every time she slept, no matter what she said or did in an effort to stop him. If she remained awake for an entire night, he was furious the next, ravaging her body in ways that left her utterly exhausted the next morning.

The fight drained out of her as quickly as it had appeared. She was exhausted, her body taut with need, her mind filled with thoughts of *him*. Raking her fingers over his smooth chest, she imprinted every solid muscle on her memory. He shuddered beneath her touch, and she smiled, content with the small victory. Perhaps he wasn't as steadfast in his resolve as he wanted her to think.

When he broke the kiss, his ragged, hot breath caressed her cheek. She pulled back to look at him, but his face was half hidden in shadow. She yearned to see him in sunlight, his dark hair glistening brightly, his tan skin sparkling with a sheen of sweat in the shimmering light.

He brought her to the same place every night: a dimly lit room with no more than a bed on which she could recline while he teased her mercilessly until dawn crept upon them. There were no windows, no doors, no escape from this man who held her spellbound hour after restless hour.

Tonight, he'd started by slowly lavishing her pussy with greedy attention. Her former lovers had never performed oral sex for longer than a minute or two, content to finish the job with as little effort as possible. But he was nothing like the others. His tongue swept lazily over every bit of flesh until Nell thought she'd tremble away into nothing as a riveting orgasm crashed repeatedly through her body in wave after furious wave.

He was relentless, incessant in his drive to consume her even as her every nerve ending thrummed with painful sensitivity after the earth-shattering climax. Begging him to stop, to let her recover, never did any good. He'd only pause long enough to caress her clit before sweeping down to lap the cream from her thighs; and if his tongue wasn't in her, his fingers were.

And now, hours after they'd started, when her pussy craved a frenzied fuck more than she'd ever thought possible, he was ready to pull away, to evaporate into nothing more than a maddening memory.

"You can't leave me again." The words came out as another threat, but it was feeble, and they both knew it. His green, lust-filled gaze assessed her face, and Nell sucked in a breath at the intensity she saw in his eyes. It was as if he were ready to devour her whole.

She bit her lower lip, her legs still wrapped around him, and let her fingers skim across his ribs to cup his firm ass. "Stay," she repeated, softer this time, as she writhed beneath him, eager to make contact with his cock. "Stay forever."

His rock-hard body didn't give an inch. He didn't move or pull away from her. He didn't have to. Instead, his image began to flicker and fade until she held nothing but air where his warm, solid flesh had been only seconds before.

Nell screamed, the sound agonizing even to her own ears, despair clogging her throat. She scanned the corners of the dark, empty room in vain, looking for any hint of an out-of-place shadow, any indication that he could still be there, watching her.

"I won't wait for you," she whispered into the still air. Blinking back tears, she clutched the thin bed sheets in her fists. "One night, you'll come for me, and I won't be here."

From somewhere in the distance, she thought she heard him chuckle. The infuriating sound grazed over her skin, and Nell shivered, feeling more alone than ever.

Through the fog of sleep and unfulfilled desire, Nell heard a faint hum and smelled the stale scent of unwashed bodies crammed too close together. When the man beside her coughed, the sickly odor of onion breath caused her to jerk upright and yank her hand away from her throbbing cunt.

The cramped space of the airplane brought her back to reality with a jolt. People were squeezed into small seats while children screamed and exhausted flight attendants rushed by with blankets and pillows, scooping away brown paper bags filled with the stomach contents of some of the more sensitive passengers.

Nell leaned her head against the cool windowpane and shifted as far away from the enormous man jammed in the seat beside her as she could. He eyed her furtively from beneath bushy eyebrows, and she turned away, focusing her attention on the miniature world below.

“Dunnohow you can look down ’ere,” he said, elbowing her in the ribs.

Nell stifled a yelp and pressed herself into her seat. Something hard poked through the cushion and jabbed at her ass, and she wiggled around, trying to get comfortable while her neighbor waited for a reply.

“I like to fly,” she said.

He grunted and flipped another page in his magazine.

Oh, God, please don't let it be ...

When he looked up at her again, the curious look in his eyes had been replaced by wide-eyed admiration.

“You -- You’re --” he stammered while Nell looked around for the nearest exit.

There had to be parachutes, even in a measly plane like this one. She could grab one and throw open a door before he had a chance to utter another word.

“You’re *her*! You’re Cleopatra!”

Too late.

Nell forced a smile and extended her hand. “Nell Winters.”

“Posh,” he said, pointing a sausage-like finger to the article in front of him. “It says right here, ‘The Real Cleopatra Returns.’ The media don’t lie.”

Nell struggled not to laugh, knowing that if she did, it would likely come out as a strangled squeal.

“I’m not really Cleopatra,” she said, leaning in to brave the onion smell. If she told him what he wanted to hear, then maybe he’d ignore her, the darn plane would land, and she could get on with this crazy expedition. “I only play her on TV.”

His face crumpled into a frown. “But you look just like her.”

“How do you know that? No one’s seen Cleopatra in four thousand years. You mean to tell me you

know for a fact she was my spitting image?"

"Well, no. But they say you've got her mannerisms and everything." His eyes lit up again. "Maybe you were her in a previous life."

"Now you're being ridiculous," Nell said, turning her attention back to the window. Outside, clouds congregated in fluffy white shapes, obscuring the world that went on as it always did below them.

"You may be Cleopatra, but you're darn rude."

A pang of unexpected remorse made Nell glance back at her neighbor. "I'm sorry. Look, I'll give you an autograph. Let me see that." She took the magazine and flipped to page twenty-six. A glossy image of her stared back, and she scribbled her name at the bottom, over the hem of the white, slightly transparent gown she'd worn for the photo shoot.

"Man, my friends are never gonna believe this!" He beamed at her, any former ill will apparently forgotten. His gaze slid from her face to the picture in front of him, lingering on the bare midriff revealed by the ancient costume.

"You come to Egypt often?" he asked.

Nell frowned, considering her answer. She didn't want to admit it was her first time in Egypt. How could she tell this man that she'd been driven here by a strange dream and by the image of a lover who haunted her nights as well as her days?

As if sensing something amiss, the flight attendant approached their row. "Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thanks," Nell said. "But can you tell me if this works?" She pointed to the telephone mounted to the seat in front of her. The plastic was chipped, and the cord looked to have been gnawed on at some point.

"It does, but you'll have to use a credit card for an international call. And up here, they're all international calls ... unless you're trying to reach heaven." The flight attendant giggled at her own joke.

Nell smiled at her and picked up the handset. The dull whine of the dial tone greeted her with its shrill pitch. Lowering the phone to her lap, she punched in her credit card number, long-since memorized thanks to all the late-night infomercials she'd given in to over the past few years. Heck, she even knew the expiration date and the three-digit security number on the back of the card.

When the dial tone returned, she punched in another familiar number, then pressed the plastic device to her ear.

"Yeah. What?" The cool, composed voice of Filomena Krummel, Nell's agent, sounded miles away through the echo of the airplane phone.

"It's good to hear your voice, too," Nell said, unable to suppress a smile. Filomena was one of the most powerful and influential women in Hollywood. Grown men feared her, children cried when she came near, and every starving actor dreamed of one day being represented by her.

"Nell! Damn, girl, where've you been? When you took off from the shoot like that, we all panicked. Tell me you're on your way back. We've postponed everything, but the crew's still on-set, ready to film

when you are.” Nell heard her take a deep puff on her cigarette and expel the smoke in a long exhale.

“Actually, no. I’m not on my way back.”

Nell closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of the seat. She pictured Filomena’s perfectly painted red lips puckered in a frown of disappointment and anger.

“Fine. Where are you, then? I’ll come get you.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, either.” Nell rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I’m somewhere over the Sahara Desert, I think. I’ll be landing in Egypt in a couple of hours.”

Nell listened to the silence, wondering if they’d been cut off. Then the distinct gasps of a hyperventilating agent came through clearly.

“Are you breathing into a paper bag?” Nell asked, sitting upright in her seat. The sounds of puffing and huffing were the only reply.

“Hello? Answer me, please.” Killing her agent would certainly annihilate her career. “Filomena?”

“Tell me this is just a misguided attempt at a vacation. Tell me you’re not chasing ghosts, dreams, fantasies -- or whatever else.”

Filomena was the only person in whom Nell had confided about her bizarre dreams. She’d left most of the erotic details out, though Filomena had certainly wanted to know everything. She even thought there might be a script to be written based on Nell’s dreams. On a good day, she found Nell’s fantasy and her mystery lover fascinating. On a day like this, Nell knew Filomena would be a lot less inclined to see the allure.

“I’m not chasing fantasy men. I just need to see for myself, that’s all.”

“So you’re going to search all of Egypt, looking for ... what, exactly? Something that looks familiar?”

“I’m not going to search the entire country. That would be stupid. I had another dream.”

“And?”

“And I know where he is.”

“Where *who* is?” Filomena’s voice rose, resembling a child’s panicked shriek. Nell held the receiver away from her ear.

“Akhenaten.”

“Your dream man has a name? Nell, this doesn’t make any sense. Are you telling me that you’ve left the set of *Cleopatra II* to chase after some man? And when you find him, then what? You’ll leave show business, have six babies, and live happily ever after?”

Nell held her breath, felt the blood pounding in her head. Confession time, and Filomena would think she’d lost her mind.

“Not exactly. Akhenaten’s been dead for over three thousand years.”

“Oh, my Lord. You’ve gone insane.”

Nell laughed. It was either that, or cry .

“Feed Carmen for me?”

“Your cat? Yeah, sure. But please tell me you’ll come to your senses and get back to the set. Soon. Tomorrow.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

She hung up before Filomena could continue her lecture on Nell’s mental state. She’d probably been only a moment away from suggesting therapy. Nell pressed her forehead against the small, icy-cold windowpane and looked out at the immense spread of the desert below.

You’ve gone insane.

Filomena had to be right. No sensible actress would walk away from a set to chase a dead man, even compelled by provocative, maddeningly frustrating dreams.

And especially not now, not when she’d finally made it. Nell’s face graced the cover of three magazines this month alone. The latest remake of *Cleopatra* had been nominated for six Academy Awards, including one for Nell in the Best Leading Actress category. The Oscars were only a few short months away, and working on a sequel meant she could keep this career-high going for quite some time to come.

But it wasn’t as if she had to stay in Egypt. She’d go to the dig site, where she’d most likely be turned away since she was neither a scholar nor a respected member of the journalistic media, and then she’d go home.

Then maybe she’d start dating again. Real men.

Live ones.

Chapter Two

“The Akhenaten Temple Dig, please,” Nell instructed the driver as she climbed into the back seat of the cab. “And hurry.”

“The dig? You won’t get in there unless you’re a famous archeology expert.” The gaunt young driver peered at her inquisitively in the rearview mirror as he pulled away. “Are you?”

Nell shook her head. “Afraid not. I just want to see it, that’s all.”

“They won’t let you in,” he repeated. “Many are intrigued by the discovery, and many leave without ever laying eyes on the temple. They say it’s still buried underground, and they’re just now attempting to dig

out any bits that may have survived intact. Or, at least, any that aren't too badly damaged." He shrugged and snuck another look at her in the mirror. "Me, I say it might not even be Akhenaten's temple. All them scholars getting excited for nothing."

Nell leaned forward in her seat. "What makes you say that?"

"No trace of Akhenaten has ever been found. The pharaohs who ruled after him tried to eliminate all traces of his existence from history. They destroyed carvings, sculptures, scrolls. Why would anyone think that whatever they'd discovered would be authentic?"

"Luck?" Nell inquired, though her head spun. Ever since the dream two nights earlier, the only one that had been different, she hadn't been able to focus on anything other than getting to the temple site. Akhenaten had spoken. He'd told her, clearly, that this is where he'd be found.

After months of fitful, restless dreams like the one she'd had on the plane, she wanted nothing more than a good night's rest. If finding the mummy of an ancient pharaoh could allow her that, then she'd be back in Hollywood in no time. She'd made a phone call to her former university's archeology department to confirm Akhenaten's claims, and had been thrilled to learn that a new site had recently been identified as Akhenaten's temple.

Of course, they'd also told her other things about Akhenaten, things she'd rather not have known. The heretic pharaoh, they called him. Her mystery lover had a reputation for being something of an enigma for Egyptologists, and it seemed as though he'd carried that reputation with him into her dreams. If she'd thought her sexy nighttime visitor was as available as any dream lover, she'd been dead wrong. Turns out the guy had a wife -- Nefertiti, of all women.

Figures. A married Egyptian pharaoh leaves behind the most beautiful woman in the world to invade my dreams.

She shook her head and tried to focus on the cab driver, dimly aware that he was still speaking.

"He loved his wife," he said.

"Uh-huh," Nell mumbled. A throbbing headache settled behind her eyes. The last person she wanted to talk about was Akhenaten's lovely spouse.

"The few pieces of art that survived all show them together. Kissing, hugging, laughing, playing ... they seemed happy." He rounded a corner and pulled the cab into a large lot. In the distance, she could make out the desert, golden and infinite.

"You'll need a horse from here," he said, shrugging apologetically. "I can't drive you out into the desert."

"That's okay," Nell said, handing him a twenty-dollar bill. "But I don't have the right kind of money."

"No problem," he replied, stuffing the American bill in the small pocket of his vest. "Good luck with your search." He opened the glove compartment and pulled out a slip of paper on which he scribbled a number. "My cell phone number. Call me when you'd like to return."

Nell thanked him, then grabbed her bag and headed toward a stall that housed one lonely merchant and two horses. Aside from the parking area, there was nothing else around. The soles of her sandals scuffed against the cement lot, then fell silent as she reached the sand.

“Hello,” she called out as she approached. “Do you rent these horses?”

“Horses, yes,” the man said, his accent heavy but welcoming. “You buy, yes?”

“Rent,” Nell corrected. “I’d like to rent a horse, not buy one. I only need it for a day or so.”

“Yes, yes, you buy,” the man insisted, pointing to one of the horses. Brown, with large white spots, the animal looked at Nell with glistening dark eyes. When she stretched out her hand to pat its mane, it neighed and inched closer.

“Fine.” Nell sighed as she dug into her wallet. “How much?”

“Two hundred Americandollar ,” the man said, much more proficient in uttering numbers than anything else in English.

She handed over the money and took the reins he offered.

“Whichway to the Akhenaten Temple dig ?” she asked, struggling to calm her hammering heart.

Now that she was here, the thought of heading off into the desert on her own made sweat bead on her forehead. She glanced behind her, hoping that the cab driver hadn’t gone far. She could call him back, ask to be taken to the airport, and forget this insane scheme.

“Twenty-minute ride. Not far, north.” He pointed straight ahead to a well-worn path snaking its way through the desert.

Nell swallowed hard and mounted, then placed her feet in the stirrups and her bag in front of her. The horse lowered its head and neighed faintly, its sleek muscles solid and reassuring beneath her.

“You ride softly,” the merchant called out. From the saddle, she turned and waved, then rode out into the vastness of the desert.

The dig site looked abandoned, and not at all the way Nell had expected. She’d seen enough movies to know that archeological digs were always swarming with people, especially around discoveries as important as this. She’d expected throngs of security bordering the area, and archeologists with their tents set up and equipment spread out everywhere.

What she found instead were sand dunes, and half-excavated columns rising out of the ground in a haphazard pattern. They’d been dug out seemingly at random, and Nell brought her horse to a halt beside one of them. About as tall as she was, the column showed its age. Cracks ran down its length, but its beautiful designs hadn’t been completely obscured either by time or by the harsh environment. Delicate carvings of children at play and intimate family moments decorated the span of the column. The sign of Aten , the sun god, dominated each scene, its ever-watchful eye fixed on those depicted in the etchings.

Nell dismounted, set down her bag, and patted the horse’s flank. She walked from one column to another, examining the similar markings that decorated each one, her unease growing with every passing moment. Could this be the wrong site? Though the carvings matched what she’d learned of Akhenaten

and his interests in his unique religion and his family, the absence of archeologists was puzzling to say the least.

“Come to me, my queen.”

The voice rose from the desert itself. Nell spun around quickly, but saw no sign of another human being. Sand stirred in the soft breeze, taunting her with its silence.

She would have missed it, entranced by the beauty of the ancient architectural design around her, if it weren't for the mysterious voice that had stopped her in her tracks. A small opening, barely enough to let a grown man through, had been carefully concealed by another of the large columns. She stopped and kneeled at its edge. A small sliver of light cut a path through the darkness beneath the sand, and Nell worked up her courage to speak.

“Anyone in there?” she called out, hovering over the gap in the ground and feeling more than a little silly. “Akhenaten?”

A loud gasp echoed from beneath the ground, followed by a resounding crash, then a distinctive swear word uttered in English by a masculine voice. It sounded nothing like the ethereal whisper that had beckoned her earlier.

“Go away!”

“Unless you're a mummy of some sort, I'm not going anywhere.” Despite herself, Nell was amused. This was certainly not what she'd been expecting.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Nell Winters. I'm interested in ancient Egyptian lore, and I thought I'd experience some of its wonders firsthand.”

“Well, this isn't a spot for gawkers and the curious. Go away!”

“But --”

“Wait ...” The man seemed to consider his words carefully. “Did you say Nell Winters? Like the actress?”

Nell's heart pounded faster.

“Yes, that's me. I'm doing some research for the sequel to *Cleopatra* . I'd love to look around.”

“Well, why didn't you say so?” The man sounded friendly now, even cheerful. “Come down here. There's a rope attached to one of the columns.”

Nell brushed her hand through the sand and discovered the rope buried beneath the fine granules. It looked thick and as sturdy as the column itself. Before she could give the impulsive action another thought, Nell slid into the hole. She shimmied downward for what felt like minutes and sighed when her feet finally hit the ground.

A man with a thick beard held a small lantern up to his face. Its dim glow penetrated the encompassing

darkness and cast a long shadow behind him. His large, white teeth glimmered brightly against the dark background of his face.

“Welcome, welcome!” He gestured with the lantern, inviting her further beneath the sand.

“Where is everybody?” Nell tried to peer beyond the shadows into the underground cavern. She couldn’t see a thing around the halo illuminating the slight man standing across from her.

He shrugged. “They’ve gone to a fundraiser. They --we -- need more money. They’ve gone to get some.”

“And you’re the only one who stayed behind? What of the media? Interested gawkers, as you called them? Grave robbers?”

The man gave a howl of laughter. “Grave robbers? This is no grave, miss. At best, it’s a temple, and a poor one at that. They practically demolished it as soon as Akhenaten died. There’s little in the way of treasure here, but much in the way of interest.”

Nell nodded. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Yazid. Welcome to the Temple of Aten.”

Nell lifted an eyebrow and again tried to peer into the darkness. “This is it?”

“You expected something grander ... richer?”

“I suppose so,” Nell admitted, “though I had no reason to. I just thought all Egyptian excavations were coated in gold.”

“Some are, but most aren’t. Take this place, for example. The only people who still care about Akhenaten are those fascinated by his eccentric rule, and there aren’t many of them left. There’s no treasure here, so that rules out the interest of the majority of the population. Still, there are archeologists who can build a career on this. They’re at the fundraiser.”

Nell tried to hide her disappointment. This was it? She abandoned a movie in the middle of filming to fly across the world and end up in a dank, dark cave with a strange little man?

“Well, then, thank you for letting me come down here. I suppose I should go.”

He watched her, unblinking, for a moment. Then he nodded. “As you wish. Up the way you came, climb the rope.” He turned back to the wall, with the lantern in one hand and a small brush in the other, and proceeded to try to peel away thousands of years of grime.

The opening she’d dropped through was about twenty steps away, clearly visible from the sunlight shimmering through it. Careful not to step on anything, Nell reached out to steady herself. She stretched her arm out in the darkness, encountered something solid, and leaned against it, taking one careful step after another while moving slowly along the length of the wall.

At the fifth step, her hand hit air.

“Hey! There’s an opening here.”

“There could be.” The sound of Yazid’s brush scraping against the wall didn’t cease as he spoke. “There are many chambers still unexplored. It’s too dangerous, with the sand liable to collapse in on us at any time.”

Nell swallowed hard and glanced up. The ground had seemed solid enough from above, but knowing that she could be buried alive at any moment made her heart leap in her chest. Still, the breach in the wall intrigued her.

It’s a temple, she reminded herself. It would have to be big.

“Do you have another light source?”

“There should be one on the ground, somewhere,” Yazid said. “Close to you.”

Nell crouched down and ran her hands along the ground. Dirt and thousand-year-old sand embedded itself beneath her finely manicured nails as she searched, but her annoyance vanished when she found the lantern. She flipped on the small switch at the bottom, and the lamp bathed her in a soft glow of light.

“Do you mind if I take a look in there?” she asked.

“Why would you want to do that alone? Wait until the others return. We’ll find you a suitable guide.”

Nell straightened, her excitement growing. “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t have much time.”

“I’m not comfortable letting you wander down here on your own. If you’ll just wait a few hours, I’m sure ...”

Yazid’s voice ebbed and petered out as Nell slid through the opening in the wall, which proved to be much narrower than she’d expected. She entered another chamber, this one larger, but just as empty as the last, and the air smelled stale and damp. She’d almost expected expensive vases and gold statues to line the floor. Wouldn’t that have been something? She could see the headlines now: “The Real Cleopatra Returns Home -- The Biggest Discovery Since King Tut’s Tomb!” Perhaps she could have been known as the Great Explorer, as well as her latest moniker, the Real Cleopatra.

She pictured herself in full Indiana Jones attire, complete with whip, and she chuckled as she advanced through the room, the light from the lantern illuminating only a few steps in front of her.

When a small glint appeared on the wall, she jumped and almost dropped the lamp. Clutching the handle tighter, she raised the lantern above her head. A gold symbol, no larger than the size of her palm, was embedded in the stone wall. Guided by an inexplicable urge, she reached out. As her fingers touched the symbol, a sudden, blindingly bright beam of light filled the room.

Nell staggered and squinted, trying to shield herself from the flickering brilliance that grew right before her eyes. It not only broadened, but mutated, shifting from an ordinary gleam to a shimmering doorway in only a few moments.

A hand reached out through the opening; a female hand, with long slender fingers and tapered fingernails.

Before Nell could even think of screaming, the hand grabbed on to her shirt. A sharptug, and Nell found herself falling, plummeting through the doorway, into the blend of light and mist within.

Chapter Three

Akhenaten smiled, and Nell reached out for him. He teased her, letting his image flash, glimmer, and fade before reappearing and solidifying into firm, masculine flesh. He smelled divine, like fresh, clean soap and male musk. Straight ebony hair touched broad shoulders that gleamed in the candlelight, and his full lips parted, glistening.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth down to hers. His lips hovered just inches away, and she groaned, drawing him down, urging him on with a quick nibble of his lower lip. He chuckled and gave in, thrusting his tongue inside her and bearing his whole weight down on her body. She smelled her own arousal and moaned against his hungry mouth, parting her legs, eager to feel him thrust into her moist pussy.

His solid chest pressed against her breasts, and her nipples budded into stiff peaks beneath him. She ran her hands over his shoulders, reveling in the strength of his muscles, the smoothness of his skin. His heartbeat pounded out a rhythm in tune with her own, and when Nell looked up, their gazes locked in a staring match that seemed to make the world stand still.

Akhenaten reached up and touched a lock of her hair, emotions flickering over his face as he watched her. He slowly scrutinized her features as if wanting to memorize each one.

Unnerved, Nell slid her fingers down his back, and he arched into her, his cock perilously close to the open center of her cream-coated pussy. She grabbed his firm, taut ass with both hands and thrust her hips against him, groaning as the tip of his shaft nudged the entrance to her throbbing, sopping cunt.

“Please,” she whimpered.

He couldn’t refuse her now. He wouldn’t dare! Not when they were so much closer than they’d ever been. His infuriating cock was more than ready for her, and with every tremble of his taut muscles, Nell knew that his self-control had to be shattering piece by carefully constructed piece.

Finally, this time, he’d fuck her the way she’d been yearning to be fucked. She wouldn’t let him go until he spilled his seed inside her, all over her, again and again. He’d finally ravish her, thrust into her, give her everything he had to offer. She’d see his face as he came, hear his moans, and know that she was the only one for him.

Forever.

And when they were done, she’d return the favor, explore and caress his body with exquisite, lingering patience, as he’d done to hers. Though the dreams had been relentless for months, she’d never brought him the kind of pleasure he delivered nightly. She wanted to worship his cock with her lips, teeth, and tongue, to watch his eyes as he came deep in her mouth, pouring his salty essence down her throat.

She wanted to see him thrown off balance, yearned to watch as some of that arrogant control stripped away to reveal the man beneath. What would he be like when he wasn’t asserting his power over her?

Nell squirmed, rubbing her pussy against his pubic bone, spreading the puffy lips wider apart, giving him room to maneuver. He didn't move, and she decided she'd do all the work if she had to. He could simply remain there, staring at her with that unnerving gaze, his body stiff as a statue's, and let her fuck him. She needed his cock inside her clenching cunt more than ever, and the maddening absence made her head pound.

As always, at the last moment he shook his head almost imperceptibly, and his image faded to blend in with the dark shadows of the room.

Frustration tightened Nell's muscles, and she squeezed her eyes firmly shut to prevent the flow of unwelcome tears that stung her eyelids.

"Soon, my queen." The sound of his unexpected deep voice rushed down her spine and caused her to cry out. Anticipation and something akin to fear rumbled through her, making her stomach clench.

Nell rubbed the back of her hand over her cheek, capturing a drop of wetness that had managed to escape despite her best efforts.

Soon, he'd promised.

And she intended to see that he kept his word.

An anguished, frustrated sob escaped Nell's throat as the dream fled from her mind and reality set in. Her heart pounded, her pussy ached, and her tight nipples pressed against the fabric of her thin shirt.

"Bastard," she muttered, taking a deep breath and willing her thoughts away from the dream. She had to get back to the shoot. This was such a fool's errand. Going to Egypt, chasing dead pharaohs. Perhaps she would go see a therapist when she returned to Hollywood. It couldn't hurt, and it couldn't be any worse than these endlessly frustrating dreams.

Nell thought about opening her eyes. She needed a cold shower, a warm meal, and a pair of dry panties.

When her eyelids finally fluttered open, she gasped, her heart leaping in her throat as the brightness of the room assaulted her senses. She squinted, forcing herself to adjust.

She lay on the floor of a large chamber, the walls of which glimmered with inlaid gold. A multitude of torches, ensconced high on each side of the room, spilled their flickering light over vases, statues, chests, jewelry, and other artifacts Nell couldn't even begin to name. The walls were a comforting tan color, seemingly quite solid, and a faint coolness radiated from the brick itself.

A sarcophagus lay in the middle of the chamber. Built of red marble and ornately painted and inscribed, it was even more breathtaking than the rest of the items. The lid had been propped against the far wall, and from her viewpoint, Nell couldn't make out whether the casket was occupied.

"My Lord," she whispered under her breath. "I've found Akhenaten's tomb after all."

She must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. She remembered Yazid, the empty chamber, and the glyph on the wall. Then the doorway made of light, and ... a hand?

No, that couldn't be right.

Nell shook her head and sat up. She leaned against the wall and tried to think. If only her head weren't pounding. Had she gone somewhere else after the empty chamber? Hit her head while she was at it? She rubbed her scalp, but couldn't feel any bumps protruding.

Maybe she hadn't injured herself. Maybe she was still dreaming.

"There you are!" A petite, barely dressed woman appeared in the doorway, as if from thin air. Nell had been cradling her head in her hands, so perhaps the woman hadn't quite appeared all of a sudden, but it was all the same to her. She eyed the mysterious newcomer warily.

Slim and pretty, she couldn't have been more than eighteen. Large black eyes smudged with thick eye makeup sparkled beneath long lashes. Her mouth had been painted a dark shade of red, which was probably meant to make her look older, but didn't quite succeed. She wore a dress made of strips of material, all crossing over one another and barely covering her. Small breasts were hidden beneath the strips of cloth, but her stomach was bare, and Nell would bet her back was, too. More strips of material hung down her legs like the tattered remains of a once-fancy skirt.

Still, Nell had to admit the effect was striking, and distinctly Egyptian. She wondered again whether she'd hit her head. Was she back on the set? Where were the cameras, then, and the multitude of people who always swarmed around?

"Come," the girl said, reaching for her hand. "The pharaoh is waiting for you."

With a start, Nell realized the girl wasn't speaking English. The words were different, more exotic somehow, tinged with a soft lilt throughout which harsher tones mingled.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Egyptian," Nell murmured, but that wasn't what came out of her mouth. She, too, had spoken in that same mix of gentle tones and harsher syllables. Worse, she had no idea what she'd just said.

The girl's brows furrowed over her green eyes, and she regarded Nell with concern etched on her lovely features. "Are you all right?"

Nell nodded, afraid to speak again.

"Good. Then come." The girl grabbed Nell's hand and pulled her to her feet. She was definitely stronger than she looked.

"The pharaoh is waiting," the girl repeated, and strolled out of the chamber.

Nell saw no choice but to follow.

* * * * *

Akhenaten hated to be kept waiting.

A slender, darkly tanned teenage boy poured him another glass of honey wine. Akhenaten accepted it graciously, then returned his gaze toward the door, drumming his fingers impatiently on the side of his massive throne.

He'd told Nefertiti countless times how much he despised being made to wait. But it was just like his wife to not give a damn about what he wanted. It wouldn't matter to her that he'd been traveling for almost a week. She wouldn't care that he was tired, aggravated, and lonely. Despite the throng of servants at hand at all hours of the day and night, Akhenaten was always alone. Other than his god, there was no one he could trust, no one he could confide in. More than anything, Akhenaten longed for someone to whom he could feel close.

He adjusted his headgear, then swished his drink around in its copper cup. He didn't want to sit here, fanned by servants eager to obey his every whim. Action and excitement called to him. He wanted to be out in the middle of things, to actually govern his people, make decisions, fight enormous heroic battles. But nothing was ever done right in his absence. If he wasn't around to give orders and see them carried out, his subjects always let him down.

So did his wife.

The wine was too sweet for Akhenaten's taste, but he downed it in a long gulp.

"More," he said, holding out his cup to the boy. The servant tipped the jug, and Akhenaten watched the nectar pouring from the spout. A flurry of motion captured his attention, and he glanced up to see his wife being dragged by the hand into the throne room. His gaze locked on to her, but she kept her eyes lowered as the other girl led the way.

Aten, but he'd almost forgotten how beautiful she was. Nefertiti's sleek, natural black hair and bangs framed her face and enhanced her wide green eyes and chiseled cheekbones. Her skin, a perfect shade of tan, indicated she'd been out in the glory of the sun god for just long enough to receive his blessing. Akhenaten let his gaze travel down and admired the soft heave of her full breasts. His cock began to harden, and he gripped the armrest, reminding himself to remain angry.

She'd wasted his time, but now, as he savored the sway of her hips and the length of her long legs, he realized it had been worth the wait. If only she felt the same way about him. Some of the frustration returned to simmer slowly beneath his calm façade.

"I should have known you wouldn't be here to greet me."

She straightened her shoulders and raised her head with the same royal bearing he remembered, but her eyes widened when she fixed him with her stare. Then she shrieked. The sound echoed through the throne room, but a moment later she covered her mouth with her hand.

Akhenaten was certain every servant in the room had turned to stare, but his gaze remained anchored on his wife. What in Aten's name had gotten into her? He hadn't changed that much in the few months they'd been apart. He glanced down at his ceremonial kilt to make sure his arousal wasn't what had frightened her.

Nefertiti released the girl's hand and swayed for a moment before falling to her knees.

Well, this is different.

"This is quite the greeting. What game are you playing? Other than cool indifference, you've never had any kind of reaction to me."

Nefertiti didn't answer. She kept her eyes on the floor, but her hands betrayed her. They trembled in her lap, and she grabbed a handful of material from her skirt, wringing the soft fabric between her fingers.

"Enough of this." She might look as innocent as a dove, but Akhenaten wasn't fooled. She wanted something, and he was too tired and too frustrated to play along.

"Are you afraid to tell me that the temple isn't finished yet? I already know."

He rose from the throne and moved toward her. She looked so small, kneeling in the middle of the vast room. The marble must be cold beneath her knees, he thought, then shook his head to clear the sympathy away. His wife had never given a damn about his discomfort. Why should he care about hers?

"The servants are staring," he said between clenched teeth as he neared her. "Stop this, get up, and speak to me like the queen you are. Or have you forgotten your role in this household?"

She still didn't speak, and the anger he'd been so carefully controlling spread through him like lightning. If there was one thing Akhenaten hated more than being made to wait, it was being made a fool.

"Shall I get you a brush so you can scrub the floor while you're down there?"

A glimmer of indignation greeted him when she looked up.

"That's a little better." He grinned despite himself and brushed a strand of dark hair away from her face. Her cheeks were streaked with tears, though he hadn't seen her cry.

"By Aten, what is it? Did someone cut off your tongue in my absence?"

She shook her head, but remained silent.

"It's that sister of yours, isn't it? Muet is shy, so you've suddenly decided to be shy, too? I don't believe this."

He took a deep breath, released it on a long sigh, then spun on his heel and headed back toward the throne, unable to look at those wet cheeks a moment longer. Even after he turned away, he could still see the look in her eyes, so unlike the way she'd ever looked at him before. If he didn't know Nefertiti better, he'd have called it hunger, maybe even lust. But this was his wife. He'd been married to her long enough to know that she'd never had those feelings for him.

Nefertiti wasn't lustful. For her, sex was a chore, not a pleasurable pastime. And that glimmer of anger he'd glimpsed in her eyes -- that wasn't like her, either. She was cool, distant, but ultimately dull. He'd never known her to have an original idea of her own on religion, politics, or even relationships -- all vital aspects of a pharaoh's successful reign. But how he yearned for a woman with whom he could share his thoughts and receive more than cool indifference in return.

He'd learned long ago that the woman he'd married wasn't the woman he craved. There wasn't a power in Egypt that could have changed that in the short months he'd been away.

"Fine, stay on the floor," he said, his back still turned to her. "I'm going to my chambers. It's been a long trip."

Two servants rushed to grab the large gold handles on the doors and pull them open for him. He picked up his cup, downed the rest of the drink, and headed for the exit. A warm bath would do wonders for his aching body, and it would help with the throbbing headache that had begun to pound behind his eyes. Nefertiti could play any game she liked, as far as he was concerned. She wasn't worth the trouble.

"Wait." He heard her voice, clear and composed, and he stopped in midstride. When he turned, she stood just a few steps away from him, her head held high, her gaze locked on his. No tears marred her flawless cheeks.

"I'll join you," she said and laced her arm through his.

The world stopped when she touched him. His senses flared, and he breathed in her scent, sweet like ripe melon, honey, and feminine spices. The feel of her hand resting on his arm sent shivers through his body.

He knew his mouth was open, but he couldn't get words out. When was the last time Nefertiti had touched him of her own volition? And those eyes -- those striking green eyes -- stared at him with so much intrigue that he had to tear his gaze away for fear of falling under her spell forever.

"As you wish." He led the way out of the throne room, more convinced than ever that she wanted something from him, and no longer certain that he could deny her anything she asked.

Nell's fingertips tingled against Akhenaten's skin. His muscular arm beneath her hand sent waves of longing through her body, culminating in an intense heat between her legs. She couldn't believe she was having this kind of reaction to anyone, much less an ancient pharaoh who had been dead for a few millennia.

This is ridiculous. I'm not really in ancient Egypt.

But the golden chambers, the multitude of servants, the signs of the sun god everywhere were too perfect, too authentic to be part of a movie set. And as much as she'd wanted to hold on to that fantasy, this felt too real to be a dream. She could hear Akhenaten's soft breathing as they walked through the palace together. Their bare feet made no sound on the cool marble, but the silvery laughter of children and the soft melodious tones of spoken ancient Egyptian accompanied them until they reached the royal chambers.

Nell narrowed her eyes as she glanced at Akhenaten's stern profile and shivered, fear snaking up her spine. She'd seen enough movies to know what happened to women who somehow slipped through the folds in time and space. They ended up raped, tortured, or worse. And that was fiction! If this was actually happening -- and she still wasn't ready to believe that it was -- her problems would be a whole lot worse.

What would she do when Akhenaten figured out that she wasn't who he thought she was? For some absurd reason, he believed her to be his wife. Well, that wasn't likely to last long. Even if Nell was the spitting image of the woman, Akhenaten wasn't likely to continue holding on to the absurd notion once they had to spend any time alone together. It would be impossible to pass his scrutiny, to fake the familiarity two married people shared.

And how was she going to get home?

Panic gripped her throat. She had to get back to Hollywood. They'd be waiting for her on set. Filomena would be worried sick. And who would take care of Carmen, her Persian companion for the past six years? Filomena would feed the sleek, elegant cat for a few days, but if it became clear that Nell wasn't coming back, Carmen would be handed over to a shelter. She *couldn't* let that happen.

Tears welled in Nell's eyes, and she blinked them back, determined to at least try to pretend that she wasn't scared out of her wits. She needed to stay calm. If she could only think this through rationally, she might be able to figure out what happened, and how to get home.

It would be reasonable to assume that whatever had hurled her into the past also had the power to toss her forward into the future, but as she glimpsed a red mud brick pyramid through an open window, Nell realized that she had no idea how she'd come to be here. The girl had found her in the tombs --that much she knew. But why was she there? And whose hand had pulled her through?

Akhenaten stopped before a set of large double doors and dismissed the two servants that had escorted them through the palace. When he reached for the handle, Nell's hand fell away from his arm. She struggled to remember whether queens and pharaohs shared a chamber. Was he going to invite her in? If he walked through those doors without her, she wasn't sure she'd have the strength to follow on her own. She could flee back through the city, back to the tombs, wherever they were.

But when Akhenaten reached for her hand, the dreams she'd been having for so many nights came rushing back.

Akhenaten.

He was here, exactly where he'd told her he'd be. And he was real.

"Don't tell me you're not speaking to me again," he said as he entered the lavish chamber. Incense filled the room with an earthy scent, and candles had been lit to banish the growing twilight. "There's carpet here. Might be a little more comfortable if you decide to drop to your knees before me again." He grinned, but the words didn't sound entirely playful. There was something beneath the light tone. Anger, maybe? Suspicion?

"Ah, well ..." Nell cleared her throat. She still couldn't quite get used to the strange words she uttered whenever she tried to speak. She only hoped that whatever she was saying was what she meant to say. "I'm sorry about earlier. I ... I fell, back in the tombs. I hit my head."

Dammit, Nell, you're an actress. You've played this part before. How different can Cleopatra be from Nefertiti?

But there was no one like Akhenaten on the set of Cleopatra. The actors who had portrayed Egyptian men didn't have his features, elegant and chiseled, which could harden so easily when he looked at her. Did he have to practice that look? Or did it come naturally, like his easy stance and the overpowering sex appeal? A good pharaoh was said to be able to inspire fear and awe in his subjects. He was a god to them. Standing here, just a couple of feet away from Akhenaten, Nell understood why.

"What were you doing in the tombs?" he asked, untying the string that held the gold-trimmed robes together at the base of his throat. When the garment fell from his lean body, Nell had to force herself not to gasp.

He was perfect. Dark and sleek, his body looked just as it had in her dreams. His broad chest, flat stomach, and strong arms were just the way she liked them -- not overtly muscular, but well defined. There wasn't a trace of hair on him except for the small trail that led down from his navel into the garment covering him below the waist. The tiny slip of cloth looked nothing like the boxer shorts her ex-fiancé had always worn to bed. If she had to give the piece of material a name, she'd have to call it a loincloth. A gold, shimmering loincloth that did nothing to hide the bulge between his thighs, but a loincloth nevertheless.

Nell blushed when she realized he was still watching her. He'd followed her gaze, which she'd fixed firmly on his cock, and he now regarded her with an expression between amusement and puzzlement.

"I -- uh --"

"Yes, yes, I know, you hit your head. Have you stopped to consider it might have done more good than you think?" He grinned and slid down onto a low, square stool covered with a leather cushion, gesturing to an identical one in front of him.

Nell sat down and managed a weak smile of her own. She couldn't read him yet. One moment he was tender, joking, and seeming perfectly at ease among servants and more gold than Nell thought existed in the world. The next, he seemed angry and bitingly sarcastic. Was his behavior just a defense mechanism he'd had to cultivate to deal with the pressure of his status in Egyptian society? Or was it a sign of something more disturbing?

"Tell me about the city," he said when she didn't answer his last question.

"The city?" she echoed, feeling a rush of warmth return to her cheeks. She knew nothing about the city. She'd seen a little of it as the Egyptian girl had led her away from the tombs and to the royal palace, but she certainly couldn't tell him anything he wouldn't already know.

"Yes, the city. The one I sent you out here to oversee as construction progressed. I didn't stop to check on the development of any of the major buildings, but I know most haven't even been started." He narrowed his eyes, and Nell stiffened as the tone in his voice changed from the amused lilt of a moment ago to one of complete authority. He wanted answers from her, and he wanted them now.

"Well ... construction is going slower than expected, my lord." Akhenaten's eyebrows shot up at the title, and Nell knew she'd made a mistake. She continued quickly, hoping to cover it up. "Some of the builders in town have had some difficulty finding the materials you require."

"That's impossible," he said flatly. "I had all the materials sent weeks ahead of time. If the builders are having trouble, it's because they're lazy, not because they haven't been given the means by which to do their job. Perhaps that goes for their queen, as well."

The insult stung, though it shouldn't have. Nell wasn't their queen, or his, or anyone's. Akhenaten scowled and fixed her with a fierce stare that bore right through her, and she could feel his unspoken accusations, as damning as the words he'd just uttered. She decided to try again.

"What I mean to say is that things don't always go as planned." She gave him her most self-deprecating smile. "You know that better than anyone."

"You're making excuses." He rose from the chair, cutting off further discussion. Moving to the side of her stool, he towered over her. Worse, his perfect stomach and that maddening loincloth were just inches

away from her face. Akhenaten spoke again, but she couldn't focus on his words with him standing so close. She could smell him, a perfectly masculine scent drifting off his skin, combined with something softer, jasmine perhaps, from his bath or grooming oils.

The urge to reach out and touch him became overwhelming. She wanted to run her tongue down his stomach, from his navel to the patch of hair she knew to be hiding under his loincloth. The dreams came rushing back, and Nell felt dizzy; the memory of his kisses burning her lips, the weight of his body on hers, and the need to feel him drive his cock deep into her became almost more than she could bear.

She reached out, ready to tug on the maddening cloth and see it drop to the ground. If that wouldn't work, she was ready to hoist it up and take his cock deep into her mouth, until he had no choice but to fuck her or spurt his seed down her throat.

"You're unworthy of being a queen," Akhenaten said, and Nell felt as if he'd thrown a bucket of ice water in her face. Her hands dropped back to her lap. Fury replaced arousal, and she shot to her feet.

"Who do you think you are, speaking to me in that manner? And what have I done to offend you so?"

"In case you've forgotten," he said between clenched teeth, "I'm your pharaoh. Your link on earth to the one true god. And if that isn't enough, I'm your husband. I can speak to you in whatever manner I wish, especially when you've disobeyed my every command when I sent you here ahead of me."

"Maybe if you'd ask instead of command, I wouldn't disobey."

He grabbed her arm, his fingers tightening painfully around her flesh. She stifled a grimace and forced herself to face him. His green eyes blazed with anger, and for a moment, raw, savage terror shot up her spine.

When he released her arm and backed away, Nell collapsed onto the leather-covered stool.

This couldn't be happening. She wasn't really three thousand years in the past with a man who didn't even seem to like his wife, but who made Nell's every nerve ending stand on edge when he was near.

She had to get home. Akhenaten might have been the most intriguing man who'd ever lived in ancient Egypt, and he might be the best dream lover a woman had ever had, but he was volatile and demanding.

She didn't belong here. She belonged on the set of *Cleopatra II*, surrounded by cameramen, makeup artists, and starving actors pretending to worship her acting abilities in return for the slightest boon. An appointment with her agent. A recommendation to the director. An introduction to an even bigger movie star.

Hero worship only went so far. In the end, they all wanted something in return for the blatant admiration they showered her with. The crew would probably stop filming for a while, but when she didn't return, they'd replace her with another actress without sparing a second thought to her situation. Penelope Cruz had been begging for the role since Nell had landed it, and it wouldn't take much to convince the director that all of Nell's scenes had to be re-shot.

Her heart hammering in her chest, she reached for Akhenaten, certain now of what she had to do. The tombs were the key to her freedom, the way home.

"I can give you a tour of the city," she said, using all the tricks she'd learned on the set, her voice as

smooth as honey. "I know you're disappointed, but if you'll at least take a look at what has been accomplished, you'll realize it's not as bad as it seems."

She hoped she was right. In truth, she had no idea what state the city was in, and she was certain there wasn't a person in ancient Egypt less qualified of giving a tour of Akhet-Aten than she was, but she needed to get out of the royal palace. They could head for the tombs first -- she thought she remembered the way -- and then she could ditch this infuriatingly handsome pharaoh and head home.

Akhenaten inclined his head and took a deep breath. "As you wish. I was planning on heading out tomorrow anyway. You're welcome to accompany me."

Tomorrow? Panic rose in her chest, and a sudden wave of homesickness washed over her. She wanted to be in her own bed, snuggled up with her cat. She wanted to feel safe, not out of place and completely clueless. If she had to spend an entire night with him, he'd certainly realize she wasn't his wife. Nell didn't know a thing about politics or religion, or all the other important facets of a pharaoh's reign. There was no way she could convince him of her identity.

"We have to go tonight," she said, hoping her anxiety didn't show in her tone.

"Why?" He raised an eyebrow and regarded her curiously. "The city won't change overnight. I plan on seeing to all my administrative duties in the morning."

"I just thought ... don't you want to get a head start?" It was a feeble attempt, and she knew it.

"Actually, no. I've been traveling for two weeks. I'm exhausted." He removed his elaborate royal headgear and ran a hand through his shoulder-length black hair, leaving it just slightly disheveled. That simple gesture stripped away the appearance of controlled authority and left him looking even sexier, if that were possible.

"And besides," he continued. "Wasn't there something you wanted to tell me?"

"Umm ..." Nell cleared her throat. "No, I don't think so."

"You've been hinting at something in all the messages you've sent over the past few weeks. I believe you said it was a surprise, but the messengers didn't relay any happiness in your tone as you spoke of it."

A surprise? The moment had come sooner than she'd thought. He'd find out she wasn't really Nefertiti, and he'd probably have her hanged, or flogged, or mummified. Her heart pounded harder, and her pulse echoed in her ears.

Act, Nell, dammit! Act!

Act. It was so simple, and the one thing she was good at. She could pretend she was this man's wife, if only for one night. Tomorrow, she'd be home.

A slow smile spread across her face as she considered her plan. After all, she'd gone in search of her dream lover. Now that she'd found him, there was nothing standing in the way of fulfilling all those fantasies. She could expertly seduce him, take his mind off any doubts that had started to form. He wouldn't get another chance to question her tonight. Though a dream lover might be able to resist thrusting his cock into a willing pussy, no real man she'd ever known had that kind of control over his libido.

“The surprise ... isn’t ready yet.”

Nell reached out and hooked her arms around Akhenaten’s neck, pressing her body tightly against him. His mouth opened slightly in an expression of surprise, and she slid the tip of her tongue between his full lips before he could ask any more questions. The faint taste of wine lingered on his tongue, and Nell closed her eyes as it invaded her mouth. He deepened the kiss, and when it was over, she was panting like a teenager.

“Tell me how happy you really are to be home,” she said, then ran her tongue over his lower lip.

“No.” He pulled away, and Nell felt the loss of his body heat as acutely as if it had been her own.

“Let me show you instead.” He seized her hand and led her into an alcove that housed the largest bed Nell had ever seen.

“This will do nicely,” she said, wrapping her arms around him again.

Akhenaten’s body called out to Nell, like it had in every one of her dreams. As they stood together, locked in a passionate embrace, she could hardly believe it was real this time.

She kissed him, letting her hands roam along his upper arms, his chest, his back. Her fingers found their way into his hair and entangled themselves in the soft black locks. She wanted to feel all of him tonight. She’d fuck him with complete abandon, leave him fully spent, unable to think about anything but the overwhelming pleasure she’d be giving him.

Besides, this night would be the only chance she got, and if this entire experience was indeed real, she wanted to go home with the best memories of her life.

She took a lazy swipe at his tongue with hers, relishing the texture, the softness, the warmth. Akhenaten moaned softly against her mouth. It no longer mattered that he’d lashed out at her just a few minutes ago. The only thing Nell cared about now was the feel of his tongue, his hands, and his cock.

Nell let her hand slide down, over the flatness of his belly and lower still, slipping it underneath the loincloth. His cock was rock hard, and he gasped and broke the kiss when she encircled it with her hand.

“By Aten, woman, what’s gotten into you?”

“I was under the impression this kind of thing was normal between married couples,” she said, trailing kisses down the front of his chest. She stopped to lick a nipple, which resulted in another low groan from Akhenaten.

“It is,” he admitted. “It’s just that ... never mind. Keep doing what you’re doing.” He chuckled, a low throaty laugh, as she knelt and ran her tongue along the inside of his thigh. She lifted the thin cloth, freeing his cock, and watched it loom large and promising before her. A creamy bead of wetness dotted the tip of his shaft, and she licked her lips in anticipation. A quick dart of her tongue caught the moisture, and Akhenaten sucked in a breath and buried his fingers in her hair. He didn’t force her head closer to his cock, only held on to her, his labored breathing filling the quiet room.

It had been months -- no, years -- since Nell had wanted to suck a cock this badly. It had always been one of her favorite foreplay activities. Sucking on the hard shaft of a sexy, aroused man did wonders for

her libido. And now, Akhenaten's cock proudly spearing the air just inches away from her face made her pussy throb.

Her lips glided over the tip of his cock, and Akhenaten stiffened as she brought his shaft in its entirety into her wet mouth. She grasped his cock and slid her hand over it, her rhythm matching that of her mouth. Nell felt his excitement build each time her lips traveled along the length of him. He grew even harder in her hand, and bittersweet pre-cum dripped freely from the tip. She cupped his balls with her free hand and held them, gently, while she continued to caress his cock.

"Aten, enough." Akhenaten pushed her gently away. He took her hand and helped her to her feet, then guided her onto the bed. When she'd traveled through the portal, or whatever the magical opening had been, she'd landed in Nefertiti's clothes as well as her body. Akhenaten didn't even bother to remove the flimsy material. He pushed up her skirt, revealing the fact that panties hadn't been invented yet. Her pussy was thoroughly soaked, and she glanced down, catching a glimpse of the cream glinting on her freshly shaved cunt.

At least Nefertiti's body mirrored hers. The same curves, roughly the same size breasts, right down to the shaved pussy. Nefertiti's belly wasn't quite as flat as hers had been, but it didn't matter. She looked womanly, and she felt beautiful. Nell slid her fingers down along her soft folds, feeling the slick wetness. Gently, she parted her lips, inviting Akhenaten to plunge into her.

"I've been waiting so long for this," she murmured.

Her words snapped him out of the trance he'd fallen into as he stared, transfixed, at the view she offered him.

He grabbed his hard cock in one hand and positioned himself between her legs. Guiding himself, he slid easily into her opening, and Nell cried out at the sheer intensity of it. She'd been dreaming about him for so long, and the one thing that had been denied to her all this time was finally happening. His cock filled her as it plunged into her pussy, and she wrapped her legs around his finely muscled waist, pulling him even deeper.

His strong hands gripped her ass, and his mouth found her breast through the flimsy covering she still wore. He grasped her nipple between his teeth and tugged gently as his cock found its own rhythm inside her. She moaned and ran her fingers through his hair, pulling his head closer to her breast, inviting more sucking, more nibbling, more fucking.

She tightened her legs around him and thrust her hips up as he rammed into her, needing to match his speed, go faster, feel him spill his seed inside her. She knew she was screaming, but she didn't care.

If a queen couldn't enjoy a pharaoh fucking her brains out every now and again, what good was it to be queen?

Nell wrapped both arms around Akhenaten and held tightly as her muscles tensed and the orgasm built inside her. She waited for it to explode, and it did, flowing through her body in one intense wave. She was dimly aware of Akhenaten crying out and his cock pulsing inside her, filling her with his creamy warmth. The release was breathtaking, and she trembled as she fell back, limp, awash in absolute contentment.

Had Akhenaten experienced the same?

When he slid off her, she turned on her side and cradled her head in the nook of his arm. Still panting, he pulled her close, and she lay on his chest, more fulfilled than she could ever remember feeling.

“You’d think we’d never done that before,” she said when she could trust her voice. He’d seemed so puzzled by her behavior, when she’d done nothing more peculiar than initiate sex with her husband.

“Perhaps we haven’t,” he said, placing a tender kiss on her forehead.

She didn’t understand what he meant, but this didn’t seem the time to pursue it. She breathed deeply, inhaling the smell of jasmine, sex, and sweat. Birds chirped outside the large windows, and Nell realized that night had fallen. Candles glowed dimly, bathing the chamber in a soft light.

She relaxed against Akhenaten, the feeling of deep sexual satisfaction still numbing her senses. Sleeping in his arms tonight would be so much better than sleeping with her cat, which was what she’d done every night for the past two years.

“Good night,” she murmured against his chest.

“Sleep, my darling.” But instead of embracing her tighter, he rose from the bed and headed for the double doors that led out of the royal chambers.

“Wait.” Nell sat up, disoriented. “Where are you going?”

Akhenaten turned back to her, still naked, the sheen of sweat that lingered from their lovemaking making his skin glisten in the candlelight.

“You might want to have that bump on your head checked out after all. These are your quarters, not mine.”

He reached for the handle on the door, then turned back to her. “Sleep,” he repeated before walking out of the room and pulling the door closed behind him.

Nell fell back against the soft pillows and stared at Akhenaten’s side of the bed, spacious and incredibly empty. She reached for the pillow he’d been lying on, glad to find it still warm. Inhaling his scent, she cradled it to her chest, wishing he’d spent the night. She should have asked him to stay, to envelop her in his arms until she awoke, content and ready to fuck him again.

Now that he was gone, the situation was even less bearable. She couldn’t survive here by continuing to fake her identity. She should have been glad that Akhenaten hadn’t been able to figure out that she was an impostor, but it was only a matter of time until his doubts won out. He’d acted strange, like her behavior didn’t quite match that of his wife, yet her appearance should have soothed his misgivings, at least for a while. But doubts had a way of returning, filling your head until you had to take notice.

She had to get home. Clutching the pillow closer to her chest, she thought about the tombs. They weren’t guarded, from what she could tell. And anyway, if she and Akhenaten went on the tour of the city in the morning, she could easily slip away to the chamber she’d come through and find whatever it was that could bring her home.

Until then, all she had to do was keep her hands off the sexy pharaoh. How hard could that be?

Chapter Four

Before she even opened her eyes, Nell decided to redecorate her house to match the royal chambers. This alcove was perfect for sleeping in until the late hours of the morning, something Nell hadn't been able to do in months. It was just dark and cozy enough to provide the kind of privacy good rest demanded.

Or maybe the reason she'd been able to sleep had nothing to do with darkness and privacy. For the first time in a year, she hadn't woken up frustrated and horny as hell. She snuggled closer to the pillow she held in her arms and took a deep breath, savoring Akhenaten's scent. Her dreams had never been that real. She could always remember the firm lines of his body, the intense glare in his eyes, the weight of him pressing down on her, but never had she been able to smell him, to really feel him there with her.

But he wasn't here now, either. Nell opened her eyes and took in the empty space in the massive bed. She'd slept on the right side all night, leaving what she instinctively knew to be his side empty, in case he returned. He hadn't, and the bed was as vacant this morning as it had been when he'd left her the night before.

Damn it, Nell. It doesn't matter.

It couldn't matter.

She had a plan now, one that involved getting home as quickly as possible. She'd got what she came for -- incredible sex, a dream lover who no longer tormented her every nighttime hour, and ... closure. Akhenaten wouldn't bother her sleep again. He hadn't last night, and, instinctively, she knew he wouldn't return. Inexplicably, a pang of longing settled in her chest, heavy and unsettling.

When Filomena had asked her what she hoped to find in Egypt, time travel had definitely not been on the tip of Nell's tongue as a possible answer. Wasn't that one of those things that happened in romance novels, cheesy science-fiction movies, and the delusional fantasies of people who had a few loose screws? Then again, a woman at the height of her career heading out in search of a long-dead pharaoh couldn't be all that stable, either.

She'd definitely make an appointment with a psychiatrist when she returned home today.

Today. Now there was a happy thought.

Or, at least, it should have been. But instead of relief, melancholy threatened to break through her composure, to send her running down the white marble halls in search of Akhenaten.

Nell frowned as she rose and dangled her feet over the edge of the bed. Now that she'd found Akhenaten, what would happen when she returned home? He'd no longer be there to torment her with the incessant foreplay that never culminated in the kind of satisfying lovemaking she'd experienced the night before. She'd be free to date, to give her heart to the first available, single, *live* man who crossed her path.

The thought made her cringe. She didn't want some random man to occasionally fuck. She could have had that countless times over the years. No, what Nell really longed for, she realized as she let her feet

slide down to the floor, was a stable relationship. One built on mutual trust, respect, and a healthy dose of stellar sex. The kind of marriage her parents had never had.

Nell's mother had been devastated when she found out she was pregnant at seventeen, even though Nell's father, a simple farmer's son from Iowa, felt he had to do the right thing and marry her. They'd only met the night they conceived Nell, and their entire relationship, if it could even have been called that, consisted of a quick romp in one of the neighbors' sheds after a party. During the course of their ten-year marriage, they found out the hard way that they had nothing in common. Her mother wanted a life filled with adventure and excitement, both of which she often found in the arms of other men, while her husband lamented his wife's faults to whoever would listen down at the local pub.

A relationship based on nothing more than sex was definitely out of the question for Nell, which was exactly why she hadn't dated any of the men she met on the sets of her various movies. Shallow and superficial, Hollywood actors couldn't provide the kind of stability and loyalty that she desired.

Lush carpeting welcomed Nell's bare toes, and she sighed. A girl could get used to this: a palace, servants to wait on her hand and foot. A husband.

Unlike the men she knew, Akhenaten caught her off guard all the time. He'd taken that ultimate step and showed his commitment by marrying, but did he love Nefertiti? Did he even like her? Last night, it had seemed to Nell as though he'd been surprised to find himself enjoying her company, but she couldn't be sure. Was he a loving husband? Or did he roam the city streets nightly, looking for his next conquest?

A knock on the door startled her out of her thoughts, and she rushed to grab a garment draped across the back of a nearby chair. It looked like a shawl, and she threw it over her shoulders, covering the sheer material that she hadn't bothered to take off the night before.

She had no idea how to dress appropriately in this place. For all she knew, Nefertiti could have been wandering around the tombs in her bedclothes. Perhaps the woman had lost her mind, and Nell showed up to replace it.

Not that hers was any more reliable.

"Come in," she called, wondering if whoever was out there had already left. Time seemed to pass at a completely different speed here. Her thoughts were lazier; they took longer to sort out. Or maybe that was because she now thought in a whole other language.

The door swung open, and the girl who had found her the day before entered the chamber. She looked like she was a minute away from becoming a woman, fully developed but not yet comfortable in her own curves. She was dressed in the same strips of cloth, so Nell shrugged and threw the shawl back on the chair.

"The pharaoh is waiting," the girl said, giving Nell a curious once-over.

"Is that all you know how to say?" Nell snapped, then immediately regretted her harsh tone. "Sorry," she mumbled. "Tell him I'll be right out."

She ran a hand through her hair, intending to dislodge some of the more unruly knots, but the girl stepped forward and laid warm hands on Nell's shoulders. For the second time in as many days, Nell didn't protest as the girl led her to a nearby chair.

“Close your eyes,” the girl said, and Nell did as she was told. After a moment, a cool, soaking-wet cloth slid across her brow, eyelids, cheeks, and the rest of her face. She didn’t complain. She was used to makeup artists doing whatever they wanted to her appearance, and after some of the disasters she’d been forced to endure, this girl couldn’t do much worse.

Nell kept her eyes closed while the young Egyptian applied soft lotion to her face, followed by eye makeup of some sort. Something cool brushed her lips, and she pressed them together, enjoying the smooth, silky feel of the unique balm.

“What’s your name?” Nell tipped her head back, savoring the feel of the soft brush running through her hair.

The soothing motion stopped, and the young woman’s hand fell away. She backed away, and Nell frowned.

What did I say?

“What’s wrong with you?” the girl whispered softly, suspicion etched across her features. A wave of panic rose in Nell’s chest.

She knows. Dear God, she knows I’m not her.

Nell cleared her throat and tried to get a handle on her emotions. “Nothing,” she said. “I hit my head. Nothing serious.”

“He cast a curse on you, didn’t he?” the girl asked in a stricken voice.

“Akhenaten?” Nell shook her head, puzzled. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Not him.” She paused for a moment and glanced at Nell, fear reflected plainly in her eyes. Nell reached out to her, but the girl stepped back and bolted for the door.

“Wait,” Nell called out, but she’d already disappeared into the hall.

* * * * *

“Who is she?” Nell asked as she and Akhenaten stepped out of the royal palace. A group of guards huddled together about ten feet behind them, far enough away to give them privacy, yet close enough to make their presence known.

Akhenaten stopped inmidstride and gaped at her, a look of concern creasing his brow. “Muet? You mean to tell me you don’t recognize your own sister?”

“My sister?” Nell shrieked, horrified.

Good going, Nell. Now you’ve done it. He’ll throw you into whatever dungeon these people used and demand that you release his wife’s soul.

Akhenaten ignored her obvious distress and started walking again. Clearly, he wanted to get as far away from the madwoman as he could, and Nell couldn’t blame him. She raced to catch up to him.

"I think I must have hit my head harder than I thought," she said with a self-deprecating smile. She shot him a look from beneath her lashes. "Yesterday, when she found me in the tombs ... she seemed familiar, but I couldn't recall her name."

He grunted. "You seemed to remember me well enough. Or were you faking that, too?"

"I didn't fake anything last night," she said, lifting her chin to meet his gaze. "You ... I was waiting for you." At least that part was true, in a way.

He didn't answer, but clasped his hands behind his back and continued walking. The sun had climbed midway over the horizon, but the morning held a comfortable breeze, diffusing some of its persistent rays. Occasionally, Akhenaten tilted his head up and stared at the sky until he blinked tears from his eyes.

"Your god," Nell said tentatively, knowing she treaded on dangerous ground. "He's watching over us today, isn't he?"

Akhenaten nodded. "Today, and every day. Even on those days when he doesn't appear to us, he's always watching, ever aware of our moves, our actions, even our thoughts. He's everywhere at all times, all things to all life in Egypt."

"He only watches over Egypt?" Nell asked, slightly baffled.

"I don't know," Akhenaten admitted with a shrug. "If he tends to others, we're certainly his favorite." He grinned at her, and she chuckled softly.

As soon as Nell's mystery lover had given her his name, she'd sought to learn as much as she could about him. She'd only had a few days before she'd fled to Egypt, but she'd read a little about his beliefs. The scholars agreed that Akhenaten hadn't joked about his faith, so either he let his guard down around his wife, or the scholars didn't have a clue.

They walked through busy streets, but the citizens of Akhet-Aten hardly spared them a glance. Akhenaten had left his ceremonial headgear at home, and aside from the guards behind them, they blended in with the other villagers.

The buildings seemed in good condition, sparkling white and often decorated with colorful depictions of the sun god and the pharaoh. Nell pointed that out, hoping Akhenaten wouldn't be as disappointed in the way she'd been overseeing the city as he had been last night.

No. She hadn't been overseeing the city. Nefertiti had. Nell shook her head, reminding herself that no matter where she was, she wasn't the queen of Egypt. She was an actress, nothing more.

When Akhenaten slid his warm hand into hers, she just about jumped out of her skin. He pulled back, a blush creeping into his tanned cheeks.

"I apologize," he said, and quickened his stride.

"No, don't apologize," she said softly and grabbed his hand again. "You just startled me, that's all." He turned his dark, assessing gaze on her, then shrugged, seemingly content with her answer for the moment.

"At least the living quarters are finished," Akhenaten said, and a thrill of delight ran down Nell's spine at the small note of approval in his voice.

“They are,” Nell agreed, figuring it was a safe thing to say. The tiny cluster of buildings lined each side of the narrow street, depicting varying degrees of poverty. Here and there, entire families huddled together on their small front steps, their faces revealing both weariness and contentment. A lump formed in Nell’s throat. Her townhouse in Beverly Hills could house half the families in Akhet-Aten .

Akhenaten must have seen her staring. “They make do,” he said.

Nell’s gaze fell on a small child, kicking up dust with his bare feet as he ran circles around his father. Both the older man and the child laughed in unison, their voices echoing through the street.

“The sun god sees to it that they have all they need,” he added. Looking at the joy on the child’s face, Nell could almost believe him.

They turned a corner, and Akhenaten halted in his tracks. Nell nearly ran into him. She opened her mouth to ask him why they had stopped, when she saw it. Crudely drawn, even with the charcoal bleeding down the white-washed wall, it was unmistakable.

The symbol --*her* symbol.

The one she’d touched back in the forgotten tomb. The one that had opened the portal and pulled her through. She took a step forward, intent on reaching for this one to see if it had the same effect, when Akhenaten’s grasp on her hand tightened, and he pulled her back.

“Heretics,” he said between clenched teeth. “Traitors. I give them shelter, a place to raise their families in peace, and this is how they repay me.” He signaled to the guards, and they rushed to his side.

“See to it that this abomination is removed at once.”

The men bowed from the waist in unison. Two of them then broke away from the group and disappeared around the corner. Nell’s confusion only increased as she continued to stare at the symbol. How could a harmless hieroglyph provoke such a reaction? Tall and narrow, it was made up of a number of horizontal lines with a few vertical, longer ones at the top. The whole effect was oddly familiar, like the depiction of a skeletal spine.

“The symbol of life, of Amun-Ra, the old god of creation,” Akhenaten said, and Nell was certain it was for her benefit. This was something Nefertiti would have known. She swallowed hard, unsure how to respond. If she admitted her ignorance, would he lash out at her? Question her further? She decided to remain silent.

“I’ve disallowed worship of the old gods in my city,” he continued, “Yet some people refuse to give themselves over to Aten . They will learn.” He narrowed his eyes, then turned away from the symbol.

“Come,” he said. “We have much to see still, and Aten is watching.”

Aten, if that was indeed the sun, was evidently incensed. Its rays burned Nell’s skin; its sweltering heat enveloping her body, causing beads of perspiration to form on her face, arms, and neck. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand as they walked, and relief washed over her when she caught sight of the tombs.

Akhenaten remained silent, his hands clasped behind him and his brow furrowed as if he were deep in

thought. Nell's heart beat faster as she took the lead, guiding their small party in the direction of the tombs. If Akhenaten's steps wavered a little to the left or right, she tugged on his hand gently until they were on the right path again.

She was so close now. This experience had been more than she could have hoped for, and it would prove invaluable in her future roles. Cleopatra would never be the same.

The walk through the city had reminded her that she knew nothing about living in ancient Egypt. She certainly couldn't continue this charade. She felt almost giddy with relief at the thought of going home. She'd have a great big slice of fattening pizza, wash it down with a Coke -- regular, not diet -- snuggle up to her cat, and fall asleep. By tomorrow, Akhenaten would be back in the dream world, where he belonged. With any luck, he'd be in someone else's dreams.

Unbidden, the image of his naked body came to her mind. His glorious cock standing hard against the curls between his thighs, his flat stomach and broad chest ... She bit her lip, stifling a moan.

For God's sake, Nell. There are men in L.A.!

Twenty feet from the tombs, Nell fought the urge to hurry her pace, by concentrating on trying to slow her racing heart. She kept her gaze focused on the pyramid-shaped buildings ahead.

Akhenaten halted again, and Nell almost cried out in frustration. But instead of another lecture on treachery, he pulled her into his arms, her body a flawless fit against his. His eyes were so green, so clear, Nell's breath caught in her throat. She stared hard, wanting to capture this moment in her mind forever -- a perfect snapshot of the perfect man. She traced his full lips with her fingertips and then followed the fine lines that tightened around his mouth, the faint stubble shadowing his chin. Their gazes locked, and Nell found she was frozen, trapped in time, in this moment, with him.

Akhenaten's warm breath caressed her cheek. Did he know he was going to lose her? That she was only minutes away from stepping through the portal and going home?

Only he wouldn't lose her. Nefertiti would still be here when she left. He'd have his wife back.

Akhenaten lowered his lips to hers, brushing them with a feather-like kiss. The touch was faint and fleeting, yet utterly engulfing, and tears stung Nell's eyes. He licked her lower lip, probed her mouth gently open, the taste and the texture of his velvety tongue almost too much to bear. Moaning against his mouth, she leaned into his kiss and squeezed her eyes shut, willing the tears away.

This was goodbye.

Nearby, someone cleared his throat. The fog that had enveloped her as they kissed dissipated, and Akhenaten stepped back, leaving her disoriented and confused.

What had she been doing before the kiss?

The tombs.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," a man said. Small black eyes contrasted with his pale skin, and he wore simple gold-trimmed robes.

"Is there a problem?" Akhenaten asked.

“You and the queen are needed at the royal palace,” the man answered, inclining his head apologetically.

Akhenaten nodded, then turned back to Nell. “The rest of the tour will have to wait.”

“But --”

“We’re needed at the palace,” he repeated as if Nell were a child, and a mix of anger and fear rose in the back of her throat.

“I heard him,” she said. “But we weren’t finished. The tombs --”

“The tombs will wait. Besides, they seem finished. And you know how tombs are. You’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.”

He started back the way they’d come, and Nell bit her lower lip in frustration. She stood in the middle of the road, shifting her gaze between Akhenaten and the tombs.

She could make a run for it, dart through the chambers until she found the right one. Then, she’d let the symbol do the work.

Akhenaten had noticed her hesitation, and turned back to her. The midday sun framed his figure, casting a bright halo around his lean frame. The effect was ethereal, almost supernatural. Perhaps he really had been chosen by the sun god. Who was she to doubt things she couldn’t understand, especially as she continued to inhabit another woman’s body?

With a sigh and a last look at the tombs, Nell resigned herself to another few hours with the sexiest pharaoh she’d ever laid eyes on.

Akhenaten stormed into the great hall, with his wife close on his heels. Expecting some kind of military emergency, he walked with a sense of immediacy ... of urgency and anticipation over what such a situation might demand of him. As a military commander, he needed the excitement, the sense of duty and responsibility that came with making the kinds of decisions that would affect the lives of his people for centuries to come.

But Aten hadn’t yet rewarded him with any of that. Despite Egypt’s turbulent and violent past, his reign had been peaceful. In fact, the heretic pharaoh himself was the only thing disturbing Egyptian sleep these days.

A forlorn sigh escaped him as he walked into the throne room, Nefertiti at his side. He turned to her as they reached the throne, and was again struck by the need to touch her, to run his fingers over her soft skin and claim her mouth with his own. Suppressing a shiver of desire, he took his customary seat on his lavish golden throne. On a small table beside his right hand waited his headgear, and he picked it up and placed it on top of his head. Heavy and uncomfortable, at least it helped him look like the authoritative pharaoh, even when he didn’t feel like acting the part.

Nefertiti stood before him, and he gestured to the smaller throne to his right. She took a tentative step forward, eyeing the chair warily and squinting, as if the sight of so much gold hurt her eyes.

Just as she sat down, the messenger who had summoned them stepped forward. "You're wanted by the royal physician, my queen."

"The physician?" she asked, clutching the throne's armrest. "What would he want with me?"

The man blushed a deep shade of red under his too-pale skin. "I don't know, my queen. But if you'll accompany me, I'm sure he'll be happy to explain."

Nefertiti nodded and turned to Akhenaten. She leaned over and gently brushed her lips to his, right there, in the throne room, in front of everyone. Akhenaten feared he beamed brighter than the sun god himself.

He watched her stroll out of the room, her hips swaying invitingly, the curve of her ass beckoning him through the thin material of her skirt. Akhenaten's cock stiffened, and he closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of the throne.

What had happened to his wife? In a few short months, she'd gone from acting like he didn't exist, to showing affection in public. How many nights had he stayed awake in his chambers, asking Aten why he'd been fated with such an unsuitable match? He'd wished for a lustful, intelligent mate his entire life. When he first met Nefertiti, he'd been struck by her beauty and had believed all his wishes fulfilled. Yet the more time he'd spent with her, the more he came to realize that her beauty was only skin deep. Nothing lay beneath the surface to keep his attention, to intrigue him and make him adore her as he'd always thought a man should adore his wife.

And now ...

Last night had been incredible. Lovemaking was a chore for Nefertiti; that much Akhenaten couldn't deny after six years of marriage. Yet she'd been eager to fuck him. She'd given her body over to him willingly, with no reluctance, and no sign that she had an ulterior motive. In truth, he knew that the kind of pleasure Nefertiti had experienced last night couldn't be faked. Even if she had gone into the chambers intending to seduce him, she'd had a pretty good time herself.

He couldn't keep from smiling, though his eyelids sagged, exhaustion finally setting in. He hadn't been able to sleep much the night before. After he'd left Nefertiti, his own bed loomed large with the loneliness that had haunted him throughout his entire life. Though he hadn't been the first choice to become the next pharaoh of Egypt, as the second son of Amenhotep III, he had spent most of his childhood surrounded by tutors, scholars, and royalty. There wasn't one person among his constant entourage that he'd ever considered a true friend, save his older brother, Thutmose. When he'd died, Akhenaten had been thrust into the role of future pharaoh, and his life had become even more complicated, ruled by responsibility and obligation.

Last night, when he'd been with Nefertiti, the isolation had vanished. He'd tossed and turned after leaving her, wondering whether this new vivaciousness and interest in him would wane in a day or two, as predictably as the setting of the sun.

He hadn't wanted to think of that possibility, but Nefertiti's face, and her beautiful body, lay heavily on his mind. He'd had to stroke his cock to climax twice just to keep from going back in there and plunging his aching rod into her sweet pussy. He hadn't wanted to push his luck. Though as her husband he had every right to take her whenever he chose, the fact that she'd offered herself willingly suggested the possibility that she might do it again.

He'd fallen asleep just as Aten began to rise, only to be roused a few hours later by a servant reminding him of the day's plans. The thought of seeing Nefertiti again that morning had sent a flood of hot desire to his groin and jolted him out of bed.

Yet he couldn't stop thinking about the changes in her. What had happened in his absence to cause such a transformation? And why had the physician summoned her from their walk? Was she ill? Couldn't whatever he had to tell her have waited until she returned?

Dark questions clouded his mind, and the sudden fear of losing her sent a chill down his spine. If she knew she was ill, then it would be logical that she'd be more interested in the tombs than in any other part of Akhet-Aten. Was this her way of saying goodbye? Had their lovemaking been nothing more than a way for Nefertiti to atone for the lack of passion in the marriage in her final days? And yet, the Nefertiti he knew wouldn't have bothered with him even if such thoughts had entered her mind.

A growl escaped his lips, and he bolted upright from his throne. The servants turned to stare, startled out of their routine.

"Muet. Bring her to me."

One of the guards bowed, then ran out of the room. A few minutes later, Muet shuffled through the door. She kept her eyes lowered, as always, as if afraid to look the world in the eye. Stopping only a few steps away from the throne, she clasped her hands in front of her and waited, her gaze fixed on his sandals. Akhenaten followed her stare, wiggled his toes, and tried to suppress the smile that threatened to emerge despite the grave misgivings surging through his thoughts.

"What's happened to your sister?"

"She hurt her head in the tombs yesterday." Muet kept her gaze fixed on the floor.

"So she tells me. What really happened to her?"

"I don't know." He strained to hear Muet's words. Her tone and posture were respectful, he admitted reluctantly, but hardly necessary. They were family. She could have looked upon him if she wished.

"She hasn't confided in you? The sudden change?"

Muet shook her head, her black tresses shimmering in the light pouring through the open window into the large room.

Annoyed, Akhenaten took a threatening step forward. "What about her visit with the royal physician? What do you know of it?"

"She's told me nothing."

He sighed in frustration. So that was it, then. He'd get no answers from the girl regarding his wife's behavior.

"Fine. If you learn anything, it's your duty to let me know." He said it more because he was expected to than because he actually thought Muet would come running to him if her sister confided in her. She was the most timid eighteen-year-old he had ever known, and her condition worsened in the presence of men.

He wondered briefly whether marrying her off would cure her of her chronic case of reticence, then decided he'd think about it later. He dismissed the girl with a motion of his hand and fell back onto his throne.

Nefertiti's sudden change and the puzzling circumstances surrounding her visit with the court physician left him with many unanswered questions. He seemed to have hit a dead end, as Muet was the only person Nefertiti allowed into her confidence.

Fine, then. He'd have to do it the hard way.

He'd have to ask his wife.

Nell walked behind one of the palace guards, leaving a few steps' distance between them. She had no idea whether this was appropriate, but at least it gave her a chance to relax and take in more of her surroundings.

Each section of the palace seemed more magnificent than the last. Her chambers were glorious, the throne room shimmered with riches, and this wing was swathed in rich velvet and fine silks. The swish of her garment accompanied her soft footsteps on the white marble tile, blending in with the melodious chirp of birds fluttering through the still mid-afternoon air outside the window. She paused, momentarily awed by the soothing sounds, so different from the constant cacophony that accompanied her every move back in L.A. She missed it, of course, but Egypt's natural harmony calmed her frazzled nerves.

And the men here were infinitely more irresistible.

Akhenaten had appeared concerned when she'd been summoned to see the physician, as if it weren't common practice for the queen's activities to be cut short by such a request. And since he'd just returned yesterday, he probably had no idea what was ailing Nefertiti. For that matter, Nell couldn't figure it out either. She felt fine, but maybe that was because she'd brought over her own immunized self when she fell through the portal.

No. She shook her head. *Not possible*. This body belonged to Nefertiti. The curves were the same, but Nell did five hundred sit-ups a day, and this woman's abs didn't show the benefits of that workout. She settled a hand on the slight swell of her stomach and decided she didn't mind the absence of pure flatness there. It felt womanly; shapely, even.

The guard stopped. Lost in thought, Nell stumbled to a halt, nearly colliding with his broad, unforgiving back. The man turned, and their noses almost touched.

"I'm sorry," she stammered, taking a step back.

He inclined his head and made a sweeping gesture with his hand, indicating the entrance in front of them. Then he bowed and straightened beside the door, becoming so still he seemed to blend into the tapestry behind him.

"I guess I'll go in," she mumbled, her breath catching in her throat. She hated doctors. Somehow, she didn't think the physicians in ancient times were any better than those in the twenty-first century, who were happy to poke and prod at you for hours, then announce that there was nothing wrong with you as they handed you a three-hundred-dollar bill for the visit.

Nell frowned. Maybe she needed a new doctor.

She peered through the doorway into a dimly lit room. Heavy drapes had been drawn over the two windows to the east and west, and the only light came from candles scattered throughout. A sharp scent that reminded Nell of disinfectant lingered in the air. In the middle of the room stood a handsome, middle-aged man. He wore simple white robes that covered him from head to foot -- by far the most clothing she'd seen on anyone since she'd arrived. His modesty served to relax her slightly, as did his genuine smile.

"Ah, Queen Nefertiti." The man nodded in greeting. "Please come in. If you'll lie there and spread your legs, we may begin."

Nell's pulse hammered in her ears, and she froze. She'd assumed she was seeing the family physician, not the town gynecologist! What was wrong with Nefertiti that it required *that* kind of doctor?

"Queen Nefertiti?" The man stepped closer. "Is something wrong?"

Nell cleared her throat, unable to trust her voice. When he took another step toward her, she moved back, keeping a solid distance between them. The doctor stopped advancing.

"You missed your appointment yesterday," he said, speaking softly, as if afraid she'd bolt at the slightest menacing sound. "I reminded you because I didn't want you to forget ... again. This is very important."

Nell nodded, hiding her confusion behind a serene smile. Was Nefertiti really that ill? Was she hiding her condition from her husband?

"Please, come in," the physician repeated.

"Fine. But I'm not getting on any kind of exam table, and all my clothes are staying on." Nell took a tentative step forward, scanning the room for a place to sit that didn't look long enough to lie down on. Her gaze finally settled on an uncomfortable-looking plain wooden chair, and she dropped into it, suddenly very weary.

The physician's brows knotted together, and he looked as if he might protest, but in the end he only shrugged.

"Have you told the pharaoh?" He lifted himself up on what looked like an examination table, a giant slab of gray marble, cracked across. It seemed better suited to embalming mummies than curing human beings of whatever ailed them.

"Told him what?" Nell asked, forgetting to play along.

"About the baby, of course."

"The baby?" Nell shook her head, uncomprehending. "What baby?"

The physician crossed his arms over his thin chest. "The one you're carrying, of course."

Nell felt dizzy, and she struggled to draw a deep breath. A baby? She carried a baby? She caressed the swell of her belly differently now than she had out in the hall. There was life forming beneath the slight

bulge.

Nefertiti wasn't out of shape. She was pregnant.

The realization came with a sweeping wave of nausea. Nell closed her eyes, willing it to pass, but a clear image of a little girl running into Akhenaten's arms seemed imprinted on the back of her eyelids. When she opened her eyes, the physician stood before her.

"Have you been ill as a result of your pregnancy?" His thick brows furrowed over his dark eyes, but he didn't touch her.

"No. Not until now, anyway." She managed a wavering smile, but the hammering of her pulse wouldn't slow. Her heart felt like it would pound right out of her chest.

"A baby? Are you sure?" The words tumbled out before she could stop them. She needed to hear it again and again, until she was convinced this man wasn't making it up.

"I'm sure," he said. "And so are you."

She nodded, and wondered why she hadn't been able to tell on her own. Now that she knew, it seemed as if she'd known forever. The girl growing inside of her would have her daddy's green eyes and full lips, that same fierce and proud demeanor, and the ability to make anyone melt or freeze in fear with one glance.

Her baby. Their baby.

"I take it you haven't told the pharaoh, then. There's no use prolonging it, my queen. Akhenaten will figure it out on his own soon. And even if his duties call him away again, he will be there when the procession occurs. You may want to tell him before the placenta is shown."

"Shown?" Nell echoed.

"Indeed. The royal priest himself will carry the placenta to the temple after your child is born, then offer it to the Nile to ensure your baby's survival."

Nell's stomach churned. "I think I've heard enough."

The physician shrugged. "As you wish. But you and the pharaoh both need to treat this like the miracle from Aten that it is."

"He's full of miracles lately, isn't he?"

If the physician heard her, he pretended not to.

"As I told you last time you were here, you need to take it easy. Rest. Another miscarriage is all too possible."

"Another one?" Her voice sounded strangled to her own ears. "How many have I had?"

He paused, his brow furrowed. "Are you sure you're alright, my queen?"

Don't blow this, Nell. Act, dammit!

She managed a weak smile. "I ...uhh ... I'm fine. It's just the baby that has me a little out of sorts. I want her," she said, and realized how much she meant it. She wanted this baby more than anything.

Even though it wasn't hers.

The physician continued to stare, but Nell looked away, buckling under his scrutiny.

"This would be the third. You really should let me examine you."

The third miscarriage. Nefertiti had been through this twice already. So had Akhenaten. The excitement, the joy of expecting a small gift from God, and the devastation of losing all that. She couldn't put him through it again.

She stood up, trembling, and started to undress. If lying on a slab of rock and being poked and prodded would save their baby, then it was a small price to pay.

She lay down, and the cold touch of the marble numbed her skin, turned her insides to ice.

"Go ahead," she said, spreading her legs. "I'm ready."

Chapter Five

After the exam, Nell rushed up to her chambers, avoiding everyone who might have summoned her back to Akhenaten's side. She wasn't sure how to deal with the news of the pregnancy. Nefertiti had been willing to tell Akhenaten as soon as he returned, as she'd hinted at a surprise in her messages to him. But Nell wasn't so sure that putting him through the joy of expecting a baby, only to have that happiness shattered again if another miscarriage occurred, was the best idea.

And yet, Nell had begun to believe that she might not have so much stepped into another woman's body, as into her role. She still felt as much herself as she had in the twenty-first century. Her body, aside from the unexpected pregnancy, was her own. And her face -- her *face*! Why didn't she think of it before? She hadn't seen her reflection in a mirror since she'd arrived here. Looking at herself would finally settle the mystery of what part of her crossed that portal. Did she come through in her entirety? Or was it only her soul and memories that now inhabited a strange host?

Nell entered her chambers, and her gaze went immediately to the neatly made bed where she'd shared so much passion with Akhenaten the night before. She could still feel him, his weight on top of her, the silky-smooth texture of his skin. The scent of jasmine hung in the air, as if he'd left a part of himself behind.

The bed looked as comfortable and inviting as ever, and she slid under the thick covers. Though scorching hot outside, the temperature in her room remained cool, courtesy of thick marble walls and shaded windows. She lodged a large square pillow behind her head and propped herself up, wondering what it would be like to do this every day. Being here almost felt like a vacation. Not having to rise in the early hours of the morning to sit in the makeup chair until the sun came up was a welcome change.

Living like this -- like a queen, a real one, with a husband who made her heart skip a beat and heat rush between her legs with a mere glance -- suddenly didn't seem so bad. And with a baby on the way ...

Nell shook her head to clear the unsettling thoughts. Thinking of staying here, even in passing, was ridiculous. She didn't belong here. She had to get home.

A timid cough startled Nell out of her thoughts. Muet stood a foot away from the bed, her eyes lowered.

"Well, you didn't knock. Why be bashful now?"

"Knock?" Muet echoed, her eyes meeting Nell's for only a brief second before she quickly lowered her gaze.

"Never mind. What brings you here?"

The girl shrugged. "I thought I'd come to see if there was anything you needed. You're usually exhausted after your encounters with the physician."

"You know, then."

Muet nodded. "I knew even before you told me. There was a change in you. Your step seemed lighter; you had less weighing on your mind. You started to smile more." She looked up again, startling Nell with the intensity in her dark eyes. "Of course, the changes didn't stop there."

Nell's cheeks burned. How much did Muet know? Sisters back home seemed to know everything about one another, or so she'd heard. Of course, being an only child, Nell didn't have any firsthand knowledge on the subject. Could Muet tell she wasn't her real sister? Would she do anything about it if she could?

"Come." She beckoned Muet closer, hoping to distract her from the subject of Nefertiti and any noticeable *changes*. She patted the bed. "Sit."

Muet smiled and perched on the edge of the bed. Her long black hair covered most of her face when she kept her gaze lowered, but Nell could make out the fine, exotic features underneath. Her large, almond-shaped eyes were so dark they were almost black. Long lashes and the perfect dark line of kohl drawn over her lids framed her wide eyes, and her soft pink lips and mouth, slightly too large for her delicate chin, only served to enhance the rest of her features.

Muet was going to become a gorgeous woman. The realization filled Nell with an almost maternal pride. What would it be like to be this girl's sister, friend, and confidante? To guide her through the turbulent teenage years and watch her as she blossomed into a remarkable young lady?

"How did he take the news?" Muet suddenly asked, bringing Nell's attention back to the subject at hand.

"Akhenaten? I haven't told him yet." She sighed and leaned back deeper into the pillows.

Muet was silent, but her gaze was fixed on Nell from beneath her heavy eyelashes.

"You think I should tell him," Nell said.

"Yes. He'd take care of you."

“He would,” Nell murmured, closing her eyes. “What kind of father would he be?” The thought echoed in her brain, and she wasn’t sure if she’d asked it aloud.

“Patient. Loving. Tender.”

“Ah,” Nell whispered. “The best kind.”

Muet’s hand found hers under the covers and squeezed. Her skin was warm, impossibly fine. The sudden affection brought the sting of tears to Nell’s eyes. She had a friend here, for as long as this trip into the past lasted. She squeezed back.

“Do I even have the right to tell him?” She lifted Muet’s chin so that their eyes met. She wanted an honest answer, even though Muet wouldn’t understand the question.

The girl’s eyes were clear, limpid pools, the honesty and trust in them almost heartbreaking. “Of course,” she said simply. “It’s his child.”

“Are you sure?”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Nell regretted speaking them. Muet stared, open-mouthed for a moment, then sprang up from the bed.

“Why would you even doubt that?” she asked, shock evident in her voice. “Have you been with ... anyone else?” She sounded unsure. Was there someone else Nefertiti might have been with?

Nell shook her head, hoping to calm Muet as much as herself. “Of course not. I wasn’t thinking, that’s all. I’m still not feeling very well after yesterday.” She rubbed at a random spot on her head. The anger went out of Muet’s eyes, and she lowered her gaze to the ground again, but her shoulders remained tense, and she didn’t sit down.

“He wants this baby. More than anything.” Nell could barely make out Muet’s whispered words, but she knew the girl spoke the truth. Nell had seen Akhenaten’s yearning for his wife. She’d felt it herself. Yet he could also be distant, as if he expected her to be, as well. Why was this man, so obviously capable of affection, holding back?

“I’ll do my best to give him this child. I promise you.” She wasn’t sure if Muet heard her as the girl turned and scampered out of the room.

When she was gone, Nell placed a hand over the swell of her stomach, getting used to the slight bump where the flatness used to be.

“I promise you,” she whispered, this time to the baby growing inside.

Nell would return to her own time in a day or two, but there were other ways to ensure this baby’s well-being. The real Nefertiti would treasure the child as well as Nell could. She’d simply have to take the best possible care of the life she’d been entrusted with until she returned home.

After that, the baby would be Nefertiti’s concern.

* * * * *

Akhenaten tried to stifle a yawn as he listened to yet another complaint from one of the workers. He sat on the unyielding throne, one elbow on his knee, his chin propped in his hand, a benevolent smile pasted on his face. Aten's watchful gaze had begun to lower, and the late midafternoon sun cast long shadows that deepened in the corners of the crowded throne room.

The commoner before him continued to rant about some injustice or another, yet no matter how hard Akhenaten struggled to keep his thoughts from drifting to Nefertiti, inevitably, that was exactly where they always ended up.

Would she be waiting for him in her chambers by now? An image of her shapely body enshrouded in soft, see-through layered garments flashed through Akhenaten's mind, and he bit back a groan.

He'd offered to allow an open discussion, hoping that he could learn more about the progress on his city. But all he'd found out so far was that there wasn't a soul in all of Akhet-Aten who didn't have something to whine about.

"The veins in the marble are too bright," the tradesman complained, a scowl deeply etched on his gaunt features.

"Some of the workers have collapsed from heat stroke," another chimed in.

A third cleared his throat before coming forward. "The men have been working all day, every day, stopping only at sundown. A day of rest is needed."

Akhenaten rolled his eyes and stood, using his full height and the elevated throne pedestal to his advantage.

"Get new marble. Hire new workers. And if Aten has made the days too long, take it up with him. Anything else?"

The volume around him increased to a roar as the agitation in the sweltering room intensified at his remark. Akhenaten settled back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying in vain to calm the pounding headache that had settled between his temples.

"Let's start again," he said at last, his tone slightly more forgiving. "One at a time."

Djal, the commander of the royal guards, stepped up to the throne. "The rebels still make their presence known throughout the city."

"I saw the symbol this morning," Akhenaten agreed. "How are you handling the situation?"

"We've doubled the guards around the palace, and the city streets are patrolled more diligently than ever. But we don't know who they are, and we haven't yet been able to catch one of the traitors. They don't work under Aten's watchful eye. They go about their evil pursuits at night, when we're less likely to spot them."

"Have there been any violent attacks?"

Anger flashed in Djal's brown eyes. "One. A priest was beaten on his way to the temple."

"I thought the temple wasn't finished yet," Akhenaten said, sitting up in his chair. "Where was the priest going?"

"Some of Aten's priests have chosen to oversee the construction of his temple, blessing the workers as they toil."

"Good. Progress has not been as quick in coming as I'd hoped. Perhaps this will help."

The commander shuffled from one foot to another. "There's more than just the symbols and the isolated attack."

Weariness settled upon Akhenaten's shoulders, and he rested back in his throne, nodding to the commander to continue. "What else?"

"Well ..." Djal hesitated. "There have been threats made against you, Pharaoh. The rebels have even dared to write their hateful slogans on the palace walls."

Akhenaten barked a short, loud laugh, startling the commoners still standing close to his feet. "They mean to do what, precisely?"

"We don't know yet," Djal admitted. "But we'd like to double your personal guard, and the soldiers patrolling the city are watchful for any sign of treason. The dissidents are a small group. We will catch them soon and rid Akhet-Aten of their misguided loyalties."

"That won't be enough," Akhenaten said somberly, his gaze raking over the faces of those assembled before him. "We can't continue to fear for the lives of our citizens. All of Aten's subjects are welcome within these city walls, but how long must I wait until I can be sure that the safety I've guaranteed these people is more than just an empty boast?"

Djal paled. "Pharaoh, the guards --"

"The guards couldn't save the unfortunate priest who ran into a zealot. And the guards may not be able to protect the queen the next time she leaves the palace unattended."

Fear raced down Akhenaten's spine as soon as the words left his mouth. He'd never before been particularly concerned about the relatively small group of men who still worshipped the old gods. Yet now, as he watched his commander struggle to reassure him that his faith in the hand-picked royal entourage had not been misplaced, he wondered what would happen if the traitors set their sights upon Nefertiti. Could the guards protect her from a well-planned attack?

Anger rose in his throat, the bitter taste heavy on his tongue. "No," he continued. "With every crime that goes unpunished, their momentum builds."

"They've only managed to scribble a few phrases on the sides of official buildings," Djal replied, looking genuinely perplexed. "I hardly think that's reason to --"

"I don't employ you to think," Akhenaten snapped. The commander fell back a step, his eyes wide with surprise. Never had Akhenaten lashed out at his guards during a public gathering, but fear for Nefertiti's safety made his reactions difficult to control. If threatening the guards made them take additional steps to capture the menaces running loose through his city, then that's exactly what he would do.

He stood, squaring his shoulders as he looked out at the crowd. A hundred pairs of eyes stared back at him.

“I see now that my previous decrees were not enough. I want all of you to go out and tell others what you’ve heard here today.” He cleared his throat, and his next words came out crisp and loud, booming through the agitated room. “All those suspected of conspiring against the pharaoh, the queen, or Aten himself will --”

A fine-tipped, slender javelin speared the air, catching Akhenaten in the shoulder and cutting off the rest of his words. Pain erupted through his arm, numbing it, and he collapsed onto his throne as the room erupted in a cacophony of noise and blood.

* * * * *

“Is he in there?”

Every muscle in Nell’s body tensed as she lifted her chin, waiting for the guard outside Akhenaten’s chambers to deliver the last of the devastating message. When Muet had rushed into her room a few minutes earlier, she’d said only that Akhenaten had been hurt. An assassination attempt, she called it.

The guard fixed her with an intense glare, and her blood ran cold. “The pharaoh is resting. The physician gave clear instructions that he’s not to be disturbed.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean for that order to include his wife.”

The guard crossed his thick forearms over his chest, but he frowned, indecision flittering over his face. “I suppose not,” he conceded at last, moving aside to let her pass.

The pharaoh’s chambers were larger than Nell had imagined, and for a moment, she felt as though she’d stepped onto an exquisitely designed set. Narrow windows had been carved high on the wall, and moonlight streamed in through the gaps, coating the dim room in a silvery glow. Four painted pillars divided the chamber into various sections, each glowing with an array of candles arranged elegantly around it. The effect was surreal, the golden sheen of firelight blending with the moonbeams to spill between the pillars where a lush, dark bed sat atop a low raised platform.

On top of the fluffy coverings, Akhenaten lay on his stomach. A bandage covered his right shoulder and part of his arm, blood seeping through the white covering to stain it crimson.

Letting the door close behind her, Nell sprinted to his side, relieved to see that his eyes were open. He blinked lazily up at her, then turned his head to face the opposite wall.

“What happened?” she asked him.

Akhenaten grunted in response.

Blowing out a deep breath, Nell sat at the edge of the bed and trailed her fingertips along his spine, careful to avoid the wound. “I’ve tried asking everyone else,” she said, relishing the way he shuddered slightly beneath her touch. “I guess you won’t tell me either.”

“What’s to tell?” His gruff voice resonated with barely hidden anger. “One of my citizens attacks me in my own palace, and the guards can’t even capture him.”

“He got away?” Nell asked, taken aback. “But there must have been dozens of people around you.”

“Hundreds,” he corrected, bitterness lacing his tone. “For all the good it did.”

She frowned, stopping her caress. “How many guards?”

Akhenaten tensed. “What?”

“How many royal guards were with you when you were attacked?”

Turning on his uninjured side to face her, Akhenaten hesitated for a moment before replying. “Four. But the commander of the guards was among them, and he could do the job of two men.”

Nell pressed her trembling hands into her lap. “There were a hundred commoners, and you only had four guards?”

“Djaldoubled the watch on the streets already, and the royal soldiers assigned to me were also to be doubled.”

“When?” She asked, more harshly than she’d intended. “After you’d been killed?”

His eyebrows rose over his brilliant green eyes. “Why are you suddenly so interested in my welfare? There have been attacks before. You shrugged them off as perils of a pharaoh’s duties.”

Nell’s pulse pounded in her ears. What kind of woman would show such lack of empathy for her husband? She shrugged, trying to appear less distraught than she felt. “I’m only concerned about what will happen to me if you died.”

“You, my queen, would rule Egypt in my stead. And don’t pretend to tell me that you haven’t thought of the possibility. I see it in your eyes every time I leave for an unknown length of time. You wish me well, but a part of you hopes I’ll never return.” He spoke without emotion, without hesitation, as though simply stating cold, hard facts, but his clear gaze clouded as he waited for her reaction.

Nell hissed in a sharp intake of breath, her thoughts reeling. The more she learned about Nefertiti, the more she genuinely wondered how Akhenaten could put up with the woman. She seemed cold, uncaring, concerned only with her own goals and ambitions. Okay, so she appeared to dote on her sister, but Muet could inspire that kind of protectiveness in anyone.

“If I haven’t been a good wife to you in the past,” Nell said, choosing her words carefully, “I’d like to change that. Starting now.”

Akhenaten grunted, but didn’t try to stop her when she gently prodded him back onto his stomach. Climbing on top of the bed, Nell kneeled beside him and pushed the loincloth out of the way, baring his smooth, firm ass.

She started the massage at the base of his spine, then moved higher, her fingers gliding over his warm skin. She pressed down gently, caressing the tension out of his taut muscles, carefully avoiding his shoulder.

“How bad is it?” she asked, brushing her palm over his ass, then lower, gliding along the inside of his

thighs.

“The physician called it superficial, but it hurts like Aten himself sent a ray of sunlight to pierce my flesh.”

Nell grimaced and stopped kneading the muscles of his calf. “You need to rest.”

She stood and slid off the bed, but he caught her wrist, turning her to face him.

“Stay.” He tilted his head and watched her, silently, the way he did in her dreams. Her pulse raced. Did he know? Did he suspect she wasn’t his wife? Or was the ever-present lust that simmered between them making itself known even through his obvious pain?

She shook her head. “It’s getting late, and you’ve had enough excitement for one day. Besides, I can’t make love to you in your current condition.”

Akhenaten’s gaze darkened. “Who asked you to?”

Heat rushed to Nell’s face and she dipped her head, avoiding his gaze. “I ... I just thought that ...”

“That since you’ve been so eager to fuck me lately, I should return the favor?”

She glanced up sharply, surprised at the venom in his voice. His eyes narrowed, and he watched her as if expecting her to suddenly confess to some unspeakable crime.

“Something like that,” she admitted, shame settling in the pit of her stomach. She shouldn’t have just assumed he’d yearn to fuck her with wanton abandon, considering his wound. And yet, why else would he want her to stick around?

His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Go, then. Run back to your chambers, or to Muet, or to wherever you go when you’re trying to avoid me.”

She remained standing as he turned away from her, debating the wisdom of staying. For a moment, he’d dropped his guard, and she’d glimpsed a fraction of what lay beneath the surface of his calm, authoritative demeanor. As much as he tried to pretend that his wife’s indifference toward him didn’t matter, Nell now knew better. Akhenaten yearned for a deeply satisfying relationship as much as she did.

Which was exactly the reason that she turned on her heel and raced out of the room.

Chapter Six

Two days after the attack, Akhenaten left the throne room through a set of doors leading further into the palace, keenly aware of the guards that fell into step behind him.

Earlier that day, Djal had informed him that the would-be assassin had been captured. He’d apparently made the grave mistake of boasting of his near success to one of his friends at a local tavern, and the guards had descended upon him shortly thereafter.

After a questioning session that lasted throughout the morning, the man offered the names of a number of co-conspirators. Djahal had left the palace moments earlier to lead a group of guards that would apprehend them.

Reaching the end of a long hall that forked in two directions, Akhenaten veered left. Nefertiti had been on his mind all afternoon. Since the assassination attempt, he'd left orders with the royal guard that no one was to leave the palace unescorted. Even the vizier received his own bodyguard to accompany him through town. Nefertiti had reeled at the news, angry at his insistence that she needed to be watched at every moment of the day. He understood her frustration, having felt the oppressive protectiveness of the royal guards since his youth, but her safety was paramount. She'd simply have to deal with whatever minor inconvenience his orders caused her.

Now that the immediate threat had abated, Akhenaten yearned to see her. He needed her smile, the weight of her breast in his hand, the scent of her arousal. Memories of their last night together swam through his mind, causing his step to falter. Had her lusty demeanor and obvious need for him come to an abrupt end?

Refusing to contemplate that possibility, he reluctantly admitted to himself that he'd likely caused her to flee his chambers. He couldn't remember the last time he'd asked her to spend the night throughout their marriage, but after the attack, her careful, soothing ministrations had left him unsettled and eagerly longing for her. To his surprise, he hadn't wanted sex. He'd simply wanted her company. And, as always, she'd rejected him.

Today, his shoulder having finally stopped burning from the javelin attack and the sour-smelling poultice that the physician had applied, he had no such reservations. He'd storm into her chambers, tear off her clothes, and have a repeat performance of the day he'd arrived at Akhet-Aten. He only hoped she was still willing.

"Pharaoh. A moment, please, if you will."

Akhenaten was only a few steps away from the doors to his wife's chambers, and he clenched his teeth in frustration. He turned, annoyed at the intrusion into his personal life, and was about to say something harsh when he realized who'd stopped him. Ramose, his vizier, stood at the end of the hall, looking as calm and composed as always. His tanned skin and bald head glistened in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Ramose had never cared much for the fashions of the day, refusing to let his hair grow or wear a wig, as was the custom.

"Ramose. I'd intended to send for you later. We have much to discuss."

Ramose came closer, his thick robes swishing around his feet as he moved. While everyone else was content in loose fabrics that covered as little as possible and provided the most comfort in the Egyptian heat, Ramose was always swathed from head to toe in rich fabrics. But whatever his quirks, he knew his duty to his pharaoh and performed it well.

"How is construction on the temple progressing? I haven't had a chance to visit since I've returned."

"As well as could be expected." Ramose bowed slightly as he stopped in front of Akhenaten. "The gardens are in bloom, and the west wing is complete. Most of the foundation has been laid for the prayer rooms and those meant for embalming."

“Good.” Akhenaten nodded, and turned back to Nefertiti’s chambers.

“There is one thing ...” Ramose said, and Akhenaten stifled a sigh. He faced the vizier, his frustration hidden behind a mask of authority.

“The royal coffers have been drained quickly while you were gone.”

Akhenaten’s gut clenched, the news hitting him as a physical blow. “What do you mean, they’ve been drained? Drained how?”

Ramose’s features remained impassive. “The treasury is empty.”

“Who did this?” Akhenaten took a step forward, so close to Ramose now he could smell the faint scent of perspiration on the man.

Ramose lifted his hands in a gesture of supplication and remorse. “I may control the funds, but the queen controls me.”

“Are you saying Nefertiti’s to blame?” Akhenaten’s head spun, the knowledge as painful as anything he’d ever experienced.

It couldn’t be true. His wife may have been acting strangely, but she’d never before been inclined to a great deal of spending. She had everything she needed within the walls of the royal palace. Yet if what Ramose had told him was true, it would explain a great deal about Nefertiti’s recent behavior. She’d been intriguing, interested, sexy, and he’d fallen for every one of her charms.

And now he was about to pay the price.

“I thought she would have told you,” Ramose said, his voice smooth as honey.

“She didn’t mention it, no. But I’ll be certain to ask.”

Akhenaten glanced at the doors behind him, the gold glint in them suddenly hurting his eyes. The encounter he had been looking forward to had now taken on a new meaning. Gone was the yearning and the lust. How could his queen have managed to spend a lifetime’s worth of royal treasures in a few short months?

“I saw her praying,” Ramose said, almost as if it were an afterthought.

“We all pray.” Akhenaten narrowed his eyes at his vizier.

“But we pray to Aten .”

Ramose bowed, turned on his heel, and walked away, his footsteps silent on the cool marble.

The guards watched with unveiled stares, and Akhenaten had to struggle to compose himself.

If Nefertiti hadn’t been praying to Aten , to whom had she been praying? Anger built inside him as the possibilities ran through his head. Isis? Osiris ? Amun? He’d forbidden the worship of other gods in Akhet-Aten , for as long as he ruled. Nefertiti knew this better than anyone.

What else had occurred while he was away?

Gritting his teeth, he pushed through the doors. They slammed against the walls, and the sound matched the pounding in his head.

Akhenaten had expected Nefertiti to be surprised by his sudden arrival. The racket he'd caused when he stormed through the doors should have startled anyone, but his wife was nowhere to be seen.

A soft, gauzy garment had been draped over the back of a chair, and an unbidden image of Nefertiti's sleek, naked body arose in his mind. His cock swiftly followed that train of thought, and he felt some of the anger drain away, to be replaced by yearning and desire.

He walked through the chamber, the sweet scent of almond and rosemary oil beckoning him further. He stopped by the chair long enough to run his fingers over the flimsy material. Then he caught a glimpse of Nefertiti from the corner of his eye.

She lay under the covers on the giant bed, nestled securely on top of mounds of pillows, only her face and ebony hair visible. Akhenaten approached slowly, quietly, then sat beside her, marveling at the fact that she hadn't awoken when he slammed the doors, and enthralled by her ethereal beauty.

He felt a surge of helpless longing as he studied her face. The bronze glow of her skin contrasted with the red silk of the pillow, giving her the mythical look of a ceremonial offering. Nefertiti was fit to be mated to a god, or at least a god's representative on earth, yet looking at her flawless features, Akhenaten had never felt more unworthy of her than he did at that moment.

Could this beautiful woman, with her red lips and those lashes that lightly brushed against her cheeks as she slept, have betrayed him? It was obvious to Akhenaten that he didn't know his wife nearly as well as he thought he did. The last few days had proven that. But could she be hiding something deeper, more dangerous, than just a sudden craving for him?

As if hearing his thoughts, Nefertiti's eyelids fluttered open. Her deep green eyes widened in surprise when she saw him, and her lips curled into a smile.

"I dreamt of you," she whispered, hooking an arm around his waist to pull him down. Thrown off balance, Akhenaten tumbled on top of her, all thoughts of anger and betrayal forgotten as she pressed her lips against his.

The kiss was simple; unremarkable, even. Yet when her lips grazed his mouth, every nerve ending in his body came alive, screaming for her, begging for more. He moaned against her mouth and pressed into her, cursing the covers that were in the way, craving the feel of the soft shapes of her body under his hands.

She flicked her tongue over his lips, then between, parting them. When her tongue invaded his mouth, his senses reeled. Nothing else existed but that moment. No political plans. No heretical accusations. No betrayal. Just his wife, wanting him as much as he'd always wanted her.

When she broke the kiss, he was panting. Blood had rushed to his head -- and other parts of his body -- and his cock throbbed so hard, he was sure she could feel it even through the thick coverings.

"On your back," she commanded, and pushed him off her. He rolled over, obediently, glad to have a moment to regain his composure.

But a moment was all he had. She threw off the covers and revealed that she hadn't been wearing anything underneath. He vaguely remembered the garments on the chair, but he hadn't made the connection before. If he had, he'd have dived right under those covers.

She straddled him, and Akhenaten couldn't decide where to focus his gaze. Her breasts hung lusciously and tantalizingly just out of reach of his mouth, and he could see those sweet pussy lips protruding between her legs.

Nefertiti lowered herself over him, the heat from her pussy penetrating right through his loincloth. Reaching down, he freed his shaft from the confines of the garment. His cock brushed against her cunt, the tip just grazing those velvety lips, and he had to bite his tongue to keep from moaning.

His hands slid easily over her hips, and he tried to bring her down on his cock, but she resisted, giggling just before shaking free of his grasp. Akhenaten gasped, the loss of her body heat almost physically draining.

"Not what I had in mind," she said and lowered herself down on the bed.

"You plan to tease me, then, until I'm at your mercy; then you can ask whatever you want of me and be sure I'd grant it?" he asked, only half jokingly. That could very well be her plan. It would work, too.

"Not exactly," she replied, and a moment later Akhenaten knew what sheer, ravishing bliss felt like.

He shuddered as her soft lips brushed against his naked groin. Her wet, hot mouth on his cock felt like nothing he'd ever experienced before. Her warmth, her texture, and his total lack of control as Nefertiti demonstrated her dominance made his knees go weak.

She slurped noisily, then took his entire length in her mouth, swirling her tongue around his cock until the tip nudged the back of her throat. Her tongue supported the underside of his cock, heating it up, and when she released him, the cool air in the room washed over his hot skin, sending shivers up his body.

"Don't stop," he managed to whisper.

He looked down to see her ravishing smile hover over his throbbing cock. She licked at the tip, flicked her tongue over the slit, then wrapped her hand around the base of his shaft before plunging it back into her lush mouth. Watching her make love to his cock sent him reeling, until he could only focus on the overwhelming jerk of her hand following the path her lips and tongue had trailed.

They moved in unison -- mouth, tongue, and hand -- all conspiring to make him lose his mind. He resolved to give in to them, and when he felt that familiar tightening in his balls, he groaned involuntarily and came. His semen washed over her lips and down her throat, and he trembled as a wave of pleasure rushed through his entire body and into his cock.

When he finally stopped coming, he lay back, exhausted, and looked up at his beautiful wife. She licked her lips slowly, a smile playing over her full mouth.

"That was incredible," he whispered, grabbing her and flinging her down on the bed beside him. "Dare I ask where you learned to do that?"

She laughed -- a little nervously, he thought -- before shrugging. "It's just something I thought might be

fun to try.”

“Fun?” *You?* he wanted to add, but didn’t when she nodded. What had gotten into his frigid, aloof wife?

Nefertiti curled up beside him, and Akhenaten rested his arm across her waist as she nestled at his side, cupped close and snug against him. Her ass nudged his softening cock, and he kissed the smooth curve of her shoulder.

“The guards have captured the traitors,” he announced. Beside him, Nefertiti’s body tensed, stiffening against his chest.

“We need to talk,” he continued, dreading to break the spell she’d cast over him, but knowing that this couldn’t wait. He needed to disprove Ramose’s accusations so he could continue happily fucking his wife, basking in the bliss she finally offered.

Nefertiti lifted his arm and slid out from under him, then rose from the bed, moving with elegant grace. At the foot of the bed, she hesitated, then gathered her clothes from the chair and tucked them under her arm.

“Later,” she said, and her tone left no room for argument. “Since I assume I’m no longer required to inform a guard of my every move, I’m going for a walk.”

“Now?”

It was late evening, Aten’s powerful rays having retreated hours ago.

“Yes. I slept too long, and I need a little fresh air.” She wouldn’t meet his eyes. She dressed quickly, ran a hand through her hair, and he was left looking after the sexy sway of her ass as she walked out.

Fresh air?

What was wrong with the air in the palace? Puzzled, Akhenaten stood up, tucked his cock back into the loin covering, and headed for the door.

He’d follow from a distance, just to make sure nothing happened to her. What kind of pharaoh let his wife go off unattended in the middle of the night, anyway? The excuse sounded feeble even to him, as he could easily have summoned a couple of his best guards to attend to her.

But this was different. There was something unsettling about the way her demeanor had changed. Only minutes ago, she’d given him more pleasure than he’d thought possible, and now she wanted nothing more than to go for a walk?

Dread turned his blood to ice.

Nell rushed toward what she hoped was the exit. She moved soundlessly on bare feet over the cold, marble-tiled floor, wishing she could remember how to get there. The royal palace didn’t look very big from the outside, but inside it was made up of hallway after hallway, forming a perplexing and menacing maze.

She'd had an escort each time she braved the halls since she'd arrived. She found her way out on the third try, and considering she'd only been queen of the palace, so to speak, for a few days, she thought that was quite an accomplishment.

The scent of dry desert heat greeted her as she stepped outside. It was dark, darker than she'd have thought possible after being accustomed to the streetlights, neon signs, and nightlife of L.A. How was she going to make her way to the tombs in pitch darkness?

The gods must have heard her thoughts, as the moon ducked out from under a dark cloud. It stared at her, bright and silvery, its smiling face urging her on and bathing her in milky blue light. She mumbled a quick thanks to anyone who might be aiding her and moved on, eager to leave the palace behind.

She couldn't stay here a minute longer. Akhenaten's touch, the warmth in his eyes, the way he'd kissed her skin as they lay in bed together, all of it tugged at her soul, urging her back into his arms. It unnerved her that she could lose her heart so easily.

The night she'd sat on his bed and massaged his sore muscles as he recovered from his wound continued to play in her mind. She'd had no idea of the kind of danger he was in, the threats he lived with every day. Sure, the guards had captured *this* would-be assassin, *this* group of treasonous bastards. But what about the next one? And the next?

She had no doubt that there would be others over the course of his reign, and although Akhenaten seemed willing to ignore the possibility, she couldn't. She'd had plenty of opportunity over the past two days to consider what a life in ancient Egypt would be like. The climate, the palace, the people all took her breath away. It would be so easy to become so enamored with Muet, to fall head over heels in love with Akhenaten.

Living with the constant worry that a killer might storm into the palace and murder Akhenaten in cold blood was an entirely different matter.

And then there was the baby. How could she protect the life growing inside her from unseen threats in a world she knew nothing about?

Shadows played on the ground in front of her as she walked through the deserted streets. The moon's silvery beams followed, lighting the road ahead and darkening the path behind her as if hiding every trace that she'd passed this way.

Another ally to count among the few she had in this ancient world.

A thought nudged at the edge of her brain, but she pushed it back. It would only take one doubt to make her turn back, and she wasn't prepared to make that choice. But could she spend the rest of her days in L.A. looking for the love, for the family, she'd always wanted? Was she turning her back on her soul mate, the one person who was right for her in this world?

But *this* wasn't her world. She didn't belong here, with Akhenaten, with their child. She didn't know anything about ancient Egypt beyond the superficial research she'd done to prepare for *Cleopatra*. What would happen when Akhenaten tired of sex, when she had to face her duties as the queen of an entire land?

Nell dashed purposefully in the direction she knew the tombs to be, yet when they finally loomed before her, large and menacing in the darkness, she released a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding.

There was a light inside, a candle or a lantern that flickered and lit the entrance. She entered slowly, quietly, hoping there was no one inside. She'd made it this far without meeting anyone else on the road. She hadn't had to answer questions about her sudden departure from the palace, or what she was doing out here in the middle of the night. If her luck held, she'd be through the portal in another few minutes, and then this would all be behind her, nothing more than a memory, a dream that had never really happened.

There was no one inside the cavernous entry chamber when she stepped through the doorway. A thick candle burned brightly in the middle of the room, casting a warm glow over the few sparse furnishings and treasures. This chamber clearly wasn't the one she'd seen when she first arrived. That one must be deeper inside.

She turned right, through a narrow corridor, guided by nothing more than hope and the knowledge that she'd stay forever if she didn't leave now. Large, lavish chambers all looked alike when she peered into them, with elaborate coffins splayed open in the middle and smaller decorations laid around them. The place wasn't finished. Soot, sand, and dust covered the floors, and she noticed the distinct foot patterns she left behind as she walked.

She'd reached the end of the corridor, determined to turn back and find another route, when she spotted it. The golden chamber, which had been filled to the brim with more treasure than she'd ever seen only a day ago, was now empty. Still, it looked both familiar and distorted, and Nell was certain it was the same room. The coffin lay open, its lid carved with Akhenaten's now unmistakable features.

Nell walked in and noticed the candle burning in the corner. She briefly wondered why they kept lights on in every room of an unfinished building, but didn't have much time to ponder further before her gaze was drawn to a spot on the floor. The shape of her body was outlined visibly in the faint dusting of sand.

She looked to the wall she'd rested against, and the gold flicker caught her eye. Her heart pounded hard against her chest, so hard she could hear it in her ears. The symbol was bigger than she remembered. She touched its smooth texture tentatively, dreading the portal and the hand that would appear, yet knowing that this was the only way home.

The only way to protect her heart.

Nothing happened. She touched it again, pressed harder, even slammed her fist into the golden shape, but the air around her didn't shimmer, no portal opened, and the dusty, dark, and decrepit remains of a three-thousand-year-old tomb failed to appear around her.

Tears ran down her cheeks as she tugged at its edges, sliding her fingernails into the small crevice between the glyph and the rough stone wall. When it came away in her hands, she gasped and then screamed when a deep, quavering voice spoke from behind her.

"Why?"

That was all he had to say. Nell spun on her heel and saw Akhenaten standing in the doorway, the look in his eyes conveying more than words could have.

"I -- I can explain," she stammered, gripping the glyph to her chest.

He shook his head. "Don't bother. That explains everything." He pointed to the symbol and she

reluctantly loosened her hold on it.

For the first time since she'd entered the chamber, Nell took the time to really look at what she'd considered to be the object of her salvation.

She struggled to breathe. The symbol of Amun-Ra glowed in her hands, its gold sheen surely reflecting the guilt and horror written on her face.

Chapter Seven

The dream returned that night, and Akhenaten came to Nell, his face full of love and lust, desire clearly reflected in his eyes.

"Mine," he whispered as he approached, grabbing her waist, pulling her so close she could feel his heartbeat against her chest.

"Yours," she replied, feeling lightheaded.

He kissed her, and somewhere between the taste of his tongue and the throbbing between her legs, their clothes disappeared. His cock pressed against her stomach, hard and demanding, and she slipped her hand between them to grab him, pull him into her dripping pussy.

And then he vanished.

The dream faded, as it always had, leaving faint traces of his bright eyes in her mind and waves of lust flowing through her body.

Nell opened her eyes slowly, hoping against all rational thought that he'd be there, lying beside her, watching her sleep.

She was alone, and the room had cooled considerably overnight, making her shiver even under the silky covers. The events of the previous night came flooding back, and Nell groaned and brought the sheets over her head. Perhaps she could stay here forever. Facing Akhenaten certainly wasn't an option. How could she possibly explain why she'd been found holding the symbol of a god of whom he'd forbidden even the mere mention?

She could run. Go back to the tombs, go home, or run headfirst into the desert until she was far enough away from the hurt in his eyes and the pain that had been so plainly written on his face the night before.

The door beckoned to her. She flung the covers off, slid on a wraparound robe like garment that felt like a blend of cashmere and silk, and headed for the hallway.

She pulled the door open to find herself staring at a massive chest. Only when she stepped back could she see the full size of the man that filled the doorway. He wore a guard's uniform and a scowl, his brown eyes accusatory.

"By orders of the pharaoh, you may not leave your chambers." He spoke slowly, as if daring her to

disagree.

Nell cleared her throat and swallowed to wash down the panic that had risen like bile into her mouth.

“How dare you speak that way to your queen?”

The man snorted. “You’re only the queen when the pharaoh says you are. Today, you’re his prisoner.”

Nell’s knees buckled, and she forced herself to remain upright. “We’ll see about that,” she managed to utter before slamming the door in the guard’s face.

Shivers ran up and down her spine as she stared at the massive wooden door. Never before had she been held prisoner by anyone, under any circumstances. Heck, she hadn’t even allowed her ex-fiancé to tie her up. Losing control was one thing Nell Winters was not good at.

She took a few steps back, trying to put as much distance between herself and the guard as she could. She was certain he wouldn’t enter her chambers. No matter how little he thought of her status at the moment, Akhenaten would surely have the man’s head if he even so much as stepped on the lush carpet.

The windows.

Warm rays of sunlight spilled through the gaps in the thick walls, and Nell’s heart quickened at the thought of escape. She ran to the closest one, a massive opening covered only by a thick curtain that had been drawn to the side.

She looked blearily out into the morning sunshine to see if the way was clear. Her inquisitive stare was met by the equally curious eyes of another man in a guard’s uniform. When she turned her head, she saw there were two more men standing nearby.

“Let me guess,” she said to the closest one before he could even open his mouth. “By order of the pharaoh.”

“Yes, my queen.” At least this one had the decency to lower his eyes, as if ashamed of the duty he’d been given.

“Carry on,” she said, and pulled the curtains over the window.

She should have known he wouldn’t make it easy. Not after last night. Why had he followed her? Aside from her bizarre behavior, which she’d attributed to the bump on her head, Nell didn’t think she’d given him any reason not to trust her. And yet, he clearly had more doubts about his wife than he’d let on.

Fists clenched, she paced the room twice, then collapsed in a small chair and let her head rest against the wall. From a nearby window she hadn’t covered, light spilled into the chamber and over her face. She let its warmth heat her skin and relax her tense muscles.

“God,” she whispered. “What have I done?”

I could tell him the truth.

The truth. Now there was a strange thought.

“I’m not really your wife. You see, I came here from three thousand years in the future, to find you and fuck you, which I’ve done. And now I want to go back home. So what do you say you take me back to the tombs and let me do just that?”

Hysterical giggles broke free from her throat, and for a minute, Nell couldn’t stop laughing. When she looked up, a couple of guards were gawking through the open window, staring at the lunatic howling to herself. Somehow, that made it even funnier.

She waved them away with a flick of her hand, and they obeyed, ducking back out of sight.

So the whole truth was out of the question. But what about a slightly modified version?

She hadn’t really gone into the tombs for the symbol. Not really. She’d gone in looking for a way home. She’d gone in because she was selfish and scared, and because she wanted to spare Akhenaten the pain she’d inevitably cause him.

It didn’t take long for Nell to convince herself that she had gone into the tombs for Akhenaten’s own good.

Now all she had to do was convince him.

Nell had asked one of the guards outside her window to summon the pharaoh, and the man had left his post hours ago, but Akhenaten appeared to be in no hurry to see his untrustworthy wife.

Once the sun had begun to set, Nell’s chambers quickly plunged into late afternoon darkness. She lit a few candles, and the flames cast a pale, flickering light over everything. The shadows danced on the lush carpet and over the marble walls, imbuing the items in the room with an ethereal glow.

When a larger shadow broke free from the wall and moved closer to her, Nell’s breath caught in her throat. Akhenaten’s features suddenly took shape as he stepped into the light, but instead of being comforted by his appearance, Nell felt more ill at ease than before.

“You came,” she whispered, taking a tentative step closer to him.

Akhenaten didn’t move. He crossed his arms over his chest, removing any doubt of his feelings toward her.

“The guard said you asked for me.”

Nell nodded, cleared her throat. She didn’t know where to begin. How could she ask forgiveness for a wrong she didn’t commit?

“I did it for you,” she said, the words rushing out at once.

Akhenaten laughed, a deep, throaty sound that made her blood run cold. The look in his eyes was anything but amused. “Really?”

“Yes. I went for a walk, like I said I would, and ended up at the tombs. I wanted to go in earlier ...” Her voice trailed off as she considered how much she should tell him. If she let him know that she’d been

trying to find a way back to the tombs since she'd arrived, he'd never let her near them again.

No, she had to be smart about this. Perhaps that hadn't been the right symbol. Getting back to the tombs still had to be the only way to return home.

"And?" he prompted when she didn't continue.

"And as I walked through the chambers, the symbol caught my eye."

"I see," he said, but his brows had furrowed together, and he didn't seem any more inclined to forgive her than he had when he'd walked in.

"You don't understand." Nell shook her head in frustration. "I saw the symbol and thought of you. Of what you'd think if you walked in and found such an artifact in your tomb. It was your chamber I walked into."

Nell wrung her hands and waited for a response. She wished he'd scream, yell, throw things. Anything would be better than that scrutinizing stare that told her he didn't believe a word she said.

"And when I walked in and found you staring at the symbol so reverently, tears running down your face ... that was all for my benefit?"

"It wasn't reverence. It was frustration. Anger. I ripped the traitorous symbol from the wall." She took a step forward and reached out her hand. He made no move to grab it, and she trailed her fingertips along the edges of his face.

"Don't you see?" she continued. "I know how hard you worked to get this city built. I know how much Aten means to you. He's the one god, the only god, and the fact that your loyal subjects, the ones you take such good care of, can even think of betraying you like this ... well, it was too much to bear."

His features softened as she spoke, the frown slowly disappearing. She smoothed her hand over his brow, and leaned in closer to him. He didn't step back, but rather uncrossed his arms and slid them around her waist, pressing her to him.

"Trust me," she whispered close to his ear. "I only want what's best for you." Standing there in his arms, smelling the slight scent of jasmine on him, Nell realized that she was telling the truth. She didn't want to hurt him, and the thought that someone had deceived him made her head pound with anger.

"Someone has betrayed you. But it wasn't me."

He pulled back and looked into her eyes, his gaze so intense, she was sure he'd be able to see right through her, to the bottom of her soul. He'd pull away, knowing she'd been lying or, at the very least, not telling the whole truth.

Akhenaten only nodded. "All right."

Nell stepped back, and her gaze fell on a shawl-like wrap made out of a thin, gauzy material. She picked it up and ran her hand along it, feeling the silky texture beneath her fingers. Her lips curled in a smile as a thought formed in her mind.

"Do you trust me?" she said and began folding the garment into a thick band.

“Atenhelpme,” he said after a pause. “I do.”

“Good.” She moved behind him and placed the makeshift blindfold over his eyes. Tying it easily behind his head, she then guided him to the bed. He didn’t protest when she laid him down, or when she removed the few clothes he wore.

“You have a gorgeous cock,” she said, watching him lie there, completely at her mercy. His thick shaft pressed against his stomach, beckoning her.

Akhenaten grunted, though that might have had something to do with the fact that she was leaning over his cock as she spoke, her lips only inches away. She flicked her tongue over the tip and received another moan in response.

She grinned, her self-confidence growing with her arousal. With a quick tug, she removed the wrap she wore and let it slide off the bed onto the floor.

She decided to start at the top. Leaning over Akhenaten’s still form, she slowly ran her tongue over his lips. They parted instantly, allowing her access to his mouth. His tongue met her halfway, and for a moment, she lost herself in the taste of him, the feel of his tongue, his hard cock searching for her as she hovered just out of its reach.

When she finally broke away, she trailed kisses along his jawline, the hollow at the base of his throat, up his arms and onto his shoulder and down his chest, pausing to nibble at one firm nipple, then the other. Akhenaten sucked in a breath when she bit a little harder than she’d intended.

“I’m sorry,” she said, but couldn’t suppress a giggle that broke free from her throat.

She continued to move down, tracing his flat stomach with her tongue, and down lower, into the thick hair that nestled his cock. Carefully avoiding the pulsing shaft, she buried her head just beneath it, kissed his scrotum, ran her tongue delicately beneath his heavy sac. She kissed his thighs, the small crevice between his leg and his groin.

“Nefertiti.” He seemed to breathe the word more than speak it, and Nell was suddenly overcome with jealousy. She wanted her name on his lips, not another woman’s.

She tried to stifle the heartache by concentrating on him. Akhenaten would have to realize she wasn’t his wife. Had Nefertiti ever gone down on him like this? Had she taken him into her mouth with the same kind of passion, the same need, the same skill?

Heat rushed into her cheeks at the thought of sharing him with another woman. Possessiveness had never been a trait she’d exhibited in past relationships, but she couldn’t help it now. The thought of Nefertiti being with Akhenaten in this way after Nell returned home was more than she could bear.

Tears pricked behind her eyelids, and she blinked hard to hold them back. She wrapped her hand around his cock and guided it into her mouth, willing herself to think of nothing but the salty taste of him, the length and thickness of his hard cock in her mouth.

His fingers tangled in her hair, and he held her head as she sucked his thick shaft. She cupped his balls in her hand as she gently allowed the tip of his cock to nudge at the back of her throat. She wished he’d come again. She wanted to taste his essence, to feel the warm flow of his cum invade her mouth and flow

down her throat.

Just as she thought he was getting close to losing control, he pulled her head back, with just enough force to make her stop.

“You don’t like it?” she asked, puzzled. The groans he’d been emitting indicated otherwise.

He sat up and pulled off his blindfold. “It’s your turn.”

Nell narrowed her eyes. “My turn to do what?”

“To show me that you trust me.”

Akhenaten had trouble deciding what to do first. He drank in the sight of Nefertiti’s lush curves, her full breasts, the pink lips protruding slightly from between her legs as she knelt on the bed. He wanted to take those tender, rosy nipples between his teeth and nibble until she moaned, while his fingers found the entrance to her cunt and made their way inside.

He picked up the makeshift blindfold and held it out before him.

“Lift your arms,” he said, and watched Nefertiti’s magnificent breasts sway as she obeyed. He wrapped the cloth swiftly around her wrists, binding her hands together above her head. Surprise registered in her features, and a smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

“Naughty,” she said, then winked and lay on the bed, her legs spread wide before him.

Her pussy glistened, its juices coating the inside of her thighs, and his cock throbbed in response. Nestling between those thighs would be so easy, and plunging his hard, ready shaft between her moist lips would definitely provide the release he sought.

But not yet. If she wanted him to trust her, she had to do the same.

He glanced around the room for the cloth that kept his cock sheathed and found it lying at the foot of the bed where she must have tossed it along with her clothes. He picked it up and folded it the same way as her garment, and leaned over Nefertiti’s legs.

A gentle kiss on her right ankle made her murmur his name. She’d never said it like that before. That tone, the sweet lilt of lust and desire in her voice, combined with something softer, affection perhaps, made his heart pound along with the throbbing in his cock.

He brought her ankles together and bound them easily with the folded loincloth.

“It’ll be hard to fuck me this way,” she said, glancing down at her thighs pressed together, blocking the way to her sweet cunt.

“Not necessarily,” he whispered.

Nefertiti would never go for what he had in mind. At least the old Nefertiti wouldn’t, the one he’d last seen months ago when he stayed behind while she headed to Akhet-Aten. This creature, however, this

woman that looked and sounded like his wife, clearly didn't share her reservations when it came to lovemaking. Whatever had gotten into Nefertiti while he'd been away, he only wished it had happened sooner.

"Do you trust me?" he echoed her words, and she nodded.

"Implicitly."

"Good. Lie on your stomach."

Nefertiti rolled over without objection, keeping her bound arms raised above her head. She looked so sleek, so perfect, her back arching slightly as she lay her head on one outstretched arm.

But it was her ass that captivated Akhenaten. Those two perfect, luscious globes, the tan skin so smooth and flawless that the candlelight glistened off it. He bent down and licked the spot where the curve of her ass met her leg, then plunged his tongue into the tight spot between her thighs. He tasted her wetness, and she groaned, lifting herself up slightly on her knees to give him better access to her hidden passage.

Now he had the perfect view of her tight pussy, the pink lips dripping with her sweet juices. He lapped at them, working his tongue between her folds, as deep inside her as he could get.

Nefertiti moaned louder with each lick of her pussy, and her hips swayed with him, pushing her beautiful cunt deeper into his face. His cock felt as hard as a rock, and he grabbed it, running his hand up and down the hard length as he buried his tongue deeper into her.

She came with a loud moan and a shudder, her pussy clenching and spasming around his tongue. Akhenaten nearly came on the sheets, but he forced his hand away from his cock and lifted his head from her depths. She fell back onto the bed, still facedown.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My legs can't take much more of this."

"No problem. Relax."

He worked his hands over the firm globes of her ass and spread them apart, the dark flesh revealing a hidden entrance he'd never dared explore. The dark rose of her anus glistened with her juices, an invitation he couldn't resist. Dipping his fingers in the moisture between her legs, he gathered some of her natural cream and spread it over his engorged cock.

He moved above her and spread her buttocks open, the tip of his cock nudging against her ass. He expected her to protest, or maybe even cry out. His cock was huge now, aching to be thrust into a place hot and tight, a place unexplored.

She surprised him again by saying, simply, "I trust you."

He couldn't bear to watch his cock enter her ass, or he'd lose control and come before he'd even begun. Instead, he focused his gaze on the curve of her shoulders, the slope of her neck, the thick black hair falling over the bed. He went slowly, nudging himself into her a little each time, listening to her gasps and following those sounds like a roadmap. His cock slid into her ass gently, delicately, as he waited for her muscles to adjust and relax to the intrusion.

"Tell me if you want me to stop."

“More,” she said.

He plunged his cock into her ass in its entirety, amazed at how tight a fit it was, and the immediate feel of warmth and delight made him cry out. There was less lubrication, but each slight movement threatened to send him over the edge.

She pressed back against him, driving him deeper, encouraging him with her moans. He slipped his cock almost all the way out, then pushed himself back into her tight ass.

The movements were still slow, but the pleasure was so intense that it didn't matter. There was no need to go any faster. Each thrust built upon the previous one, and his balls tightened until he could no longer keep the orgasm at bay.

He held himself still over her and shuddered, releasing a jet of cum inside her.

“I want to hear you,” she said, but her voice sounded muffled over the roar of the blood pounding in his ears. He cried out, allowing the pleasure to drain out of him as his cock continued to squirt its delight. The fierce jet brought her to orgasm, her whole body tensing and quivering with delight.

When he finally pulled out of her, his eyes were glued to the white stream that had splashed over her ass and flowed down the backs of her legs.

“You're so beautiful,” he said, spreading the wetness over her ass with the palm of his hand.

“So are you,” she whispered, breathlessly.

He felt dizzy, the blood suddenly rushing away from his head, and he untied her hands quickly before collapsing beside her.

Nefertiti rolled onto her side and ran her fingers over his chest, over his arms with a feather-light touch. The release of the potent orgasm, combined with her ministrations, now made his eyes feel heavy and his eyelids droop.

“You believe that I was telling the truth?”

“I do,” he said, and forced his eyes open to look at her. She glanced back at him, wide-eyed and honest, and he couldn't keep the smile away. “I believe you.”

She returned the gesture with a dazzling smile of her own. It lit up her face, her eyes, and made her look even more beautiful, which Akhenaten hadn't thought possible before now.

“I love --”

A crash from outside the doors interrupted his words. Angry voices rose from the hallway.

“The pharaoh insisted he didn't want to be disturbed,” someone said.

“It's urgent,” another voice answered. “You'll allow me in at once.”

Akhenaten groaned and sat up. “I wonder if it would be any easier to make love to my wife if I wasn't

pharaoh,” he said as he put on his clothes.

Nefertiti rose also and dressed quickly while he went to the doors.

“What is it?” he growled as he threw them open.

A lean man with a narrow face and a long nose stood in the doorway. “The royal physician begs an audience with the queen.”

“Again?” Akhenaten turned to stare at her, expecting an explanation. “That’s twice in two days!” he continued when she didn’t volunteer any information. “I’m coming with you.”

“No.” The answer came swiftly. Nefertiti placed a hand on his chest and leaned in to brush her lips over his. “Not this time.”

“But --”

She kissed him again to stop his protest. “I’ll be back soon.” Akhenaten’s mouth tingled, the touch of her lips lingering as she walked away. Her hips swayed sensually, and his gaze focused on her ass. His cock stirred at the memory of the passion they’d just shared.

He watched her disappear around the corner, and his thoughts shifted from lust to concern.

“Someone around here has to tell me what’s going on,” he said, following her.

For the second time in as many days, Akhenaten found himself chasing after his wife as she left her chambers.

Chapter Eight

An unnerving hush had fallen over the royal palace, deepening Nell’s unease. Was something wrong with her baby? Why else would the physician have asked for her so soon after her having last seen him? The examination had taken a long time, but he’d assured her that as far as he could tell, her pregnancy was developing as expected. There were no signs of strain and no indications of an impending miscarriage.

Had he revised his prognosis?

Nell quickened her stride, eager to meet with the physician and get this over with. She could deal with whatever he had to tell her, but not knowing made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. The guards escorting her matched her pace, and Nell forced herself to stifle a sigh.

Experiencing the kind of passionate encounter that she and Akhenaten had just shared didn’t mean he was ready to let her run around the palace unattended. But at least he no longer regarded her as a traitor. A sharp stab of pain pierced her chest at the thought of the hurt in his eyes and the downturn of his mouth in a permanent frown. She never wanted to see that expression mar his features again.

It took Nell longer than it would have taken Nefertiti to make her way through the palace, but she

eventually found her way to the physician's quarters unaided. She stopped before the double doors and turned to the guards.

"I'll enter alone."

The four men standing before her offered no protest. They bowed and settled in to wait, pairing off to each side of the entrance.

Nell pushed the door open and stepped in, giving herself a moment to adjust to the dimness. Inside, the air was warm, oppressive, and only the slightest glow from the moon reached into the dark chamber, casting an eerie shine over the barren room. Everything appeared much the same as it had the last time she'd been there, except now someone occupied the examination table in the center. A small, thin figure lay on the marble slab, a sheet draped over the still form.

Nell took a few tentative steps forward, scanning the darkness for any sign of the physician. She couldn't see him, so she moved closer to the shape on the table.

"Nefertiti?" The voice was weak and scratchy, barely above a whisper.

"Muet." Nell reached out and grabbed the girl's hand. In the dim light, she could barely make out the girl's features.

"Let me light a candle, sweetheart. I'll be right back." She tried to remove her hand from the girl's grasp, but Muet's grip was stronger, and wouldn't yield.

"Don't go," the girl whispered, tightening her hold. "Please."

"I'm not leaving you. I'm just going to get a candle, okay?"

Reluctantly, Muet released her hand, and Nell hastily searched the nearby table for a light source. It took her a few minutes to find the candle; then a new problem arose. How did the ancient Egyptians light candles without matches?

She rifled through the objects on the table for some kind of flint and tinder box, but couldn't see anything that might serve her purposes. Unwilling to leave Muet alone while she went in search of help, she shouted for the guards.

The four men marched into the room swiftly, their weapons drawn.

"No, no. Put those down." She gestured to their spears, and they obeyed. Nell could make out their collective frown, and she hastened to reassure them that her need demanded a different kind of aid.

"I need a light."

"A light, my queen?" one of them asked, perplexed.

"You heard me." Nell waved the unlit candle in the air. "A light."

"Ah." The man stepped back out into the hall and returned a moment later with a torch. Nell dipped the wick of her candle into the blaze and watched as it caught fire. Then she blew it out and grabbed the torch from the guard.

“This’ll do. You may go.”

The guards bowed and left, their backs stiff and straight as always. She could only imagine the gossip they must engage in when she was out of earshot.

With a shrug, she turned back to the bed, letting the light spread its orange glow over the white sheets. When her gaze fell on Muet’s face, Nell gasped and nearly dropped the torch.

“My God,” she said without thinking. “What’s happened to you?”

A dark purple bruise overwhelmed Muet’s right cheek, and her eye was swollen shut. Nell traced her fingertips over the girl’s forehead, careful to avoid the wound.

Muet turned her head away. “I fell.”

“You fell?” Nell echoed. She was no expert on injuries, but this didn’t look like it could have been caused by a fall. “How?”

“I tripped. Outside. I landed with my head against the fountain; then I blacked out. The physician must have found me, because when I woke up, I was here. And so were you.”

“But how did you trip?”

Nell couldn’t understand how a healthy teenager could fall like that. Most people would have put their hands out as a reflex to catch themselves.

Muet moved her small shoulders slightly, trying to shrug under the sheet. The linen fell away a little, revealing her upper arms. Another bruise, this one not quite as dark, stood out against her tan skin just above her elbow.

“Did someone grab you?” Nell asked, pointing to the bruise. Muet yanked the sheet and pulled it back to her neck.

“No,” she said, not meeting Nell’s eyes.

Nell released a frustrated sigh. She knew better than to try to argue with a teenager when they became sullen and uncooperative. She’d been one herself. But despite that knowledge, she tried again.

“Tell me, sweetheart. Did someone hurt you?”

“No one hurt her, my queen.” Nell jumped and spun around at the sound of the deep voice. The royal physician stood a few feet away from her, his arms folded across his chest. “The girl fell.”

“Yes, so she says.” Nell clutched the physician’s arm and led him to the far end of the room. She dropped her voice to a low whisper. “Do you believe her?”

She still held the torch, and the fire reflected in the physician’s eyes. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“The bruises. The ones on her arms, and her swollen eye. You don’t get that from falling.”

"Forgive me, my queen, but how much medical training have you had?" He lifted an eyebrow, and Nell blushed under his scrutiny. She wondered whether he had any right to question her like that, then decided that perhaps she shouldn't push it. She knew too little about Egyptian customs to call him on any improper behavior.

"None, but --"

"Then please allow me to see to your sister." He swept past her and bent over the bed, then withdrew a small container from the folds of his robes.

"Don't turn away," he told Muet, the authority in his voice leaving no room for argument. Nell remembered the way she'd yielded to his examinations the previous day and forced herself to suppress a shiver.

She moved in closer to get a better glimpse of the object he held in his hand, but she could only make out a white, sticky substance, which the physician spread over the bruise. Muet winced as his fingers made contact with her face, but she didn't cry out. Nell had to admire her for that -- the puffy, swollen eye looked tender and painful.

There didn't seem to be much she could do for the girl, so she brushed her fingertips over her lips and blew Muet a kiss. She thought she saw the corners of the girl's mouth twitch in a hint of a smile.

"We'll talk again later," Nell said and left the room.

The guards fell into step behind her.

"Take this." Nell handed the torch to the guard who had brought it for her earlier, and he placed it in a sconce on the wall. A long row of similar torches illuminated the hallway, along with the thin stream of moonlight pouring through the open gaps in the wall.

She'd only taken a couple of steps when a tall, bulky man appeared in her path. She inclined her head and quickened her step to walk past him, but he cleared his throat and spoke.

"My queen. A word with you, if I may?"

Nell stopped, annoyed at the interruption. She wanted to be alone to think about Muet. Better yet, she wanted to see Akhenaten, tell him what happened, and ask his advice. He'd know if there was anything untoward going on in the palace.

She hoped.

"What is it?"

The man's eyes narrowed, and he drew his brows together in a frown. His face mingled charm with brute power, and a chill enveloped her as she watched his expression.

"Muet," he said. "How is she?"

"What do you know about my sister's fall?" Nell knew her voice had an edge to it, but she couldn't help it. The man's stance, his entire presence, bothered her in a way she couldn't explain. She'd never seen him before, yet every instinct in her body signaled caution.

He lifted his hands in a gesture of supplication, his lips drawn together in a tight smile. "I heard she had an accident. I was only concerned about her welfare, and who better to ask than her own sister? You've seen her, I presume?" He tilted his head toward the doors of the physician's chambers.

"Yes." Nell's irritation grew by the moment. "What's your relationship to my sister?"

He inhaled sharply, his eyes narrowing even further. "I'm only a concerned friend."

Right. And I'm the queen of Egypt.

"I'm sure you are. My sister is not well, as you know. She's not to have any visitors." The physician had said nothing of the sort, but Nell hoped her bluff would hold. She assumed this man wouldn't question her authority any more than he would have questioned the physician's orders.

She thought she saw him clench his jaw, but his demeanor didn't change.

"As you say." He smiled, showing a full mouth of perfect teeth that glistened in the torchlight. "I hope she recovers well."

"I'm sure she will." Nell lifted her chin, signaling the end of the conversation, but the man didn't move. He continued to stare, and she held his gaze, unwilling to be intimidated. He lifted his hand and ran it over his bald head, the gesture allowing the long, loose sleeve of his robe to fall back to his elbow. The symbol of Amun-Ra, the one that had caused her so much hardship over the last twenty-four hours, had been etched in black ink on the man's wrist.

As quickly as the robes revealed his skin, he drew the material back to cover the mark. Nell made sure her features revealed nothing of the suspicion gnawing inside her.

"Please tell your sister I wish her well," he said, and finally departed. A knot had formed in her stomach, and Nell turned to make sure he didn't enter the physician's chambers. She breathed a sigh of relief when he turned the corner.

Once he was out of sight, she allowed herself to tremble at the implications of that mark. It could mean nothing, of course. He might have had it done before Akhenaten became pharaoh, before he'd forbidden the worship of the old gods.

Or he could be betraying Akhenaten even now.

"That man --"

"Ramose," one of the guards answered helpfully.

Nell nodded. At least she knew his name, if not his position in the royal palace. "Take me to his chambers."

The men faltered. None spoke or met her eyes.

"Do you always act like this when your queen commands you? His chambers. Now." She hoped her voice sounded authoritative enough, and she mumbled a silent thank you to her acting coach.

This would either work, or it would get her thrown into the dungeon. She hoped for the former.

“This way, my queen.” One of the men finally moved forward and led her through a number of corridors and down a narrow set of stairs.

“The royal vizier’s chambers,” he announced as they stopped in front of a set of remarkably unadorned doors.

“Letshope he’s not home,” she said.

Akhenaten hid behind a tall column and watched as Nefertiti stopped to talk to Ramose. The two of them had never liked each other, so this little encounter was even more bizarre. Then again, everything had been odd since he’d arrived at the palace. From his wife’s behavior and her possible illness, to the mystery of the empty coffers and the fact that he continued to sneak around his own palace like a common criminal, none of this made any sense.

He flattened himself against the pillar and wished he could hear their words. Neither one looked happy, which was probably a good sign. At least that much hadn’t changed.

Ramose ran a hand over his head and then bowed before making his way down the corridor. He walked past the column where Akhenaten hid, mumbling under his breath. Frustrated that he couldn’t make out Ramose’s words, Akhenaten glanced at Nefertiti. She stared in his direction, her gaze remaining fixed on Ramose’s retreating back.

When she turned away, Akhenaten started to follow, then changed his mind and went in the opposite direction.

He caught up to Ramose quickly and placed a hand on the vizier’s shoulder. Ramose jumped slightly, then turned, the expression on his face impassive, as if he was accustomed to having the pharaoh prowling the halls alone at night.

Akhenaten cleared his throat, trying to regain some of his authority. “Have you seen Nefertiti?” he asked, hoping Ramose hadn’t spotted him in the hallway after all.

“Yes. She just left the physician’s chambers.” Ramose nodded dismissively and started walking away.

Akhenaten’s patience began to wear thin. Even the royal vizier didn’t have the right to treat his pharaoh with disrespect.

He swallowed the sharp remark on his tongue and fell into step beside Ramose. If this man knew more about Nefertiti’s mysterious behavior than he let on, putting up with a little insolence would be a small price to pay for the answers he’d been seeking.

When Ramose realized Akhenaten meant to walk with him wherever he was going, he stopped again. “Is there more I can do for you tonight?”

“You mentioned Nefertiti’s extravagant spending, yet that’s quite unlike her. What has she been buying?”

Ramose shrugged. "I'm not certain. I believe you'd have to ask her."

Akhenaten took a deep breath and tried again. "But you're the vizier. Why would you let her take the treasure without at least finding out her intentions?"

"It's not my place to question," he said, a small smile twitching at the corner of his lips. "I assumed she was under orders from you."

"Well, she wasn't," Akhenaten snapped. He rubbed the bridge of his nose to ward off an impending headache. "Are you sure you don't know anything else?"

"I saw her pray," Ramose said, his gaze piercing into Akhenaten's eyes.

"Yes, you've said that before. You also hinted that she wasn't praying to Aten. How do you know this? Did you hear her?"

"No. I only saw her."

"And what led you to believe she was being disloyal?"

"Many things. And nothing at all." Ramose smiled, his lips turning into a thin line that almost disappeared into his broad face.

"Unless you're willing to stop playing games, this discussion is over," Akhenaten said, trying to rid himself of the mental image of strangling the man.

"As you wish," Ramose said and turned away.

This time, Akhenaten didn't follow. Trying to get information out of Ramose was useless when he wasn't willing to give it. Akhenaten had made him royal vizier over five years ago, and in that time he'd found Ramose to be a loyal servant, if a little odd in his behavior. He could be sullen and withdrawn one moment, and entirely gleeful the next. Akhenaten avoided him as much as possible, yet until now, Ramose had handled the royal funds extremely well.

Ramose had said that the coffers had been entirely drained, but Akhenaten couldn't fathom such a thing. There was treasure upon treasure that his father, and his father before him, had accumulated during their reigns. No matter how much wealth his wife could spend, she couldn't squander away all of it. Not in an entire lifetime.

He headed back the way he'd come. If Ramose couldn't answer any questions about Nefertiti, maybe the physician could.

He walked into the physician's chamber, and the oppressive darkness enveloped him like a cloak. He shuddered, a chill creeping up his spine, reminding him why he hated physicians. He'd always associated them with death, their dark, dreary habits no better than those of the men who embalmed the departed for entry into the afterworld.

Logically, Akhenaten knew death wasn't something to fear. He'd been taught that the body was only a vessel and the soul traveled on to meet with the sun god, yet something about the entire process filled him with revulsion. Even following Nefertiti into the tombs had taken all his self-control, and as he'd treaded the sacred ground after her, he'd nearly expected mummies to jump out of the sarcophagi.

It was a good thing the tombs had only just been built, as they should have been empty of any unwelcome guests.

The body on the table in the middle of the room was perfectly still, and for a moment, Akhenaten feared that the woman lying there was indeed dead, awaiting burial. Then she stirred and looked at him, and Akhenaten recognized her features in the pale moonlight.

The physician spoke from the back of the room. "Ah, Pharaoh. If the queen sent you, please tell her not to worry. Her sister will make a full recovery."

Akhenaten took in the bruise on the girl's cheek, her shut black eye. "What happened?" he asked her, but it was the physician who answered.

"She fell."

"I see." He supposed it was possible, though the bruises looked worse than those of any fall he'd ever taken.

"It's time for another salve," the physician said and lifted a small container from a nearby table. He poured oozing liquid into his hands, his motions no more than shadowy gestures in the darkness. "Was there anything else?" he asked.

"No. Well, yes. But you're busy. I'll come back later." He didn't want to discuss Nefertiti's illness in front of her sister, not in Muet's current condition. If Muet had been telling him the truth earlier, then she had no more knowledge of Nefertiti's illness than he did, and finding out the truth might upset her, which in turn could interfere with her healing process.

And Nefertiti would never forgive him.

He walked out of the chamber and let his feet carry him out of the palace. The night was balmy and warm, and he walked through the gardens, inhaling the scent of jasmine and the night air. *Fresh air.* Wasn't that what Nefertiti had gone out for? Strolling through the garden, he now knew what she meant. Perhaps a walk through town in the middle of the night wasn't such a bad idea after all.

He considered summoning the guards to accompany him, then decided to remove his headgear and leave it behind. He placed it on the ground, between bundles of narcissus and strands of ivy. Without it, he could pass for a common citizen, a man like any other in Akhet-Aten.

He set off in the direction of the temple. It should have been finished by now, but construction continued, and Akhenaten struggled to convince himself that inspecting the workmanship would do wonders for getting his mind off his wife.

At the very least it might dull the ache in his groin, the constant reminder of how much he yearned for her.

"My queen!" one of the guards hissed as Nell pushed open the door to Ramose's chambers. "Back away!"

She turned to face him, annoyed at the interruption, already considering a number of punishments for the insolent guard. He might have been assigned to watch over her, but he still had no right to tell her where she could or couldn't go.

Even if she was breaking and entering.

And yet, was that even a crime in ancient times? When had privacy laws prevailed? Nell had always been under the impression that in a monarchical rule, those in power had the right to do as they pleased.

As she contemplated a way to deal with the guard, she found herself still staring into Ramose's chambers. The torches in the hallway flickered and glowed, casting an orange flush over the ornately decorated room. She could make out a bed, a few chairs, but nothing incriminating from the doorway.

Someone placed a heavy hand on her arm, and she jumped, covering her mouth with her hand to stifle a surprised scream.

"How dare you?" she said to the guard who had grabbed her. "The pharaoh will have your head." That sounded more medieval than ancient Egyptian, but she hoped the guard wouldn't notice.

"But, my queen ..." He faltered for a moment, then continued. "He's coming."

"Ramose?"

The man nodded. "I sent a man to keep watch, and he spotted him down the hall. We don't have much time."

Nell shrank back against the wall, looking wildly for somewhere to hide. The guard still held her arm, and he pointed to a nearby room. "That one's empty."

She allowed him to lead her into the chamber, and the three remaining guards quickly rushed in after them. One carried a torch, which splattered light over the barren room.

"How did you know it was empty?" She whispered to the guard.

He blushed. "I've come here a time or two."

Nell turned away to hide her smile. Fooling around on the job was obviously not a modern invention.

"Put out the torch," she said, sneaking another peek out into the hallway. She held the door open just enough to peer through. There was still no sign of Ramose, but if the guard was right, he'd arrive soon.

"What's your name?" she asked the man who'd warned her. Even in the dark, she could make out faint traces of his young features. He couldn't have been older than eighteen. The slight fuzz on his upper lip stood out in contrast to his youthful face and smooth skin. She remembered freckles dotting the bridge of his nose, and ears that seemed too large for the rest of his head.

"Khai, my queen."

"Thank you, Khai."

The guard look startled, but he bowed stiffly at the waist. He kept his gaze on the floor. Was it even

appropriate to thank guards? The man was only doing his job; perhaps gratitude from authority figures was frowned upon.

Ramose's heavy robes shimmered in the firelight as he turned the corner and headed for his chambers. He walked straight into his room, without so much as glancing into the dark chamber where Nell and the guards stood clustered near the door.

"Khai, I need you to do me a favor." Nell cringed as soon as the words were out of her mouth. "I mean -- I need you to do something for me." There, that was a little better.

"Anything, my queen," he replied from the darkness. She heard the shuffling of feet and weapons and assumed the guards must have been preparing for a full attack. She wondered if they'd actually storm Ramose's room on her command. Then what? They'd arrest him? Kill him?

She shook her head and continued, eager to set the guards at ease. "Ramose has been summoned to deal with an urgent issue. Apparently, there's been a problem with the workers' pay."

"I'll let him know," Khai said at once, comprehension and obedience clear in his tone. He slid through the opening in the door, pulling it almost closed behind him.

From where she stood, Nell watched him knock on Ramose's door. He maintained a cool composure as he delivered the message, then bowed and turned away after Ramose's short reply. She couldn't make out their words, but the glower on Ramose's face indicated he wasn't too happy at being summoned away in the middle of the night.

Khai walked down the corridor, away from the empty chamber, and turned the corner. Only when he was out of sight did Ramose shut the door behind him. He headed in the opposite direction and disappeared down the darkened hallway.

Nell exhaled a sigh of relief and stepped out from her hiding spot. She waited until Khai rushed back.

"He didn't seem too pleased," she said.

"He wanted to know why this couldn't wait until the morning," Khai said. "I told him he'd have a revolt on his hands if he did. It seems the workers want their pay, and they want it now." A smirk formed over his handsome features, and his dark eyes sparkled.

Nell couldn't suppress a giggle. "Why, Khai, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were enjoying this."

The smirk faded. "I'm sorry, my queen."

"Don't be." She leaned in confidentially. "I'm enjoying this, too."

He smiled, but he seemed less sure of himself now, and Nell regretted having said anything.

She stormed through the doors to Ramose's chambers, uncertain of how long he'd be gone. The records office was nearly in the middle of town, but he could change his mind and decide to deal with the issue the next morning after all.

Ramose had lit candles throughout his chamber after he'd arrived, and hadn't bothered to blow them out. They bathed the room in a soft light, relieving Nell of the added burden of having to carry a torch.

The guards waited outside, and she had all the privacy and space she needed to snoop around the room.

A pang of guilt hit her suddenly, and she considered turning back. There was probably nothing to find here. But the memory of Muet's battered face urged her on. If she didn't find anything, then that would be the end of the matter, but she owed it to Muet to at least try. Ramose had seemed much too interested in the girl's welfare to be completely unaware of the circumstances under which she "fell."

Nell started her search with a long marble table low to the ground. Stone tablets and scrolls had been scattered haphazardly over it, and she scanned them quickly, but the hieroglyphs meant nothing to her. However odd, she could speak the language, but couldn't read it.

She stood up in frustration and called out to Khai .

"It seems I need your help again," she said when he approached.

His only reply was another stiff bow.

"Take a look through these. Tell me if you find anything unusual."

He set to work, and she continued roaming the chamber. A large container at the foot of the bed held thick robes identical to the one Ramose wore. She guessed there must have been at least ten in there.

Subtle and beautiful color variations sparkled in the designs of heavy fired pots adorning the chamber. Small statues were spread out randomly over a few shelves, but she couldn't find anything incriminating. No other symbols of Amun-Ra like the one tattooed on his wrist. No statues of the forbidden gods at all, as far as she could tell.

A smaller box held gold jewelry. She pulled out a long, heavy necklace, but the symbol of Aten hung from the bottom. She placed it back in the container and slammed the lid shut.

Dejected, she collapsed onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. If Ramose wasn't involved in her sister's accident, and she'd been wrong about him, then being here was a complete waste of time. Not to mention dangerous.

She stretched out on the thick covers, and something sharp prodded at her hip. She wiggled around it, but it seemed solid, and she couldn't get comfortable again. She sighed and stood up. Curious as to what lay beneath the blankets, Nell tossed back the covers to reveal a large stone tablet. The hieroglyphs seemed to have been carved recently, as dust from the marble came off on her hands as she ran her fingers over the indents.

"Khai, take a look at this."

He sat cross-legged before the table, reading a scroll. She placed the tablet in front of him, then crossed her arms over her chest and waited while he read, silently, to himself.

"The coffers are empty," he announced without looking at her.

"What?" she asked, startled, hoping she'd heard wrong. "You mean all the royal funds are gone?"

He nodded, and traced a finger over the figures etched in the marble. "According to this, the last of the treasures were liquidated a few days before the pharaoh's arrival."

“Liquidated? What does that mean?”

Khaishrugged. “I don’t know. But they’re gone.”

Nell wrapped her arms tighter around herself to make her body stop trembling. “Does the pharaoh know?”

Khaiblooked up, his dark eyes sincere. “I don’t know, my queen.”

“We’re done here,” Nell announced, grabbing the tablet from the table.

Khaifollowed her out of the room without another word. Outside, she turned left, heading for the royal chambers.

Would Ramose have told Akhenaten about the missing treasure? And how could all the fundsbe drained before the city had even been completed? Akhenaten didn’t strike her as foolish in matters of rule, or finance.

She gripped the tablet tighter under her arm and quickened her step. She had to find Akhenaten and tell him about the state of his coffers.

And regardless of the fact that she had no more proof than the glyphs she couldn’t read, every instinct told her she had to warn Akhenaten about Ramose.

Chapter Nine

The streets were quiet, draped in an unnatural tranquility that enveloped the houses, empty merchant stalls, and official buildings. There were no sounds at all -- no animals, insects, or the hum of voices in the distance.

Akhenaten strolled through the streets, letting the moon guide his steps, admiring the beauty of his new city. The workers had done well, having built the city almost in its entirety in only a few short months.

A slight breeze played through his hair and clothes, tickling his neck. He could make out the temple in the distance, a large structure made entirely of white marble,its two tall towers looming over the city.

He paused when he reached the wall where the symbol of Amun-Ra had been painted earlier. It was gone now, leaving the wall spotless and bare. He remembered Nefertiti’s surprise at seeing the symbol, the way he had to explain to her what it meant. He’d thought she’d hit her head harder than she’d let on, but now her frequent visits with the physician worried him further.

Was she losing her memory? Had she forgotten the way she’d felt about him for the six years of their marriage?

He frowned and quickened his step, his gaze fixed on the temple before him. Nefertiti had always treated him more like a friend than a lover, though he’d simply assumed she’d never had an interest in

sex. He had no concerns about her fidelity; he only presumed his wife lacked the capacity for lust. Though he was lascivious enough for both of them, he felt guilty for pushing his needs on her, for making her suffer through what for her was obviously an uninteresting task at best, unpleasant at worst.

But now ... whether this illness had anything to do with it or not, Nefertiti had changed in his absence. She looked the same, certainly, but her behavior was that of another woman entirely.

Lost in thought, Akhenaten didn't realize he'd reached the temple until the large gates took shape before him. He strolled into the garden, drawn by the scent of jasmine and the gentle tinkling of water nearby. A white marble fountain greeted him, and he ambled over to it, sat on its edge, and let his fingers trail through the clear water.

The sun-disk symbol of Aten stood out, large and impressive, in the middle of the fountain. It watched over the water, the garden, the temple, and Akhenaten himself. He could almost feel the power of Aten emanating from the carving, its strength and influence holding as much sway over him as ever.

He reached out to touch the marble and closed his eyes. The figure of the sun, bright and sharp in his mind's eye, took form, hovering in midair before him. Aten always came to him when he prayed. He'd shown Akhenaten the right path in every decision he'd ever made, from his marriage to Nefertiti to the building of Akhet-Aten .

"I am your son, exalting your name," Akhenaten began, the power of the prayer washing over him, soothing his nerves. "Your strength and power are established in my heart. I will obey your wish, your every command. And yet, I need your help."

He lifted his head and opened his eyes, gazing reverently upon the still form of the sun disk. He intended to let his gaze linger, to feel the will of Aten speak to his soul, but his eye caught a movement to his left, a blur of white against the dark backdrop of the garden. Still touching the sun-disk, he turned his head toward the motion, and his gaze fell on the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Nefertiti.

She was here. But that was impossible. No one knew where he was. He hadn't told a soul he'd be walking out this way. How had she known where to find him?

She seemed to float over the grass, along the pebbled path that led to the fountain. He blinked to clear the fog from his eyes, but she still looked shrouded in a white haze, a vapor that made her appear more like a spirit than a woman.

That had to be it. She wasn't really here at all. Aten had sent an image of her, an apparition to show him the path he had to take.

The ghostly visage of Nefertiti held something under her arm, a large stone block or tablet; he wasn't quite sure. Perhaps he'd find the answers he sought written on the marble slab, inscribed by Aten himself.

She placed the tablet on the grass and reached out her slim arms to envelop him. Her skin felt cool around his neck, but she pressed her firm body against his, and he felt the lush heat emanating from her. The dense, hot warmth of her breath drew him helplessly, and he searched for her lips, eager for the taste of her, for the feel of her smooth lips against his, her silky tongue in his mouth.

She tasted of honey and cinnamon, and he kissed her hungrily, thoroughly. He closed his eyes and pulled

her closer, and she settled on his lap, her breasts pressed close to his chest, her legs dangling over his.

Akhenaten let his hands roam over her arms, her waist, then back up to her breasts. He cupped one in his hand, feeling its weight. He squeezed slightly, just enough to elicit a moan from the ghostly presence in his lap, and he moved on to the other breast, unwilling to neglect any tantalizing piece of her.

He tweaked a nipple between thumb and forefinger through the thin shift she wore. Another gasp, and she slid her tongue into his mouth, deepened the kiss, fought him for the possession he thought he had. Her hands roamed as his had done, over his chest, down the front of his abdomen and lower, until she grabbed his cock and held it, ran her hand over the hard length.

He trembled, unsure of whether to continue. Would Aten be angry at his indiscretion, if he were to make love with his emissary? What if this was all part of his plan? Would he be pleased?

Akhenaten lifted Nefertiti in his arms and laid her gently on the grass. It was slightly wet with dew, but she didn't protest, only stared up at him with unheeded lust and pleasure in her gaze. Her hair shimmered softly, and her eyes grew darker, mysterious as twilight.

"You're mine," he whispered, then claimed her mouth again and climbed on top of her, pressing his body against hers, spreading her legs with his knee. "All mine."

Nell struggled to keep her thoughts in check while Akhenaten kissed her, but those full, gorgeous lips made it hard to concentrate on anything else. Nearby, guards stood at the ready, hidden behind lush foliage. They'd followed her from the palace, yet even their presence couldn't still Nell's response to Akhenaten's touch. He nibbled on her bottom lip while his hand gently probed between her legs. His body pressed down on hers, the weight of him both comforting and arousing.

"Wait," she mumbled between kisses. "I have something to tell you."

"Later," he whispered against her neck. He trailed blazing kisses down her breasts; then his mouth dipped lower and captured a hard nipple between his teeth.

Nell arched her back and wound her fingers through his hair, pulling him closer. Ramose be damned. The only thing that mattered was the fact that Akhenaten, her dream lover for countless months, was now here, in the flesh, ready and willing to make love to her. They were outdoors in a gorgeous garden, surrounded by the scent of jasmine and the cool, fresh air against their skin.

Akhenaten lifted his head from her breast and eyed her with a piercing stare. Lifting herself up on her elbows, she met his gaze and lifted a questioning eyebrow.

"I want to worship you," he said finally, after what seemed like minutes. Every nerve ending in her body responded to his touch, his words, and she shivered, though the air wasn't any cooler than it had been a moment before.

She giggled nervously. "Watch it, Pharaoh. Someone up there may consider your words blasphemous."

Akhenaten turned his head to the carving of the sun disk on the fountain, then shrugged, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Atenmay be god, but you are my goddess.”

Nell groaned and fell back onto the grass, spreading her legs. “That’s it. If you don’t fuck me now, I can’t be held responsible for what I might do to you.”

Akhenaten shifted down and chuckled against her leg, a throaty sound that reverberated through her thigh and settled between her legs. She couldn’t be sure if the hum she felt in her pussy was the throbbing of her arousal or the murmur of his voice.

Not wearing panties proved extremely convenient. The musky scent of her arousal hung heavy in the air. When Akhenaten flicked his tongue over her engorged folds, she bit her bottom lip to keep from screaming.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and relished the feel of his movements along with the sheer ecstasy of his tongue on her eager cunt. He licked her with soft, deliberate strokes, gentle yet absolutely maddening. He knew just how to tease her, to keep her on the brink of orgasm without taking her over the edge. He continued to probe her pussy with his tongue as she spread her legs wider, pulling his face into her throbbing cunt.

He slipped a finger into her slippery hole, and she cried out, the inclination to keep quiet forgotten. He thrust his finger into her slowly at first, then faster, his tongue matching his motions. Just when she thought she couldn’t take it anymore, he slid another finger in beside the first, stretching her wider, making her cunt clamp tightly on to him. Then he nudged her clit with the tip of his tongue, and she was floating, her body relaxed but her pussy clenching, eager for release.

She screamed, her hips bucking hard against the ground, her head thrashing wildly from side to side. The rush of ecstasy blossomed in her core and pulsed through her veins, clenching her muscles in rapture.

When he slid his fingers out from inside her, she chocked back a sob, the loss of him too much to handle. “It’s never been like that before,” she managed to say. Orgasms had never had such a profound effect on her. They were wonderful, yes, but never like that, the kind of release that started deep in her core and traveled throughout every inch of her being.

She shuddered and brought her hand down to her pussy, rubbing herself absentmindedly. “That felt so good,” she continued. “I don’t want it to stop.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Akhenaten said, shedding the last of his clothes. While she recovered from the aftereffects of her release, he disrobed and stood before her in his full, naked glory.

His cock looked huge, standing tall and hard against his sleek, muscled body. She could make out the glistening drops of cum at its tip, a startling white contrast against his tan skin.

Nell licked her lips and lifted herself up on her elbows. “My turn?”

“Not what I had in mind.” He grinned another one of those devastating smiles and knelt between her legs, holding his cock in his hand. He prodded her entrance with its engorged tip, then grabbed her hips and thrust hard, deep inside her still-quivering pussy.

Nell made a sound between a sob and a cry of pleasure, something even she couldn’t identify.

“You feel so good,” she whispered as he set the pace, a fast, intense rhythm that made her back rub

furiously against the grass. She didn't care about the discomfort; the only sensation that mattered was the throb and yearning between her legs.

She was keenly aware of him fondling her clit while he fucked her, his thumb barely grazing the tender nub, yet each flick of his finger promising to send her over the edge.

He bent his head and placed a kiss on the side of her breasts, then followed the curve and stopped to graze at her nipple. His thrusts never faltered, but continued with the same ferocity with which he'd begun.

"I need to feel you come in me," she said and brought one hand down between them, searching, seeking the soft, sensitive sac below his cock. She fondled him gently, and he groaned and closed his eyes, slamming into her one last time and unleashing his seed in quick, fierce spurts.

He shuddered, and she lifted her legs and gripped him tight against her as he came, unwilling to miss a drop of his release. He gritted his teeth, but the moans were persistent; she could hear him even though he held back. When he opened his eyes, his gaze was filled with an intensity she'd never seen before.

"Nefertiti," he said, and she loosened her grip on him.

That wasn't her name.

It was as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice on her overheated, horny body. The effect was instant, the arousal fading at an alarming rate. He slid out of her, and she rolled onto her side and pressed the palms of her hands against her eyes to hold the tears at bay.

He wasn't her husband. He belonged to someone else. And no matter how much she might wish otherwise, he wasn't hers to have.

"I love you," he whispered from behind her, his arm enveloping her body. His hand found her breast and cupped it, pulling her closer against him.

"I know," she said, but the words sounded choked, and the tears she'd hoped wouldn't come burned just beneath her eyelids. Another word of love would set them free, and Nell didn't think she'd ever be able to stop crying if she started now.

She took a deep breath and willed her emotions to the furthest reaches of her heart. She was an actress. She could pretend anything if she set her mind to it. She could even pretend she didn't love him.

Nell twisted in his arms until she faced him, which was worse, because he eyed her with a mixture of concern and sheer adoration. She decided to focus her gaze on an indistinct spot on his flawless chin.

"I came here to warn you about Ramose," she said, eager to change the subject.

"Ramose? What about him?"

"I went to his chambers earlier," she said, risking a quick glance at Akhenaten's eyes. He furrowed his eyebrows together but didn't interrupt her, so she continued. "I had run in to him when I left the physician's chambers, and Muet."

Akhenaten nodded. "I saw Muet earlier, too. It's a shame about her accident."

“It wasn’t an accident,” Nell said, sitting up. Akhenaten followed her lead, and they sat there, cross-legged and naked, staring at one another. “My guess is that she was pushed, if she even fell at all.”

“The physician certainly seemed convinced that her fall was genuine. Did you tell him about your concerns?”

Nell nodded. “He brushed me off, muttering something about the fact that I don’t know anything about medicine. Which may be true,” she said, jabbing a finger in the air. “But I know bruises when I see them, and those looked like abuse to me.”

“Abuse?” Akhenaten said the word slowly, as if tasting it and finding it unpleasant. “And you think Ramose is involved?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” She sighed and picked at a blade of grass. “He just seemed much too curious about her welfare, and he frightened me.”

Akhenaten chuckled. “Ramose is a little intense, all right, but he wouldn’t harm anyone.”

Nell lifted an eyebrow. “Are you sure about that?”

“As sure as I can be about anyone.” He reached out to graze his fingers along her cheek, her jaw.

She leaned into the touch, but his comforting words didn’t alleviate her doubts. “I found that tablet in his chambers. The coffer is empty.”

She expected him to be surprised, maybe even furious. Instead, he only nodded, and kept his piercing gaze fixed on hers. “And I hear it’s all your doing.”

“Mine?” He might not have been surprised, but she was downright shocked. “What do you mean?”

“Ramose told me you drained the coffer.”

A chill ran through her body, and it took her a moment to regain the ability to speak.

“You don’t seem too concerned about that,” she murmured finally.

None of this made any sense. Could the one thing she could have accused Ramose of doing have been her fault all along? No, not hers. Nell hadn’t done anything. But Nefertiti might have.

“How could one woman spend the entire treasure of the Egyptian monarchy and have nothing to show for it?” He smiled and reached for her hand. “I’m sure Ramose is exaggerating. The treasure is still there. Especially since you seem as surprised as anyone to hear of its supposed disappearance.”

Nell nodded, unable to speak. What if she really had drained the coffer? But Akhenaten had a point. What could Nefertiti have done with all that treasure?

“Hey,” he waved a hand in front of her eyes. “Are you all right?”

“I’m concerned, that’s all. When I came across the tablet, I thought you should be told, and rushed right over here.”

“Which brings up a good point. How did you find me?”

“Oh, that.” She waved a hand dismissively. “The guards told me.”

“What guards? I came here alone. No one saw me leave.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” She pointed to the edge of the garden, where large palm trees leaned against each other like old friends. Tall shapes stood out among the grass, as rigid as the tree trunks.

Akhenaten bolted upright and snatched his clothes from the ground. “You mean they watched us?” He gestured wildly with his hands. “They saw us do that?”

Nell tossed her head back and laughed, surprised by his reaction. “I figured as pharaoh, you’d be used to having the undivided attention of your subjects.”

His scowl deepened. “Me, certainly. But I don’t think I like them watching you.” He picked up her thin garment and threw it over her shoulders. She obliged him and shrugged into it until it covered her breasts and fell midway down her thigh.

She looped her arm into his and stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Pretend I didn’t say anything.” His features softened, but she saw him cast a wary glance in the direction of the guards.

“Next time, just say something sooner.”

Nell covered her mouth to hold back a giggle, but it erupted from her throat anyway. The silvery laughter accompanied them as they held tight to one another and left the temple to Aten’s watchful eye.

Chapter Ten

Nell and Akhenaten had only taken a few steps out of the temple garden when Nell stopped abruptly in the middle of the road.

“Something wrong?” Akhenaten asked, his concern instantly etched on his handsome features. Nell’s heart pounded in her ears, and she pulled gently free of him to wrap herself tightly in her own arms.

She knew what she had to do, but no amount of acting classes had prepared her for this. Her heartache was real, and the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks weren’t a result of chemical fumes or onion peels.

“I ...” She faltered, her voice sounding scratchy with guilt. “I’d like to stay behind, pray for a while.”

Akhenaten’s features lightened visibly at her words. “You want to pray? To Aten?” She nodded, unwilling to speak. Lying to him like this, in front of his god, had to be blasphemous on so many levels.

“Then stay,” he said, brushing a hand across her jawline, pushing a sliver of hair back behind her shoulder. “I need to go back to the palace and speak to Ramose again. He knows more than he’s told

me.” He indicated the tablet he’d picked up from the garden.

Nell leaped into his arms, hugging him so tight that he gasped against her, his breath warm against her cheek.

Akhenaten laughed, and the utterance reached her core and fluttered there. She closed her eyes and willed the sound to memory, longing for the ability to recall it for the rest of her life.

She finally broke away from the hug and caressed his lips with a quick, fierce kiss that lasted only a moment.

“I’ll see you back at the palace,” he said, his lopsided grin hinting at lustful thoughts.

She nodded, and turned away into the garden. Tears fell freely down her cheeks; they poured in waves, and she sobbed, soundlessly, as he walked away.

Wiping the back of her hand over her tearstained face, she once again resolved to leave the man who had quickly become the most important person in her life.

She couldn’t stay in Egypt a moment longer. Every minute she spent here embedded this place, this time, and this man deeper into her blood. If she stayed tonight, she’d never leave. She’d live here with Akhenaten and Nefertiti’s baby forever.

Darting a glance around the corner to make sure Akhenaten had taken all his guards, she headed off in the direction of the tombs. Every few steps she glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one followed her, but the mention of prayer seemed to have gained her that extra level of trust Akhenaten had lacked in her. When he left the temple, so did his guards, and Nell found herself alone for the first time in days.

She raced down the narrow streets, the whitewashed buildings around her nothing more than a blur. Blood pounded in her head along with the beat of her heart, and she realized she’d never been more anxious in her entire life.

Leaving Egypt would be a million times harder than arriving here, yet she was convinced she’d made the right decision. Now that she’d planted a seed of doubt in Akhenaten’s mind about Ramose’s loyalty, she felt even better about her role here.

There had been a purpose to her leap through time. She’d been sent here to warn Akhenaten, to save him from whatever evil Ramose had planned. A rational thought at the back of her mind pointed out that she didn’t have enough proof to accuse Ramose of anything as serious as betrayal, but she hoped that if there was anything to find out, Akhenaten would uncover the truth.

He’d be safe.

He’d probably rule for a hundred years.

The prospect brought a smile to her face as she rounded the corner, and found herself standing in front of two guards, their faces composed and impassive.

She cleared her throat and walked up to them, stopping only inches away from one of the large men standing to the left of the tomb’s entrance. His head and face were neatly shaven, and his skin glistened in the bright moonlight.

“I’ll be only a moment,” she said to him, then veered quickly to her right to glide through the door.

The man lunged in after her. His hand gripped her arm with unexpected strength, his nails pinching her flesh.

“I’m afraid you won’t,” he said, pulling her back out. “No one’s allowed in there.”

Nell didn’t have to feign indignation. Every nerve in her body screamed out in frustration. “Those rules don’t apply to your queen,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

The man snarled, gave her a harsh appraisal that made her skin crawl. “That’s where you’re wrong. They apply to everyone.”

She clasped her hands together in front of her to keep from hitting him. The other guard looked ready to grab her if she tried anything, and she really didn’t want to end up in the royal dungeon, waiting for Akhenaten to bail her out.

“The pharaoh would never give such an order.”

She hoped.

“It’s by order of the royal vizier,” the other guard said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Ramose.” She should have known. If anyone would interfere with her plans to return home, it would be him.

“Fine, then,” she said as smoothly as she could manage. “If the royal vizier commands it, then it shall be done.” Sarcasm dripped from her tongue, but the guards just shrugged and settled back into their posts.

Nell sauntered away, her mind whirling to formulate another plan. The front entrance was no longer an option, unless the guards could be distracted in some way. She had a brief vision of stripping before them, then shuddered and quickly discarded that plan.

She wasn’t that desperate.

Yet.

She hadn’t gone far before one of the guards called out to her. Surprised, she turned to find him approaching, his deep scowl as intimidating as he’d intended. She fought to keep the apprehension from showing and instead forced her features into a hard, unreadable mask.

“I assume you changed your mind about letting me in? I was just going to summon the pharaoh.” The man’s confident frown faded a little at the mention of the pharaoh, and Nell smiled inwardly, content with at least that small victory.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said. “The royal vizier requests your presence.”

“What?” This time, she couldn’t hide her surprise. Her mouth gaped open, and she struggled to close it and continue. “How did he know I was here?”

The guard shrugged. "He just knew."

"Is he inside?" she asked, her trepidation rising.

"I'll show you to him." The guard motioned in the direction of the tombs. Firelight from the torches spilled out the narrow entrance and pooled in a circle on the ground.

Nell considered her options. She could decline, run back to the palace and the safety of Akhenaten's arms. But if she did that, then she'd have to postpone her trip home -- maybe indefinitely. Or she could go into the tombs and face Ramose, discover his reason for summoning her, and maybe find her way home while she was at it.

A vizier shouldn't have the right to order the queen around, should he? She wished she'd done more research into ancient Egyptian culture when preparing for her roles, but it had all been so simple when the scripts were already written, and all she had to do was look pretty and try not to screw up the lines.

She glanced at the sky as if the answer were written there, but the moon and brilliant stars only glittered back, awaiting her decision.

"Lead the way," she said finally, gesturing to the guard. She kept her gaze low, her attention focused on the man's heavy footfalls. Torches had been set in the wall on either side of the entrance, illuminating a few feet down the corridor. The guard grabbed one and marched ahead, holding the light source high above his head.

"Why is Ramose here?" Nell asked the guard, but received no reply. He continued walking, leading them down one corridor after another. Nell tried to keep track of the mazelike twists and turns, but eventually confusion set in and she gave up. Ramose had the upper hand now, holding her fate in his hands. She trembled at the thought and forced herself to keep going.

She paused and attempted to glance into different chambers as they passed them, hoping to catch sight of the one she'd come through, but the guard kept moving, and she feared being left alone in the dark. She couldn't be sure how often people came down here, and she didn't relish the thought of wandering around the tombs for hours, maybe even longer. In her twenty-four years, she'd never considered the possibility of meeting her end in a three-thousand-year-old tomb.

She ran to catch up to the guard. The symbol on the wall, the salvation that would finally bring her home, would just have to wait.

When she finally found it, she'd leave this place forever. The portal would sweep her away from here in the blink of an eye.

Away from Ramose. And Akhenaten.

She was about to ask the guard to turn back when he paused at the entrance to a large chamber. Inside, it was as empty as the rest of the rooms they'd passed, but Ramose's imposing figure seemed to fill the cavernous area. Torches cast a flickering pool of pale light around him, and his skin glistened with a golden sheen.

She strolled in proudly, her head high, her gaze even with his. No matter how intimidated she might feel, she decided not to let it show. She couldn't let him have even that satisfaction, no matter how minor.

“Ah, Nefertiti,” Ramose said, his voice a shadow of a menacing whisper. Nell flinched without meaning to, then curled her hands into fists at her sides to keep from doing it again.

“How good of you to come.” Ramose waved the guard away, and Nell heard the man’s footsteps retreating down the corridor. She was alone now, alone with a man she didn’t trust, in tombs already prepared to welcome her dead body. She fought back a shiver.

“If there’s something you have to say, then say it,” she snapped, gathering strength from the sound of her own voice resonating off the chamber walls. “Otherwise, I’m going back to the palace.” She whirled on her heel and headed for the hallway.

“Not so fast, my queen.”

Nell froze with her hand on the archway and turned back. She’d come this far. If he’d intended to harm her, he probably would have done it by now.

“I saw you,” he said.

“Well, then. I’m glad we got that straightened out,” Nell said, rolling her eyes. She turned back to the exit.

“I saw you arrive.”

Nell’s blood turned to ice, and she spun back, slowly, to face him.

“You mean ...”

Ramose nodded. “I was there. When whatever demon that created you sent you here. You’re not Nefertiti.”

The room spun around Nell, and she leaned back against the wall to steady herself.

“You’re being foolish,” she said, but her voice quivered. Her mouth had gone dry, and she flicked her tongue over her parched lips.

“We’ll see if the pharaoh shares your opinion.”

Oh, God. If he tells Akhenaten ...

Nell took a deep breath, fought to gain back some control over her emotions. “You don’t mean to go to the pharaoh with these wild accusations. How would you even try to convince him that his wife isn’t really his wife?”

Ramose shrugged. “I’ll tell him what I saw. Nefertiti stood in the middle of the room; then you showed up. For a moment, there were two identical versions of Egypt’s queen. Then you walked right into her, blended into her form.” He took a few steps closer, until he stood just inches away.

He leaned forward and whispered in her ear. “You survived. She didn’t.”

Chapter Eleven

“That’s ridiculous,” Nell said when she could find her voice. The wall against her back no longer offered comfort, but made her feel trapped, like a wild animal in a solid cage.

“Is it?” Ramose asked, a sneer plastered on his wide face.

“Of course. Do you even realize what you’re saying? You’re claiming I killed Nefertiti. That I killed myself!” Nell’s voice rose, and the echo bounced off the walls of the chamber. Anger flared in her; anger and fear, and she held back the urge to lunge at him, to scream, argue, and holler until he listened to reason.

Ramose didn’t reply. He turned his back to her and walked out, leaving Nell to scan the room quickly for any sign of a symbol on the wall that could bring her home. If there was ever a time to flee ancient Egypt, this was definitely it. Ramose would tell Akhenaten she wasn’t Nefertiti. He’d tell the pharaoh exactly what he saw as she came through, and though the claim would sound farfetched, Nell couldn’t be sure that Akhenaten wouldn’t believe him.

Ramose’s deep voice thundered from the hallway, and he returned a moment later with the guard in tow.

“Please show our lovely queen the way out,” he said, gesturing to Nell. She considered arguing, trying to convince him that she really was the queen of Egypt, but quickly changed her mind. Ramose seemed intent on believing the worst, and if what he said was true, and he actually had seen her come through the portal, then no amount of rationalizing could sway his opinion.

She stumbled after the guard through the corridors, panic building in her throat. She had to find the portal back to her own time, her own world.

“Wait,” she said to the guard as they passed a large room. She ducked inside, and the man followed close to her heels.

“We must go,” he said, hovering close.

She used the light from his torch to scan the room, then gave a disappointed sigh when she realized this one was smaller, narrower than the one she’d come through.

“Fine,” she mumbled and stepped out into the corridor.

It seemed to take forever to reach the outside, and the stale air in the tombs quickly grew oppressive. Nell’s throat constricted, and her breathing came in ragged, shallow gasps. Over his shoulder, the guard gave her a puzzled look but didn’t stop to inquire about her well-being.

Fine. I don’t need your concern anyway. I just need to get home.

Outside, pale light streaked the sky, the sun just beginning to rise. She hadn’t had any sleep in over twenty-four hours, but the adrenaline running through her veins kept her alert and aware.

The guard took up his post by the doors. He wasn’t under orders to take her back to the palace, but there was no way she would re-enter the tomb either. She glanced longingly at the solid brick walls, the

thick rock that kept her away from the portal that could take her home. If only she knew exactly where to find the gateway to her own world, she might be able to make a run for it through the guards, then dash through the halls until she reached the right room and could fling herself through the portal.

She realized she was staring, and the guards watched her warily. She gave them a half-hearted wave and headed toward the city, where the pale gleam of dawn shimmered on the rooftops.

Her only chance was to get Akhenaten fully on her side. Ramose's claims would plant doubts in his mind, make him reconsider the wisdom in letting her roam the palace and the streets alone. Even though Akhenaten held deep religious beliefs and worshiped Aten absolutely, it didn't mean he didn't believe in demons, or whatever Ramose thought she was.

She strolled through the streets, where the citizens of Akhet-Aten had begun to stir. A group of children watched her wide-eyed, picking at their noses and scratching at their bellies. Their smiles were genuine, and she returned them, but their gaiety did nothing to alleviate her anxiety. Sooner or later, she'd have to face Akhenaten.

She might even have to tell him the truth.

A woman carrying a small child in her arms bumped into Nell and startled her out of her feverish thoughts. The woman looked like she'd stepped out of a parenting magazine, her hands wrapped around the child, smelling of fresh-baked bread and warm milk.

"I'm sorry," Nell said, beaming a smile at the boy in the woman's arms. He couldn't have been any older than two, his thick, curly hair, bright eyes, and chubby cheeks giving him the appearance of a grinning cherub.

"Well, aren't you cute," Nell said, and the child reached out of his mother's grasp and wrapped his small arms around Nell's neck.

The woman laughed and tried to pull him back, but he had a tight grip, and Nell wrapped her arms around him and drew him close, while his mother nodded approvingly. "He likes you," she said, and Nell nodded, content to bask in the smell of the child's warm, honey-scented skin.

"I should apologize," the woman said, stroking her son's arm. "But he's never done this before. He usually shies away from strangers."

A small gurgle followed by a cooing sound came from deep within the child's throat, and Nell knew she'd found the answer to the questions plaguing her.

When the boy finally disentangled himself from her and nestled safely in his mother's arms, Nell placed a hand on her slightly swollen stomach.

"Who would he rather believe?" Nell murmured aloud as she turned away from the happy family. "His vizier, or the mother of his child?"

Akhenaten burst through the double-door entrance into the palace and marched confidently in the direction of the treasure room. Behind him, the guards quickened their pace to keep up, and no one spoke, a fact for which Akhenaten was grateful. He'd had plenty of time on his way here to consider

both Ramose's and Nefertiti's words.

They had each warned him about the other. Ramose said Nefertiti had depleted the entire royal treasure, but she'd denied it, and Akhenaten felt inclined to believe her. He'd known Nefertiti for years, and she'd never been the type to spend frivolously. Ramose, on the other hand, had also been a loyal servant for a long time, and Akhenaten was no more eager to suspect his motives.

He bolted up the thick marble steps two at a time. He wanted to see for himself, to enter the room and find it still brimming with treasure, filled with all the gold and precious stones he remembered from his father's reign.

The doors to the treasure room loomed before him, large and golden, and Akhenaten faltered with his hand on the handles. Two guards, their massive bodies hard and intimidating, stood beside the entrance.

What if the treasure had really been squandered? Were they even guarding anything at all?

Nonsense. A lifetime's worth of treasure couldn't be frittered away in a few short months, no matter how lavish and wasteful a woman's tastes.

He pushed the doors open and walked into the chamber. The torches on the walls burned throughout the day and night, and the soft orange glow of firelight shone over the room.

But there was nothing for it to illuminate, and the blaze cast empty pools of light over the smooth marble floor. No gold coins stacked in neat piles. No necklaces, pendants, bracelets, or rings. No gems, golden chalices, or statues.

No treasure.

Akhenaten bellowed, a throaty sound that broke from deep within his lungs and bounced off the empty walls. The guards rushed in, weapons at the ready.

"Get Ramose. Now." He struggled to maintain control, to resist lashing out at the nearest person. The guards left the room before Akhenaten had to order them a second time.

He circled the room, refusing to believe his eyes. How could it all be gone? He bent down and ran his hand along the marble floor, feeling its smooth, polished texture beneath his palm. Not even one gold coin glittered up at him. Not one precious gem, one diamond or ruby. There was nothing left.

"He's not here," a guard reported, out of breath. The man must have run the entire span of the palace in a few short minutes.

"Find him." Akhenaten said, digging his fingernails into his palm. "Find him now."

The guard bowed and rushed off, giving orders to the other men waiting patiently outside the doors. The clang of weapons and low stomp of sandaled feet signaled the guards storming off to obey his orders.

Ramose had blamed Nefertiti for the missing coffers, but Akhenaten refused to believe she was responsible. She'd have no reason to take it all. If she had needed the funds, she'd have told him.

Which left only one possible conclusion. Ramose was lying. That didn't mean he'd stolen the royal treasure, but the entire situation made little sense. What if the trusted royal vizier had simply changed the

designated treasure room and moved all the riches to a safer place? But if he had, why had he not said so? And what place could be safer than the inside of the royal palace? No citizen dared to come in here. The servants and guards had been handpicked, chosen for their reliability, faith in Aten, and willingness to serve the pharaoh at any cost. Many had been with the royal family for generations.

And no servant could carry off an entire treasure trove without someone noticing.

Whoever took the fortune had to have had access to this room. The guards would have let him pass without question, without stopping him when he carried out armfuls of gold.

Only two people besides himself had that kind of access to the palace, that kind of authority.

Nefertiti and Ramose.

Akhenaten rushed out of the room and sprinted down the corridors. He flung open door after door, startling servants and other palace occupants alike. He walked in on a couple making love and only paused long enough to admire the swell of a breast, the lean muscle of a long leg. He didn't take the time to apologize, but continued tearing across hallways and bursting through doors, many splintering as they hit the wall with the force of his fury.

When he reached Ramose's chambers, he paused to search them, flinging aside bedcovers, throwing robes on the ground. He wasn't sure what he expected to find. Ramose certainly couldn't have hidden the entire missing treasure in his drawers.

Akhenaten paused for breath only long enough to feel the anger pouring through his veins, then continued ravaging the vizier's room. He was meticulous, lifting tablets, scanning scrolls, smashing urns to fragments, but by the time he had trashed the entire chamber, it had become clear there wasn't one gold coin in there that didn't belong to Ramose.

Spent and weary, Akhenaten made his way back to the treasure room. There, he sat on the ground and leaned his head against the wall.

He'd wait. His guards would find Ramose eventually, and when they did, the royal vizier would be held responsible for every lost coin, every ounce of gold, and every precious gem that he couldn't account for.

"Where is the Pharaoh?" Nell demanded when she entered the palace.

The guard at the entrance was quick to answer. "He's in the treasure chamber. Would you like an escort?"

"No. Just point me in the right direction. I can find it."

He indicated up a marble staircase and to the left, and Nell took off running. She had to reach Akhenaten before Ramose did. Akhenaten loved her, but would that be enough to save her from accusations of ... what? Witchcraft?

She shook her head and dashed down the corridor, the golden etched doors no more than a blur around her. She stopped abruptly before a large entrance, brighter and more ornate than the others. The door was slightly ajar, and she peered through the narrow opening.

Akhenaten sat on the floor, cradling his head in his hands. The hollow room seemed to pulsate around him, the empty void a tangible, stifling weight bearing down on his shoulders.

“This can’t be the treasure room,” she said, stepping inside and closing the door behind her. “It’s empty.”

He lifted his head, his handsome features reflecting no warmth or welcome. “I hadn’t noticed.” His tone was laced with sarcasm, and Nell winced at her insensitivity.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice low and soothing. She knelt beside him and ran a hand through his thick black hair.

“Did you take it?” He looked up at her, his gaze so intense, she couldn’t have hidden the truth from him -- even if she knew what it was.

“No.”

He sighed, the urgency and tension draining out of his voice. “That’s what I thought. If not you, then who?”

“Ramose.” The answer came swiftly, along with flashes of Ramose’s hard features twisted into a grimace, and the way he’d looked at her back in the tombs.

“Maybe,” Akhenaten admitted. “And yet, who could carry an entire lifetime’s worth of treasures out of the royal palace? My father accumulated many of these during his reign.” He gestured around him, as if he could still see the mountains of coins and jewels. “And his father before him. And now look at me. I’ve lost it all.”

He lowered his gaze, and Nell wrapped her arms around him. He laid his head on her chest and sighed deeply. Tears stung her eyes. She couldn’t bear to see him so devastated. Not him, not this man who had always been so authoritative and in control.

She leaned her chin on his head as he curled up closer to her.

“I have something to tell you. It might even cheer you up.”

“I doubt it, but try me.”

Nell took a deep breath, unsure of whether she was doing the right thing. She’d decided to keep her pregnancy a secret at first, convinced that the truth would only hurt him, bring back painful memories of all those miscarriages. Then she’d thought she could use the baby as leverage, a way to make Akhenaten believe her rather than Ramose.

But this was different. Sitting here on the cool marble floor, understanding Akhenaten’s disappointment, his betrayal at whoever had done this to him, made her realize that a baby might be just what he needed to bring hope back into his beautiful green eyes.

She took his hand and guided it to the swell of her stomach. Akhenaten’s large palm was warm and comforting. Would the baby be aware of it? She thought she felt a stirring in her stomach, like butterfly wings beating against her from the inside.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispered, and Akhenaten’s body stiffened against hers. For a long moment, he didn’t move, and she feared that she’d misread him, that perhaps he wouldn’t be as happy about a baby as she’d thought.

Then his hand started moving in slow circles over her belly. “A baby,” he whispered, his voice unsteady.

He lifted his head from her chest and pierced her eyes with a questioning gaze. Nell nodded, anxious to speak, yet fearing if she opened her mouth, she’d start crying and wouldn’t stop.

He leaned in to kiss her, but the gentle touch she expected turned into a possessive, wild embrace. His mouth tasted of tears. His hands were everywhere, over her shoulders, arms, and back, pausing only to cup her breasts for a second before moving on, lingering over her stomach, and down her thighs. His lips pressed against hers, and his tongue explored her mouth with a fevered need. His hunger alarmed and aroused her, his touch sending waves of heat to her pussy.

She gave in to the kisses, the caresses, the wild abandon. Her body responded to his with intense urgency, and she moaned against his mouth, felt the wetness pool between her legs.

His hand found her slick cunt, and she gasped when his fingers brushed against her swollen folds. She nibbled his lower lip as he cupped her intimately in his warm palm, exploring her pussy, his hand tender and gentle. He ran two fingers slowly up and down her slit, sending shivers down her spine with every stroke.

Nell leaned back and spread her legs for him.

“I love not having to wear panties,” she said, closing her eyes, Akhenaten’s breath hot against her mound.

“What are panties?” he asked, then licked her, a quick stroke down her opening.

She squirmed and whimpered in delight, lifting her hips, yearning to bring her eager pussy back into contact with his mouth.

“They’re ... oh!” He flicked the tip of his tongue against her clit, and her breath caught in her throat, all other thoughts forgotten.

“Oh?” he asked, inserting a finger inside her tight hole. “They’re oh?”

Nell tried to laugh, but it came out as another moan. He seemed encouraged by her excitement and continued lapping at her cunt, his wet, hot tongue and his finger moving in unison. He nibbled at her swollen lips, taking them in his mouth, running his tongue along her soft folds.

She shifted her hips, driving them higher so she could experience more of him, more of his mouth and fingers, more of the way her pussy clamped against his mouth. She closed her eyes and shuddered in an overwhelming orgasm, her muscles clenching in ecstasy, a rush of heat cascading through her body.

Spent, she lay back on the floor, thankful for the cool marble against her skin.

He moved between her legs, nudged the tip of his cock against her slit. She opened her eyes and marveled at him, his naked body hovering just above hers. She hadn’t seen him shed his clothes.

“You look amazing,” she told him, and he did. The firelight played over his smooth chest, his muscular arms. It glinted off the curly hair between his legs, and she strained her neck to get a better glimpse of his cock, hard and sleek.

He bent over her and trapped her mouth against his, and she tasted herself on him. Grinding her hips against his, she grabbed his ass, bringing him deep into her with one slow thrust.

She loved the feel of his body on top of her, the heavy, masculine weight against her breasts. He kept his cock deep within her, moving it only marginally inside, until Nell thought she’d go out of her mind. The tip of his cock nudged against her inner core, driving every sensitive nerve ending to extreme pleasure. He lowered his head and took a firm nipple into his mouth, nibbling and sucking on it.

“I’m going to come again,” she said, the words coming out as a ragged whisper.

He plunged his cock into her, hard, rolled the nipple against his tongue, and Nell groaned, another orgasm raging through her. Her muscles clamped together, the intensity of the orgasm clenching her pussy, her ass, all the way to her toes.

Akhenaten nuzzled her neck. His fingers gripped her ass; his cum flooded and filled her and spilled warmly down her thighs. She nibbled at his ear and clamped her legs around his waist, holding him in.

“I want every drop,” she whispered to him as he came, his body shuddering with the strength of his release. He looked into her eyes as the last of his orgasm subsided, a longing look that made Nell’s breath catch in her throat.

He hovered above her, his semi-erect cock still inside her pussy, and Nell decided there was no better feeling in the world. She tightened her grip on his waist and brought him down to her, then flipped them so that she sprawled on top of him.

He grinned, and the light in his eyes was genuine, all thoughts of treasure or the empty room around them seemingly forgotten.

“A baby,” he said, and she kissed him, trailing her lips softly across his.

“Our baby,” she agreed.

Chapter Twelve

Akhenaten awoke with a cramp in his shoulder and down his arm. Nefertiti nestled comfortably against him, and he realized they’d fallen asleep on the hard floor of the treasure chamber. His arm tingled with pain, but he didn’t want to rise and wake her, so he cupped her breast in his free hand and pressed himself tight against her back.

She stirred, moaning softly in her sleep, and Akhenaten buried his face in her hair, inhaling her scent and marveling at the way she always smelled like honey.

“You awake?” Nefertiti whispered.

“It seems we both are.”

Nefertiti shivered, goose bumps marring her soft, naked flesh.

“You’re cold,” Akhenaten observed. “We really should have gone back to bed.”

“But this is so much more romantic,” she said, turning to face him. She ran her hand along the side of his face, then planted a swift kiss on his lips that left him grinning.

“I love waking up with you,” he said.

“Then you should do it more often.” Nefertiti ran her hand over his chest, down his stomach, until she grasped his hardening cock. “Yum,” she said, and her tongue darted over her lips in one of the most sensual moves Akhenaten had ever seen.

“By Aten, you’re beautiful.”

She inclined her head graciously, as if such compliments on her appearance were commonplace. Akhenaten wasn’t surprised. She probably heard it all the time from her sister and the female slaves that cared for her. A pang of jealousy struck him when he thought about other men praising her in the same way, but he pushed the thought out of his mind and concentrated instead on Nefertiti’s swift hand movements.

She’d brought his cock to its full length with her ministrations, and she continued to stroke him, hard, while staring deeply into his eyes. The unrestrained lust in her gaze aroused him even further, and his cock throbbed eagerly against her palm. He still couldn’t believe this was his wife, the same woman who only months ago wouldn’t have sex with him unless he practically begged, and even then it was a quick and dirty affair. Afterward, he always felt awful for having made her endure something she clearly didn’t enjoy.

But the woman in his arms this morning couldn’t get enough. He grinned at Nefertiti, and she smiled back, then ran her nails softly over his balls. He groaned and closed his eyes, and when he opened them, found that Nefertiti had slithered down the marble floor and held his cock before her mouth.

She licked the tip of his shaft slowly, then enveloped his entire length in her warm mouth. The feeling was exquisite, and he tangled his hands in her hair as her talented mouth slid up and down his stiff cock. She paused, and his cock escaped her mouth with a loud pop.

“I can still taste myself on you,” she said, licking her lips.

Akhenaten couldn’t reply. He just groaned again, thinking about how his astute mind turned incoherent when she acted this way.

Nefertiti went back to work on his cock, trailing her mouth over its length, then taking it all in so the tip nudged the back of her throat. She slurped hungrily at his shaft, her hand gripping his cock and sliding up and down along with her mouth. She sped up, and he tightened his grip on her hair, his desire urging her on.

Cupping his balls with her free hand, she squeezed gently, and Akhenaten couldn’t hold back any longer.

He closed his eyes, thrust his hips forward, and squirted his fluid down her throat as she kept him steady in her mouth and swallowed every drop he had to offer.

He lay back, spent, and she climbed up over him, her pussy hovering just over his softening cock. She pressed her breasts together, pinched each nipple between thumb and forefinger. Her folds glistened with wetness, inviting his touch. He reached for her, but she moved just out of his grasp, giggling.

“We should probably get up before they send in a search party to make sure we’re still actually here,” she said.

Akhenaten nodded. “That’s probably a good idea. The guards should have found Ramose by now, and I want to deal with this quickly.”

“I should go see my sister.” Nell picked up her garment from the floor and wrapped it around herself. She struggled with the ties for a moment, then finally had them in place, the formfitting material clinging to her curves.

Akhenaten hadn’t moved from the floor, content to watch her as she dressed, but she nudged him playfully with her foot. “Well? Are you just going to lie there all day?”

He made a sudden grab for her, but she jumped out of the way. “You’ll have to try harder than that,” she said, her tone playful and inviting.

He stood up and lunged at her, then pinned her back against the wall. Her silvery laugh filled the empty room. “You’re all the treasure I need,” he said, claiming her mouth. She melted into the kiss, and he parted her lips with his tongue, eager for another taste of her.

A knock on the door startled them both out of the kiss, and Akhenaten sighed deeply and reached for his clothes. “Stall them for a second, will you?”

She nodded and headed for the door.

She spoke to whoever it was while he dressed, though he couldn’t hear her words. When he was presentable, he went to join Nefertiti in greeting their unwelcome guest.

He approached the door and found a guard standing there. The man was slightly overweight, with a round face and small, dark eyes, narrowly set. “This better be important.”

“It is,” the man said, bowing low before Akhenaten. “We thought you’d like to know that we haven’t found Ramose yet.”

“Let me see if I understand this.” Akhenaten stroked his chin thoughtfully. “You interrupted my leisurely morning with my wife to tell me that you haven’t been able to do your duty?”

The guard’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Well, we -- that is, I thought --”

“Fine. I’ll find him myself. Is that all?”

The man nodded, bowed quickly, and retreated. Nefertiti turned to Akhenaten with a smile. “I think you scared him,” she said.

"I don't understand." Akhenaten ran a hand through his hair. "How could they not have found him? This isn't a large city. It's an even smaller palace. And as far as I know, he has no idea we're searching for him, so he should have no reason to hide."

Nefertiti shrugged. "He was in the tombs last night ..." Her voice faltered, and the color drained from her face. Then she shook her head and a dazzling smile replaced the brief look of fear that had fluttered across her features.

"I have to go," she said.

He embraced her and kissed her again, deeply. This time, her eager tongue searched for his as her breasts pressed up against his chest. When his cock began to harden again, he moaned against her mouth and forced himself to pull away.

"I could stay here and fuck you all day," he said.

"Ditto." She winked at him and flew through the door and down the hallway before he could say another word.

He made a mental note to ask her what "ditto" meant, and headed for the front entrance. A group of guards fell into step behind him.

Outside, sticky air clung to his skin. He breathed deeply and sent a quick prayer up to Aten . It was because of him that life bloomed in Egypt. Birds sang their praises to Aten , flowers turned their heads in admiration, and people -- well, maybe not all, but most -- whispered fervent prayers in acknowledgement of his power.

Akhenaten paused in the garden, stretched his arms wide, and lifted his face up to the sun. The rays were warm on his skin, almost uncomfortable, yet he couldn't help but grin. After the incredible night he'd spent with Nefertiti, everything looked brighter, hopeful, even with the mystery of the missing treasure still unsolved. He had no doubt that his new relationship with his wife was Aten's doing. After all, his god had the power to bring life to the smallest seedling, to warm the skin of any unbeliever. He was certainly able to bring together two people who had always belonged together, to make them fit and complement one another in a way they never had before.

And the baby! The miracle that had seemed lost to them after so many miscarriages hovered on the edge of reality. Of course, there was no guarantee that the same tragedy wouldn't befall them this time, but it felt different somehow. Nefertiti was stronger. She seemed more capable of bringing a life into this world. As unreasonable as that sounded, Akhenaten knew that Nefertiti's new strength and determination would carry over to their baby as well. The child she carried was in good hands, both Nefertiti's and Aten's .

His smile didn't waver as he walked down the dusty road, his gaze fixed on the glittering water before him. The Nile appeared even more striking when highlighted by Aten's brilliant rays, and today the water shimmered with an unmatched splendor. Gold and white sparkles danced on the surface, and as he approached, the shimmer brightened, leaped a little faster.

He wished Nefertiti was with him to witness Aten's glory on this perfect afternoon. Birds chirped in the distance, and the softest breeze ruffled through the small patches of grass and flowers nearby. The scent of jasmine permeated the hot air, the perfect touch to an atmosphere that already overwhelmed his senses.

He thought about her as he walked, the soft curve of her breasts, her wide hips and narrow waist, the gap between her thighs that displayed the velvety lips slick with moisture. He grew hard at the thought, and his hand wandered absently over the bulge beneath his loincloth. Other than the guards who followed him, he was alone by the Nile, all the citizens of Akhet-Aten most likely still working on adding the final touches to the city.

A solitary palm tree stood near a large rock formation a little further down the Nile from where Akhenaten stood, and a figure sat cross-legged at its base. Akhenaten approached slowly, tentatively, unwilling to disturb a man so fervently rapt in prayer.

The man wore massive dark robes, even in the sweltering heat, and Akhenaten stopped in his tracks, stunned by recognition. His guards hadn't been able to find Ramose, but he had, led no doubt by Aten's ever-watchful eye. There should have been no reason Akhenaten had chosen to walk this path today, yet he'd followed his feet and ended up exactly where he needed to be.

Akhenaten approached quietly, still wary of disturbing prayers to Aten. Ramose's head was bent low, his hands clasped beneath his chin, and the words he murmured blended together into a soft, indiscernible chant.

Before Akhenaten could get close enough to hear the words, Ramose stood up abruptly, as if he'd sensed Akhenaten's approach.

"You've been looking for me," he said, without a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Yes," Akhenaten admitted, feeling a little sheepish. Then he remembered the empty treasure room, and a swift bout of anger swept through him. "It's about the treasure."

"It's missing." Ramose shrugged, unconcerned.

"I know that," Akhenaten said between clenched teeth. "What I want to know is why you took it." The blunt approach had to be better than finesse and delicacy, at least with Ramose. Subtlety would never work. Ramose would feel insulted, and then he'd refuse to offer any kind of explanation for the disappearance of a lifetime's worth of accumulated treasure.

"I didn't take it. I thought we already spoke about this."

"You blamed Nefertiti. She blames you."

A grim smile tugged at the corners of Ramose's mouth. "Ah, Nefertiti. I should have guessed. Did she tell you about our little encounter in the tombs last night?" He wiggled his brows suggestively.

The anger already surging through Akhenaten's veins intensified swiftly. "Nefertiti wasn't in the tombs last night. She was with me, at the temple. Then she was with me again at the palace."

"But where was she in between?"

"No more games, Ramose. What are you implying?"

"Simply this," he said, lifting his hands in a gesture of sheer innocence that fit him about as well as a confident smile on Muet's face. "Perhaps your wife isn't being as honest with you as you'd like to think."

“You seem to be forgetting that the wife you speak of is also the queen of Egypt. Your queen.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” He narrowed his eyes and fixed Akhenaten with a fierce glare. “I only hope you’re willing to keep an open mind. You seem a little ... soft, when it comes to her.”

Akhenaten stood there, gaping, staring at the man who had dared to speak so boldly to him. “Watch your tongue,” he said when he finally overcame his shock. “Or you might find it removed from your body before the process of mummification can do the same.”

He turned on his heel and stormed off. The unrelenting sun blazing down on him no longer had the invigorating effect it had just minutes before. Now it felt heavy, like it pressed an extra burden on his shoulders.

Nefertiti had gone back to the tombs last night after he left her at the temple to pray? Why hadn’t she told him?

Or had she? She’d said that Ramose had been in the tombs, but Akhenaten hadn’t picked up on the implication that she’d been there with him. What were the two of them doing together in such an odd place? And what was Nefertiti’s constant fascination with the tombs? Every time he let her out of his sight, she found a way to head back there.

Akhenaten suppressed a shiver that had crept over his skin despite the heat. Just when he thought he’d gotten closer to figuring out the mysteries surrounding the palace since he’d returned, more questions arose.

Nefertiti blamed Ramose for the lost treasure. Ramose blamed Nefertiti for more than that, stopping just short of accusing her outright of treason and treachery. And yet the two of them held secret meetings in dark places in the middle of the night!

Akhenaten clenched his teeth and bunched his hands into fists at his sides as he marched away from the serene spot on the Nile. One thing was certain: Nefertiti and Ramose couldn’t both be telling the truth. Finding the liar had become his top priority, although unearthing the truth would likely be bittersweet.

Aten, don’t let it be Nefertiti.

The sun dipped behind a cloud, and Akhenaten sighed.

He was on his own this time.

* * * * *

Nell paused before the doors to the physician’s chambers, suppressing a shudder that threatened to chill her blood. She’d come here much too often since she’d arrived at the palace, and the physician still made her uncomfortable. At least this time her visit wasn’t for the purpose of another invasive exam, though she’d need one of those again sooner or later. Nell didn’t know much about ancient medicine, but since ultrasound hadn’t been invented, she guessed she was stuck with the physician’s fumbling hands and prodding fingers.

She sighed and pushed open the doors, expecting to see her sister lying on the slab of marble in the middle of the room. The examination table was empty, however, and bright beams of light spilled through the window, casting a refreshing glow over the inhospitable contents of the chamber.

Well, this is different. It almost looks welcoming.

“Good afternoon, my queen,” the physician said from behind her shoulder, his stale breath warm against her cheek. Nell hadn’t seen him approach, and she jumped at the sound of his voice.

Almost welcoming.

She pasted on a smile and turned to greet him. “And a glorious afternoon it is, isn’t it?”

He nodded briefly, then swept past her into the room, heading for the windows. He drew the rich velvet curtains against the bright beams of sunlight, casting the room once again into gloom and shadow.

“I came to see my sister.”

“Young Muet has been moved to her chambers,” the physician said, his back still turned to her. In the darkness, his form blended as an indistinct shape into the background, almost fusing with the large marble columns lining the walls.

“I’ll seek her out there, then.”

The moment she turned her back to the room, the wave of apprehension lifted, and Nell was at once filled with the serene sensation that comes after a night of heavy lovemaking. Her skin tingled, her breasts felt deliciously heavy, her nipples sensitive and still throbbing from Akhenaten’s playful nibbles.

The servants she passed in the hallway bowed their heads as she passed, but she caught the furtive glances they cast her from the corners of their eyes. Was last night’s ecstasy written plainly on her features? Or did they merely wonder at the abrupt changes in their queen?

She’d never been to Muet’s chambers, but the guards guided her without questioning her strange request. They didn’t marvel at the fact that Nell didn’t know the way to her sister’s room -- not outwardly, anyway. She didn’t want to consider what they said about her when she wasn’t around, and the gossip that flew around the servants’ quarters.

She knocked softly on the door, and Muet’s muffled reply greeted her a moment later.

“I hope I didn’t wake you,” Nell said, gliding into the room and closing the door quietly behind her.

“Not at all. I’ve been awake for hours, since before dawn.” Muet glanced out the nearest window. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Nell followed Muet’s gaze and glanced out at the garden that lay beyond the window. Tall grass and thick bushes surrounded the palace, and the sun’s rays glistened brightly and playfully over the lush greenery.

“It is,” Nell agreed. “Like you.”

She beamed a smile at the young woman and sat down on the edge of the bed. Muet blushed a becoming shade of red and lowered her eyes.

“You always were kind to me,” she said. “At least that much hasn’t changed.”

“And why shouldn’t I be?” Nell kept her tone light, though apprehension swept through her. “Isn’t that what sisters are for?”

Muet nodded, her forehead furrowing. “It’s just that you’ve been ... different, lately.”

“So you noticed,” Nell murmured.

“The whole palace has noticed.” Muet raised her head and fixed her sister with an unflinching stare, which took Nell by surprise.

“Yes, well -- I’m not here to talk about me.”

“You want to know more about the fall, then.”

“Except we both know you didn’t fall.”

Muet lowered her eyes again. “Of course I did.”

Nell reached for Muet’s hand and squeezed it tightly. “You don’t have to be afraid. Whoever did this to you, we’ll make him pay.”

Tears welled in Muet’s eyes, and a solitary drop slid down her cheek. “I didn’t fall,” she whispered, barely loud enough for Nell to make out the words.

Nell reached out with her free hand and wiped the tear away. “I know, sweetheart. Now tell me what happened.”

“No,” Muet shouted, wild panic evident in her teary gaze. “No,” she said again, her voice more subdued this time.

“Why not?”

“It’s for your own good.”

“Formy good?” Nell stared at Muet in pure astonishment. “You’ve got bruises on your face and arms, and you’re worried about what’s good for me? You said it yourself -- I’m different now. And as the new me, I can certainly take care of myself.”

Muet shook her head, her silky black hair falling over her face. She remained silent as Nell stroked the back of her hand with her thumb, and it soon became evident that she wouldn’t reveal her secrets. Not today.

“This isn’t how it’s always been,” Nell said, her voice gentle, hoping to prod Muet out of her despair. “Since Akhenaten’s return to the palace, it’s been one problem after another, but underneath it all I sense contentment, even happiness. We need to get our minds off everything that’s happened in the last few days. Any suggestions?”

Muet brushed her hair away from her eyes, and the corners of her mouth lifted in a tentative smile. “A festival,” she said.

Yes.

Images of a lavish celebration, filled with exotic food, music, and, above all, laughter, came unbidden to Nell's mind.

"We had one before, years ago," Muet said as if sensing Nell's excitement.

There would be dancing, of course, Nell thought, a smile playing upon her lips. She pictured couples in tight embraces, the glow of passion written plainly across their faces.

"A festival," Nell murmured, still lost in the world her imagination had created. In her mind, the couples explored each other's bodies, shedding clothes as they swayed to the music.

"Yes," Nell continued, unable to hide the broad smile any longer. "But I think this one will be different."

The strength of the sun made Akhenaten's eyes water, and he lifted his hand to his forehead to shield his eyes from the penetrating rays. Sweat dripped down his brow, but he didn't want to go back to the palace, not yet, not until he had more answers to the questions that plagued him. Facing Nefertiti now, with no news to share, wouldn't get him any further in his search for the truth.

He hadn't noticed anything exorbitant in the palace, so if Nefertiti had in fact taken the treasures, she hadn't spent the funds on items to improve her surroundings. But what else could she have splurged on? Unless she had stashed the treasures away somewhere out of sight, she'd need to have something to show for that much royal gold.

He turned to one of the guards trailing him. "Are there any unusual buildings in the city? Anything I hadn't ordered built that's being worked on?"

The guard furrowed his brows in concentration, then shook his head. "I don't believe so. There's the palace, the temple, the tombs." He counted the buildings on his fingers as he rattled them off. "Then there are the police barracks and military headquarters, the storehouse, the inn, the records office, the clerks' office, the office of works --"

"The office of works," Akhenaten said, interrupting the flow of the guard's recitation. "Take me there."

"This way," the guard indicated, and Akhenaten fell into step beside him.

If Nefertiti hadn't been buying lavish silks, exotic jewels, or other embellishments, perhaps she had used the funds to procure some work. The office of works held each worker's contract, and he'd be able to find out if Nefertiti had hired anyone on her behalf.

Guilt settled in Akhenaten's stomach, heavy and laden. Nefertiti had stated time and again that she wasn't responsible for the missing treasure and that she hadn't spent any of it. Yet with Ramose insisting that he wasn't to blame either, Akhenaten had quickly run out of suspects.

Nefertiti had been through many difficult events of late. And she'd hit her head in the tombs, which meant it could be possible she didn't remember some of the things she might have done in his absence. The thought made him anxious and frustrated, and he worked his lower lip between his teeth as the guard led him through the city. The shouts and sweet laughter of children accompanied him, but even those

joyful sounds failed to lift his spirits.

If Nefertiti couldn't remember squandering away a lifetime's worth of royal treasure, what else could she have forgotten? She was so beautiful, with her smooth olive skin, shiny black hair, and luscious curves, and it would have been easy for her to take a lover in his absence. How could he be sure she'd been celibate the entire time he'd been away? What proof did he have that the child she carried was his? Jealousy stirred through his veins, and he clenched his fists at his sides.

No. He couldn't allow his doubts to stand in the way of their new relationship. He'd sensed she'd been as honest with him as she could be, aside from the odd meeting with Ramose the night before. He'd definitely have to ask her about that.

They stopped in front of a pale, unremarkable building and climbed a set of crooked marble steps. Though the office of works was spacious, the air inside was musty and dry, and Akhenaten coughed to clear his lungs. The man behind the counter rose quickly when he saw the pharaoh and his entourage, set aside the scroll he'd been reading, and dropped into a deep bow. Akhenaten greeted him with a smile.

"I only have a few questions," he said as the man straightened. "You keep all the records of the work that has been completed in Akhet-Aten, is that correct?"

"Yes," the man said, nodding abruptly. He was thin, with long, gangly limbs and piercing blue eyes. "We also keep records of the work in progress, and work that has been contracted but not yet begun due to ... lack of funds." He dropped his gaze to the floor as he uttered the last few words.

Akhenaten smoothed his features into the impassive mask of authority, but cringed inwardly. So, the lack of royal treasure had already begun to affect everyone, including the workers who should have continued to labor on building the city to its full potential. He'd definitely have to remedy that, and quickly, before his own citizens lost confidence in him.

"Has the queen been here recently?"

The clerk looked perplexed, his forehead wrinkling. "The queen? No, I can't say that she has."

"Are you sure? Perhaps it wasn't recently ... it may have been months ago."

The clerk shook his head. "I haven't seen the queen in here at all."

"Fine." Akhenaten rocked slowly back and forth on his feet. "Is there anyone else who works here when you're not around? Someone else who might have taken orders from her for work to be completed in the city?"

"There's no one else," the clerk insisted. "I'm here at all hours. I sleep just back there." He indicated with his thumb behind his shoulder. "Any work that has to be done must go through me. I allocate the workers available, collect the fee, then impart it to the workers when the task is completed."

Akhenaten sighed, his frustration building. "And you're sure you've never seen the queen?"

"I'm sure. The only orders from the palace came from the royal vizier."

"Ramose?"

“Big man, with no hair and long robes,” the clerk confirmed. “He comes in here weekly to inspect the contracts and place more orders for work to be done.”

“And has he had any unusual orders as of late? Something that might cost much more than you’d expect?” Akhenaten leaned against the marble slab that served as a desk for the clerk, until his face was only inches away from the other man’s.

“N-no,” the clerk stammered, taking a step back. “In fact, I haven’t seen the royal vizier in weeks, and he hasn’t been by to pay the workers, either.”

“And before that? What was the last job you completed for him?”

“The palace,” the clerk said. “It was finished just days before you arrived.”

Akhenaten nodded, hopelessness and frustration threatening to overwhelm him. He took a deep breath to calm his ragged nerves. If he didn’t get to the bottom of this mystery soon, his entire city would fall to ruins around him.

“And you’re *sure* you haven’t seen the queen here?”

“Like I said, she doesn’t come here. She’s never sent a missive in her stead, either.”

“You’ve been very helpful,” Akhenaten said, turning to leave. “Send word if you think of anything else that might be useful, any strange requests for costly work that might come your way.”

The clerk mumbled something, but Akhenaten wasn’t listening. He stared at the entrance, where Nefertiti stood in the doorway. Her eyes widened when she saw him, and they exchanged an awkward glance. Her body shifted as if she considered dashing down the street, then she straightened and met his gaze boldly.

In her arms, she held the golden symbol of Amun-Ra.

Chapter Thirteen

Nell clutched the symbol to her chest, its sharp edges digging into her arms as she stared at Akhenaten. He rushed toward her, his eyes flaring with barely hidden anger, and grabbed her shoulders.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice low and menacing. “And why are you holding *that*?” He cast a quick glance at the symbol in her arms, his lip curling in distaste.

Nell’s pulse quickened and her heart hammered, but she held his gaze, determined not to back away. She had a good reason for being here, and at least part of it had to do with him.

“I had an idea,” she began, and his grip on her shoulders tightened. She squirmed, trying to break free, but he held her securely, and she resigned herself to his hold.

She tried again. “I thought it might cheer you up.”

“You thought having my wife walk all over Akhet-Aten with the symbol of an outlawed god in her arms like a common traitor would lift my spirits?” he asked, but his voice was gentler now, and she took strength from it.

“Not quite,” she admitted, shaking her head. “I came here to procure some work.”

The cold glint returned to his eyes. “Like you’ve done before?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Nell answered truthfully. Nefertiti might have come here before, but she had enough trouble finding this place even with the directions the guards had given her.

He grunted. The sound came from deep within his throat and made her knees weak with its reminder of other moans and similar sounds he’d uttered while making love to her. She hastened to continue.

“You need something to take your mind off everything that’s been going on around here lately.” She paused, and when he didn’t stop her, she went on. “I thought a festival might be just the thing to lift everyone’s spirits. You need it, and so does Muet. And, well, after the last few days, so do I.”

Nell took a deep breath and waited for an outburst of anger, but Akhenaten loosened his grip on her shoulders. His features had softened, and he looked at her with kindness and desire, rather than the fury that had shadowed his gaze only a moment before.

“What did you have in mind?”

She grinned and placed the symbol in front of the clerk on the marble desk, then turned back to Akhenaten. “Music. Dancing.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Sex.”

Akhenaten’s eyebrows shot up. “Sex?”

She nodded. “Can you think of a better way to get everyone to loosen up around here? I thought orgies were commonplace in ancient times ...” She bit her lip when she saw the confusion in his eyes. “I mean, before, you know ... when other pharaohs reigned.” She held her breath, but he only nodded at her to continue.

“I figured we’d invite the entire town, regardless of class. Workers have as much right to enjoy themselves as we do, maybe more after their grueling days. I wanted a feast worthy of royalty, except I had no way to pay for it.” Her gaze fell back to the symbol of Amun-Ra.

“And you thought trading this in might provide the funds for such a feast?”

“I did,” she said, unable to hide a smile. “I knew you wouldn’t miss it, and would probably want it gone regardless. The guards had taken it away for safekeeping, but I managed to get it back from them with a few well-placed threats.”

Countless times since she’d arrived here she’d been able to fall back on her acting skills to get her own way, to ensure that no one questioned her authority and royal bearing. It had worked so far, with everyone but Ramose. She banished the thought of the disturbing vizier and focused instead on Akhenaten.

“I have to admit, a festival is a splendid idea. It would give the workers something to focus on other than

the lack of funds and the work that has stalled throughout the city.”

“And it would give us an excuse to make love in front of the entire world,” Nell said.

Akhenaten’s lips twitched in amusement, and Nell returned his infectious grin.

“What’s gotten into you?” He asked her, trailing the back of his hand over her cheek.

“You,” she admitted honestly. “I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you. And I don’t care who knows it. No, wait, that’s not true. I want everyone to know it.”

He laughed and drew her into his arms. She nestled her head beneath his chin, and he wrapped her in his embrace, holding her close. They clung to each other for a while, until the clerk cleared his throat, reminding them of his presence.

Nell broke away reluctantly and turned back to the man. “Melt this down,” she instructed.

The clerk’s eyes widened, and he shrugged, looking from her to Akhenaten, who nodded. “Do as she says.”

Nell beamed a smile Akhenaten’s way. He opened his mouth as if to say something else, but she cut him off with further commands for the clerk. “Order as much food as is available, along with music and any decorations you might need. The festival will take place at the palace, tonight.”

“Tonight?” The clerk said, his expression one of wide-eyed horror. “But there isn’t enough time.”

“Are you telling me it can’t be done?” Nell scowled at him. She turned to Akhenaten. “Are we in need of a new clerk for the office of works?”

“No need for that,” the man said quickly, lifting the symbol from the desk. “I’ll get to it at once.”

“Good.” Nell slid her hand into Akhenaten’s and pulled him away through the open door.

“Are you sure you should be exerting yourself like this, in your condition? Walking all over the city, planning a festival ...” Akhenaten gazed at her from beneath his thick lashes. “I don’t want anything to happen to our baby.”

Nell squeezed his hand. “And nothing will. I’d much rather be here with you, focusing on our well-being, than cooped up in my room. Besides, the festival is a good idea, and you know it. The clerk will take care of all the details, and he’ll do a marvelous job under the threat of losing his job at the office of works.”

“You’re right,” Akhenaten agreed. “But I still don’t think you should --”

“Shush,” Nell said, pressing a finger to his lips. She rose on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Our baby’s safe. I promise you, I won’t lose him.”

“Or her,” Akhenaten said with a smile. “It could be a girl.”

Nell laughed, delighted at the idea of a little girl with Akhenaten’s large eyes and tan skin. In fact, her research into Akhenaten’s life indicated his first child with Nefertiti had been a girl. They’d named her

Meritaten .

“Pretty name,” she murmured.

“What is?”

“Meritaten. Do you like it?”

He smiled. “We’ll never be able to keep the suitors away.”

They strolled down the road hand in hand for a while, making their way through the crowd that parted as they neared.

“How about a little shade?” Akhenaten suggested when the temple came into view, and Nell followed him through a tall gate and into the temple gardens.

Lush greenery sprung up everywhere, along with white lotus flowers, narcissus, and small yellow chrysanthemums. The smell was intoxicating, and Nell breathed deeply, inhaling the sweet aroma. They stopped beneath a large shade tree, beside which a small pond gurgled softly.

“It’s beautiful here,” she said as they sat on the grass, and she laid her head on Akhenaten’s shoulder.

“Just like you.” He bent his head and claimed her lips, his mouth warm and inviting, his tongue searching deeply, possessive and loving. Nell moaned and melted against him.

Her hands fumbled for his loincloth, still unsure of how it unfastened, so she tugged relentlessly at it. The fabric ripped, and they both froze for a moment; then Akhenaten chuckled and bent his head to nibble at the side of her neck.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her head thrown back to allow him as much access as he wanted to her skin. He trailed hot kisses down her collarbone and paused between her breasts, his breath warm against her skin.

“I have others,” he said, then continued his thorough exploration of her body. He cupped her breasts in his hands, tweaking the erect nipples between thumb and forefinger. Nell groaned and shivered with pleasure. The sticky wetness between her legs intensified as she squirmed and spread her thighs open for him.

As if on demand, he shuffled lower, grasping her hips in his strong hands. His touch felt warm, reassuring, and she lifted herself off the ground, inviting him to taste her. He trailed more kisses down her skin, on her stomach, her hipbone, between her thighs. She tangled her hands in his hair and gave a cry of frustration.

“I want to be everything to you,” Akhenaten said.

Nell glanced down and saw him staring at her from between her spread legs. He grinned and planted another kiss just above her clit, where her skin glistened in the fading sunlight. Akhenaten’s hands slid under her ass, and he lifted her slightly, but instead of burying his tongue in her, he gave her another aggravating kiss, lower this time, just brushing her swollen folds with the tip of his tongue.

“You’re infuriating,” she said between giggles and moans.

“Always,” he answered, his voice muffled by her pussy as he buried his face between her legs and pressed his mouth to it. His tongue slithered its way down her slit, through the velvety folds, wetting her already slick opening even further.

“That’s it,” she said, closing her eyes, pulling his head closer.

Akhenaten’s finger joined his tongue for only a moment, long enough for him to wet it thoroughly between her folds. He slid his finger down to her anus, then back to her pussy, gently caressing the sensitive skin separating the two. He dipped his finger into her pussy just enough to make her cry out, then removed it, his tongue still working its way through her labia, up to her clit to tease it with a flick, then back down as he lapped at her.

She couldn’t take it anymore. “Dammit, Akhenaten, fuck me.” She was panting now, beads of sweat dripping off her forehead and onto her skin and the ground beneath her.

Akhenaten obeyed, lifting himself up from between her legs and hovering over her. He brought his finger up to her mouth, and she tasted herself on him, which only heightened her arousal further.

“You’re delicious,” he murmured in her ear as he positioned himself on top of her, nudging her opening with his hard cock. “Like honey and sweet wine, only better.”

She grasped his ass in her hands and pulled him in, but he held back, only allowing the tip of his cock to penetrate her throbbing cunt.

Her frustration built, and she looked at him through a haze of desire. He stared back, his eyes wide and sincere, and filled with unbridled lust and an intensity that startled her.

“I love you, Nefertiti,” he said, then plunged his cock into her, his gaze never leaving her eyes.

Tears blurred her vision, and she swallowed hard, the pleasure building inside her with each thrust made that much more bittersweet by his words.

He loves his wife. Not me.

She shut her eyes against the onslaught of tears and moved with him, her hips driving their motion, speeding it up. He lowered his head and took a nipple into his mouth, sucking on it noisily, the sound merging with her moans and the shrill cries of birds chirping in the cooling night air.

Nell couldn’t believe how good he felt inside her. He filled her completely, not just physically, but with more emotion and lust than she thought possible. The elated joy of fucking him, of having him on top of her, in her, surrounding her, was more than she could bear.

The muscles in her cunt tightened and pressed on his large cock from all sides until she shuddered and came, clutching his shoulders to her, possessing his cock. She felt his surprise, heard his moan as he released his seed inside her, but it was too much for her to take, and it spilled out of her pussy and down her thighs.

He rolled off her, panting, and looked as spent as she felt. Nell found the strength to turn her head and stare at him, watching as a smile formed over his luscious lips.

“Please tell me this is forever,” he said, his green eyes reflecting the moonlight that had settled over Egypt. Nell turned her head, unable to reply. She blinked and felt the wetness on her lashes, and this time she couldn’t hold the tears at bay. She rolled on her side and let them flow, silently, to the ground.

Akhenaten didn’t push her, and he didn’t ask again, though she could sense his disappointment, could feel it as sharply as if it were her own, clutching at her heart. Maybe it was hers, she thought, as tears wet the grass beneath her head.

Her heartbreak would know no bounds when she went home.

It had to be tonight. Whether or not the mystery of the missing treasure would be solved at the festival, Nell couldn’t linger here a moment longer. Her plan hinged on the real Nefertiti returning as Nell slipped through whatever portal bound their two worlds together. When the woman finally returned, she might be able to shed some light on what happened to the treasure. But if Nefertiti *didn’t* return, everyone would assume she’d been guilty all along.

She sighed and pressed her cheek against the rough ground. What did it matter, anyway? Nefertiti wouldn’t be here to take the fall.

And Akhenaten would spend the rest of his life wondering why his wife abandoned him.

For a moment, Nell considered confessing everything. Her real identity, her need to return home. The impulse vanished as quickly as it had emerged. Leaving them both with heartache was still preferable to being treated like a lunatic.

At least for now.

Chapter Fourteen

Akhenaten leaned against a tree in the palace gardens, watching as the guests shuffled in, most in pairs, some unaccompanied, their eyes eagerly searching for a companion to spend the evening with. News of Nefertiti’s plans for tonight’s festival had spread quickly, and the guests were animated and lively, eager to take part in the celebration.

A woman nearby laughed loudly, and Akhenaten moved away in search of Nefertiti. She’d mentioned it would take her a while to get dressed, so he wasn’t concerned that she hadn’t shown up yet. It was still early, though the moon bathed the garden in its silvery light and a myriad of stars gleamed from horizon to horizon. Torches and candles had been lit to illuminate the guests, and overhead, the trees stirred and whispered.

He stopped in front of a group of musicians and watched as they set up their instruments. There were only three of them, two men, and a woman dressed in a gold shift, the material stretching tightly across her body and languidly hugging her curves. Her nipples poked against the thin fabric, erect and eager, and Akhenaten’s groin stirred with longing.

But he wasn’t interested in any other woman. Without so much as a second look, he ambled away from the trio, in search of his wife.

He caught sight of her as she strolled through the archway leading from the palace into the garden. Her straight, midnight hair hung loose around her shoulders, unadorned but for a large lotus flower tucked behind her ear. Her jewels would have been part of the missing treasure, Akhenaten noted with a grimace. He had nothing left to offer his villagers, or his wife.

Her usual white shift had been replaced with a pleated, beaded dress. Shoulder straps and a deep cut allowed for a generous view of cleavage and heightened Akhenaten's arousal. He rushed to meet her as she climbed down the few steps to the garden.

"You're stunning," he said, running a finger down her collarbone and dipping it into the narrow space between her breasts.

Nefertiti giggled and tilted her head in a gesture of pure innocence, but she eyed him from beneath her lowered lashes. "You're pretty handsome yourself," she said. "But you're wearing entirely too much clothing."

"I am?" He stared down at himself in puzzlement. He'd chosen a shorter and more revealing kilt than most of the others he wore for official business. It reached halfway down his thighs and left the sides of his legs bare, held up by mere string around his hips.

Nefertiti nodded and moved away from him. He pushed forward through the crowd gathered around her, but she moved swiftly until he lost sight of her in the throng of people.

Akhenaten swore silently under his breath, eliciting a few curious glances from those nearby.

"I want to thank everyone for coming tonight," Nefertiti said, and Akhenaten followed the sound of her voice. The crowd had formed a circle around her, and Akhenaten settled himself in beside a plump woman fanning herself. Nefertiti looked radiant, the shimmering beads in her silver dress and the shine of the moon- and torchlight casting a dazzling glow around her.

"As you've all heard by now, tonight's celebration will be a little different than the festivals you're accustomed to." She searched the crowd until her gaze was fixed on him, then winked and smiled broadly. His heart swelled with pride at the thought that she was all his.

His to love, his to fuck, his forever.

Her brilliant smile sent shivers down his spine and into his cock, which stiffened as he watched her. He shifted away from the plump lady, afraid he'd nudge her with his growing member.

"The pharaoh and I wish to give thanks for everything Aten has blessed us with. Aten, the sun god, giver of all life in Egypt, should be celebrated by a festival worthy of his power and the gifts he's given us." She paused, and members of the audience whispered to each other. When she spoke again, an expectant hush gathered over the crowd.

"Tonight, we worship Aten by worshiping each other." A strained giggle erupted from the front of the crowd, but Nefertiti ignored it. "What better way to celebrate the life-giving god than by performing acts that allow us to create life in kind? Emulating him by focusing on the same power in each of us, the power to create and enjoy the fruits of our creation, is the only way to truly show him how much we appreciate his efforts and his blessings."

A few people nodded, while others kept their gazes firmly fixed on the ground. Nefertiti held out her hand to Akhenaten, and he joined her in the middle of the circle the crowd had formed.

“Sexual pleasure,” Nefertiti continued as he grabbed her hand, “is a form of worship. We worship Aten while we worship our partners. I want you all to leave your inhibitions behind,” she said as she tugged at one of her shoulder straps. “And follow my lead.”

She slipped both straps over her shoulders and wiggled out of the dress, which fell to the ground and pooled around her feet. Gasps of shock and admiration erupted from the crowd, but the guests fell silent again as she knelt on the ground in front of Akhenaten.

Akhenaten couldn't remember when he'd last been this hard. Having this gorgeous creature on her knees before him in front of all these people, her tan skin glistening in the moonlight, was too much for his cock to bear. It strained against the loincloth, a large, hard bulge that he was certain everyone could see. And he didn't give a damn.

Nefertiti tugged on the strings holding the loincloth together, and it soon fell to the ground beside her garment. A few moans reached Akhenaten's ears, but he was too enthralled by his wife to look around him and analyze the crowd's reaction.

“That's it,” Nefertiti said, holding his solid length in her hand. Her rosy nipples were firm against the cool breeze, and Akhenaten longed to bite them, grasp them between his teeth and hear her gasps of pleasure as he sucked on them.

His cock throbbed in her hand, and he moaned when she lowered her mouth to it. He lifted his gaze from her luscious mouth, afraid he'd come before she even began if he continued to watch her full lips make love to his cock.

He was startled to realize that all around him, their guests imitated Nefertiti and Akhenaten's erotic action. Men stood while women knelt, their mouths lowered in silent worship of the cocks before them, their hands firmly grasping hips, asses, thighs, or running over smooth stomachs and strong chests.

The sound of Nefertiti's slurping drove him crazy, and he risked another glance down at her. She had his entire shaft in her mouth; the tip of his cock nudged the back of her throat, and he could feel it -- Aten, he could feel it! -- the moist heat of her mouth, the way she sucked his entire cock without blinking an eye.

He tangled his fingers in her silky hair and held tight as she moved her mouth along his shaft. When she released his cock, it was only so she could run her tongue up and down its length, moaning, as if the taste of him was the most delicious thing she'd ever encountered. Her hand stroked him, matching the rhythm of her mouth.

“I'm so hard,” Akhenaten whispered. The moans of the crowd had gotten louder, and when he looked up, his eyes locked onto one woman licking cum off a softening cock.

“I can't hold back,” he said, and Nefertiti nodded briefly before taking his entire length back down her throat. Her hot tongue wrapped around his cock, caressing it, engulfing it in heat and softness. She grabbed his ass as she sucked him harder, pulled him deeper, and Akhenaten's hips moved with her as he continued to fuck her mouth, thrust harder as she took him, again and again, to the brink of climax.

Akhenaten grunted as hot semen spurted from his cock, tightening his muscles and grasping on to

Nefertiti's head for dear life. She swallowed as much as she could, and the rest dripped out of her mouth, mingling with her saliva to drip down his balls and thighs onto the ground.

His knees shook and he panted, unsure whether he could stand on his own when Nefertiti released him. As if reading his mind, she held on to him and moved up the length of his body slowly, enveloping him in a deep embrace. Her lips found his, and he tasted himself on her, driving his tongue deeper into her mouth while his wet cock rubbed against her slick, shaved pussy.

"You're incredible," he murmured in her ear. She rewarded him with a low, throaty laugh. Around him, some of the guests had moved off, while others were still entranced by their own sexual escapades. No one paid attention to them any longer.

"You should go greet your guests," Nefertiti suggested, and Akhenaten reluctantly agreed.

"They've seen me naked," he said, grinning. "I need to go make sure I still possess some of my fierce authority."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. When he turned to leave, she slapped her hand firmly across his ass. Akhenaten jumped and grinned over his shoulder at her, shaking his head.

"Whatever's gotten into you this past week, make sure it stays," he said, then saw her demeanor change in an instant. Her smile disappeared, and her posture stiffened. She winked again, but the sparkle had vanished.

"What did I say?" he asked, but she'd already disappeared into the crowd.

Frowning, Akhenaten stumbled off, still a little weak in the knees, to a group of wealthy citizens he recognized as having followed him to the new capital of Akhet-Aten .

A sliver of movement from the right caught his eye, and he turned abruptly, scanning the scene. Men and women danced, holding each other tightly in naked, sweaty grips. He looked beyond them to dancing slave girls, and tables laden with food. Still, there was something ...

There it was again. Further down into the back of the garden, behind one of the large trees, a man dressed as a priest of Amun-Ra walked through the greenery, his head bowed. His golden priest robes shimmered as he walked, his hands enfolded in his sleeves.

Chills of dread and wonder ran up Akhenaten's spine. He couldn't believe anyone had the audacity to defy him at his own festival, his own gathering. The priest stood out among the throng of naked guests, and Akhenaten ducked through the crowd, intent on following him.

He had to figure out the man's identity. Anyone brave or foolish enough to attend the pharaoh's party dressed as a priest of Amun-Ra had to pay for his boldness.

The festival had turned into a cacophony of noise and skin, naked bodies pressing up against one another, the joyful sound of laughter filling the air. Servants slipped silently among the guests, bearing trays laden with drinks and pastries. Perfect voices sang in flawless harmony, their tones blending together in a beautiful melody that carried over the garden. Akhenaten pushed his way through a group of people entangled in a steamy embrace, sparing a look at the acts in which the three men and one woman were engaged.

His cock throbbed as he watched them, the woman taking one man's cock deep into her mouth while another man lay on his back on the ground as she rode him fiercely. A third man stood nearby, stroking his cock, waiting his turn.

He stepped over the man on the ground, muttering a quick apology, and continued his search for the priest. The golden robes glittered in deep contrast to the dark skin of a woman standing behind him.

Hastening his step, Akhenaten shoved aside a man squeezing a woman's breasts, and earned himself a quick tongue-lashing. Even the pharaoh wasn't above being reprimanded for interrupting intimate acts tonight, Akhenaten mused to himself. He was close now; just a few more steps and he'd have him. The priest had stopped walking, and stood motionless at the back of the garden with his head bowed.

"Where are you off to?" Nefertiti whispered in his ear. Akhenaten jumped, delight and longing rushing through him at the sound of her voice.

"I'll just be a moment," he said, glancing into her beautiful green eyes. She smiled at him, revealing perfect teeth and the barest hint of her pink tongue. Images of what she could do with that tongue flashed across his mind, and he grinned back, swept her into his arms, and planted a firm kiss on her luscious lips.

He released her reluctantly a moment later, remembering his original search. "Stay right here," he said, running his hands down her naked body to cup her firm ass. "I'm just going to get --"

The priest was gone. Akhenaten stared at the spot where the man had been standing, then scanned the surrounding area. He was nowhere in sight. A group of women had settled themselves on the ground nearby and were busy pleasuring each other. Somehow, Akhenaten doubted if they'd have noticed him in the midst of their ecstasy.

Nefertiti regarded him with a concerned look etched across her fine features. "What is it?"

"A priest of Amun-Ra," Akhenaten confessed.

"Here?" Nefertiti asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

Akhenaten shrugged. "That's what I'd intended to find out, but he's gone."

"Maybe he came to his senses and left," she said. "Although I can't imagine how he'd have gotten through the guards."

Akhenaten glanced at the men standing guard while the festival went on around them. They all had lusty, yearning looks on their faces and still bulges angling up the fronts of their kilts, but they'd been trained too well to give in to their desires. None fumbled under his loincloth, all content to watch rather than participate. Akhenaten knew they'd be taking part in their own lustful acts when they went to their quarters tonight, but for now, they continued to watch over the well being of their pharaoh, his queen, and their guests.

Nefertiti was right. How could a man dressed as a priest of Amun-Ra have gotten past his guards? He would have had to be extremely good at slipping through a group of people unnoticed, or --

He lost his train of thought as Nefertiti's mouth clamped around one of his flat nipples and her hand cupped his balls.

“Aten, woman, what you do to me,” he growled as she continued to flick his nipple with the tip of her tongue. The wind brushed against the wet spot on his chest, and he shivered with delight and the coolness of the breeze.

Nefertiti stood and kissed him firmly on the mouth, her tongue sneaking between his parted lips. She was in control tonight, and he gasped as she pinched his ass. His cock pressed against her belly, already hard again, while her musky scent tickled his senses and revealed her arousal.

“I never knew you could be like this,” he whispered against her hair as she trailed hot kisses along his neck and collarbone. She stiffened in his arms for a moment, then shook her head and laughed.

“Well, surprise,” she said, and grabbed his cock firmly in her hand.

He growled and lifted her onto him, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Her firm body rubbed up against him, her breasts sliding up and down along his chest as he positioned her onto his cock. He bent his head to take one perky nipple into his mouth, and she groaned, her nails sinking into his shoulders as she clung to him.

Akhenaten held her ass in his hands as her pussy slid over his cock, enveloping him in her wetness and warmth.

“You feel so good,” he whispered as he plunged into her. She gasped with each thrust, and he loved the sounds she made, so honest and full of the desire he’d craved from his wife for so long.

She was so light; he could bounce her on his cock with one hand while he explored her cunt with the other. He slid his fingers between her folds and followed the slick line that separated her ass and her pussy. He touched his cock as it entered her in swift thrusts. Her breasts bounced as he fucked her, and his eyes were glued to the two perfect globes, their pink areolas flushed with excitement, the nipples erect and begging to be sucked.

He felt the familiar tightening in his balls and held Nefertiti close against him, thrusting into her with long, powerful strokes. He came quickly after that, the cry escaping his throat much louder than he would have thought himself capable of uttering in public.

Nefertiti’s pussy clamped down on his spurting cock, and she screamed out with him, their voices joining and echoing through the garden.

She unwrapped her long legs from around his waist and slid down his body easily, leaving him leaning against a tree, trying to catch his breath.

“You’re incredible,” he murmured, grabbing a strand of her hair between his thumb and forefinger. He moved his hand to her cheek, and she leaned into the caress, closing her eyes.

In the distance behind her, Akhenaten caught sight of the golden robes and dropped his hand from Nefertiti’s face.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” she asked quickly, concern filling her eyes.

“The priest is back,” he said, watching the man now sitting boldly on a throne-like chair meant for Akhenaten alone. The priest cast one arm carelessly over the armrest, while with the other hand he pulled

back his hood.

Nell stared at Akhenaten incredulously. "He's here?"

Akhenaten paled and didn't reply. His eyes widened, and he grasped her shoulders firmly, almost painfully. He stared at a spot behind her, and she tried to turn around to follow his gaze, but his grip was too strong.

"Guests of the pharaoh," a man's voice boomed, loud and menacing from behind her. Nell gasped, recognizing Ramose, and she managed to wrench herself out of Akhenaten's hold.

Ramose sat on Akhenaten's golden chair, his robes falling over it in thick folds. Nell had kept Akhenaten too busy to be able to take his royal spot on the throne and observe the festivities. Now Ramose sat upon it dressed as a priest of Amun-Ra, a position which, as Nell understood it, had been eliminated by Akhenaten. The worship of all gods other than Aten had been forbidden, and Nell couldn't imagine why the pharaoh's royal vizier would defy him so blatantly.

Not that she was entirely surprised. There was something sinister about the man, from his involvement in her sister's injuries to having witnessed her coming through the portal. What vizier hung out in tombs in the middle of the night? And how could he have let the entire royal treasure disappear like that?

Akhenaten's arm wrapped around her waist as he pulled her closer to him. She was grateful for his warmth, the feel of his naked body against hers, the faint scent of sweat and masculinity emanating from him. She leaned back and rested her head on his shoulder.

Akhenaten made no move to stop Ramose, and as Nell watched, a group of guards surrounded the throne. They held their spears pointed toward Ramose and glanced at Akhenaten, awaiting orders to remove him by force. She couldn't see his face, but Akhenaten hadn't given that order yet, and Ramose smirked their way and continued.

"I hope everyone's having a good time," he said, casting a derisive glance at the guests. The dancing and lovemaking had ceased, and all eyes were glued to Ramose. A hush had fallen over the crowd, and even the group of performers who had provided such lovely music had stopped cold in the middle of their melody.

"It amazes me that you can all be such fools," Ramose said, and audible gasps erupted from his audience. Ramose didn't seem to notice, or if he did, he didn't care.

"You're being led astray. Can't you see that? A religion of light." His lips curled into a sneer as he spoke the words. "Can anything be more foolish?"

Nell felt Akhenaten stiffen behind her, and he must have made a gesture to the guards, because they move up closer to Ramose.

Still, he continued. "And as if your pharaoh wasn't completely out of his mind to make you follow the sun," he said, the guards' spears now jabbing into his flesh in warning, "the woman you believe to be Nefertiti is a fraud."

Nell groaned and let her head fall into her hands. *This is it, then. This is the part where they hang me,*

or spear me, or throw me in the dungeon.

She spun around and looked at Akhenaten. Confusion and pain shone brightly in his eyes, and she backed a few steps away from him. There was no more time to waste. She had to go home, now, before they made her explain how she came to impersonate Nefertiti, to carry Akhenaten's child, to fall in love.

The worst part was that she couldn't explain if she wanted to. Who would believe her when she tried to describe the twenty-first century, the portal with the hand that beckoned her through? How could she tell Akhenaten that for all she knew, the wife he loved was gone forever because she'd been foolish enough to follow a dream image of a man who promised passion beyond anything she'd ever experienced?

"It's time for the charade to end," Ramose said as Nell continued to back away. She bumped into someone and mumbled an apology, but the sharp feel of a knife at her back stopped her cold in her tracks.

"That's right, my queen," Ramose said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. "I told you that night in the tombs that your day would come. You took something precious from all of us, and now you're going to pay."

The knife dug deeper into her flesh, and she felt it break the skin. A wet drop of blood trickled down her hip from the wound in her side, and the man behind her wrapped his arm tightly around her throat.

Akhenaten moved forward at lightning speed, his hand outstretched.

"Stop right there," a man behind her said, and Nell recognized his voice at once. "The physician ..." she whispered, though he crushed her throat and the words came out as barely a croak.

"Guards!" Akhenaten bellowed. He held his fists bunched tightly at his sides, and his face blazed with fury. He took a step forward, and the physician made a growling noise deep in his throat. Akhenaten stopped, holding his hands up in supplication. He cast a worried glance at Nell, and she tried to smile, but her face felt stretched, her jaw permanently clenched and powerless to respond to her commands.

The guards were too far away. They had been holding Ramose but rushed quickly to Nell's aid when they were summoned. They now made their way through the throng of people, many panicked by the sudden turn of events and seeking to gather their garments and flee.

Nell glanced up to see Ramose now sitting on the throne calmly, with no one to stop him if he thought to escape, or cause Akhenaten harm. She wanted to cry out a warning, but her air supply was fading fast, and she felt weak, lightheaded.

"That's right," the physician whispered in her ear. "You're going to die. And you're going to release the real Nefertiti, the queen you've stolen from us."

Nell gasped and struggled for breath. Her lids felt heavy, pressing down on her eyes against her will.

I have to go home. She wasn't sure if she'd spoken the words aloud, or only thought them.

With one last shuddering attempt at a shallow breath, she gave in to the overpowering blackness, and fell into oblivion.

Chapter Fifteen

Akhenaten's head throbbed. He stood motionless, watching his wife's inert body slumping lifelessly in the physician's arms. A thin trickle of blood stained the flawless skin of her hip and dripped onto the grass.

Adrenaline rushed through his veins at a furious speed. He clenched his fists and allowed his muscles to tighten as he struggled to control his anger.

He searched frantically around him for the guards. They were coming, shoving at people with the butt of their spears, but the guests were desperate, eager to leave this scene which had quickly turned dangerous. The guards seemed to move in slow motion, their efforts impeded at every turn.

Akhenaten glanced back at Nefertiti and the man who held her. The guards would be of no use, as the physician still held his wicked-looking curved blade against Nefertiti's side, but just having their presence would have been reassuring.

He could wait no longer. He had to act now, no matter the consequences. Nefertiti was dying, if she wasn't already dead.

A bellowing scream broke free from deep inside his lungs, something primal and vicious, and with it, fury and anger propelled him into action. The physician looked up at the sound, and Akhenaten lunged for him. A moment later his elbow connected with the man's face with a loud, satisfying crack. The physician's breath whooshed out between his teeth, and he loosened his grip on Nefertiti. She slid out of his arms like a child's doll and fell to the ground. The physician swore loudly, dropped the blade, and brought his hands to his nose, which now gushed a thick stream of blood. He turned on his heel and broke into a run.

A few of the women who had gathered to watch dropped to their knees around Nefertiti.

"Take care of her," Akhenaten yelled over his shoulder. The physician had already bolted through the garden, and Akhenaten gave chase. Driven by anger and the image of Nefertiti lying lifeless on the ground, Akhenaten was quicker, and he caught up to the man before he could reach the exit and disappear through the streets of the city.

Akhenaten grabbed the physician's shoulder and twisted him around with strength he hadn't known he possessed. The man's face was a bloody mess, but he grinned, blood staining his white teeth.

"She's dead now, Pharaoh. The real queen will return, you'll see."

The real Queen?

It didn't matter now. The ravings of two madmen weren't his concern. And yet ... Nefertiti had been acting strange lately. Was it possible that she wasn't his wife? That the woman he'd been making love to since he'd returned was only an impostor? And the baby -- Aten, it was too painful to consider! If the woman wasn't really Nefertiti, whose baby did she carry?

Akhenaten lifted a knee and plunged it into the man's midsection, watching with satisfaction as the physician doubled over in pain. A look of confusion crossed the man's features as he fell to his knees and

stared up at Akhenaten.

“But --” he stammered, blood dripping from his lips, “I saved you from the abomination. I’ve given you your queen back. She’s there, back in the garden, waiting for you. She’ll be demure and pure again, you’ll see.”

Akhenaten stared at the physician, aghast at what he’d heard. “You killed my wife. You killed your queen. I don’t know what kind of lies Ramose has been telling you, but what you’re telling me is impossible. Listen to yourself,” Akhenaten said, nudging the man on the ground with his foot. “You’re trying to tell me that I don’t know my own wife, that I can’t tell the difference between an impostor and the real thing.”

The man’s head drooped, and he fixed his gaze on the ground.

“And how could you possibly think that killing Nefertiti would bring back my wife? You’re speaking in riddles, and none of your words make sense.” The physician didn’t answer, and Akhenaten shook his head. His voice quivered with strong revulsion. “I’m not wasting any more time on you. It’s clear that you’re nothing but a pawn in this, Ramose’s puppet in a sick, twisted game.”

A few guards approached tentatively, and Akhenaten motioned them forward. “Take him,” he commanded, and watched as two men lifted the physician off the ground. “Throw him in the dungeon. I’ll deal with him later.”

He rushed toward the crowd of people still huddled where Nefertiti had fallen. He had to tell her he didn’t believe a word they’d said, that he loved her, and whatever madness Ramose and the physician had concocted didn’t affect their future together. He’d never leave her alone again, not when there were so many people who didn’t share his vision, his faith in Aten.

Akhenaten had always known he’d be the target of assassination attempts from unbelievers, from those who sought to usurp him and supplant him with another pharaoh, one not nearly as radical in his beliefs. He’d never imagined their hatred would extend to his family, to his beloved Nefertiti.

She had to be alive. His heart pounded in his chest, a painful reminder that he’d never be whole again without her. The pain he felt now would haunt him forever, and nothing mattered without her in his life. Not his treasure, or those who sought to kill him.

He pushed his way through a throng of naked bodies, the hum and excitement in the air pulsing with an energy of its own.

“Nefertiti,” he cried out as he shoved his way through the group of people still huddled over the form on the ground.

He reached the spot where she’d fallen, and looked wildly at the faces staring up at him.

There was no body on the ground.

Nefertiti had vanished.

Disoriented and lightheaded, Nell pushed her way through the throng of people. She shoved against

naked bodies, touching breasts, hips, and other areas without murmuring so much as a quick apology.

She had to get out of there. She had to get home, tonight, before things became any worse for her. Akhenaten knew she wasn't Nefertiti. Everything they'd built since she'd arrived in Egypt had been shattered by a few cruel words. But it had never been meant to last. She wasn't naïve enough to have thought for a moment that she could make a life for herself here in ancient times, with a man who stirred fevered longings through every inch of her body. Okay, so maybe, just for a moment, the image of Akhenaten holding their baby, a precious small bundle in his arms, seemed real.

Why isn't it possible? Why can't I have a future here?

"Nefertiti!" She heard Akhenaten cry out, and she stopped for a moment to glance back at him. He stared at the spot where she should have been lying on the ground, his face a mask of fury and panic.

No, she had to go. She had to get home. Akhenaten would be furious with her, and even her acting skills couldn't get her out of this one. She couldn't think of a lie convincing enough to explain her appearance and the way she'd taken over his wife's body. The truth certainly wasn't an option, even if she had known how it was possible that she was there in the first place.

Someone stepped on Nell's foot, and she cried out in pain but kept pressing her way through the crowd. She could make out the gate over the top of people's heads, and she wasn't far off.

"Excuse me," she murmured, squeezing past a rotund woman with large breasts that hung down to her full belly. The woman glared at her, then turned back to the commotion Akhenaten had stirred on the other side of the garden.

Just a few more steps and she'd be --

"Oh!" she cried as someone grabbed her hand. "Let me go!"

The hand holding Nell's was smooth and delicate, yet strong. People still clustered around Nell as she tried to make her escape, and she couldn't see who held her. She felt herself being tugged along through the crowd and, much to her surprise, in a minute she stood by the garden gates, clear of the mob.

Muet's brows were furrowed, and she stared at Nell with concern etched on her exotic features.

"Are you alright?" the girl asked, pushing a lock of hair back from Nell's face.

Nell nodded, but her knees felt weak, and the terror she'd experienced while the physician had held the knife to her side came rushing back. She leaned against Muet, and her sister grabbed her in a tight embrace.

Sister? When did I start thinking of her that way?

Yes, sister. Muet had been the sister she'd never had. Nell had felt protective of her since the first time she saw her, standing there in the tombs, looking at her with those large, questioning eyes. She squeezed the girl tighter.

"Thank you," she said, when she trusted her voice enough to speak. The fear had subsided, but a chill settled deep into her bones, and she shivered.

“Here,” Muet said, handing her a long silk garment. “Wear this.”

Nell nodded her thanks and wrapped the cloth tightly around her body.

“I saw Ramose,” Muet said, leaning against a large marble column. She crossed her arms across her chest, an act that made her seem even more vulnerable. “In the garden. I heard him talk about you.”

“And you believe him?” Nell asked. Her breath caught in her throat as she waited for Muet’s answer.

“It doesn’t matter,” Muet said, shaking her head. “You’re my sister. You’ve always been there for me when I needed you, and that’s why I came tonight. I wanted to tell you the truth.”

“The truth about what?”

“About this,” Muet said, indicating the vivid purple bruise on her cheek. Flickering torches had been set up all around them, and their fiery glow made the wound on Muet’s face even more striking. Anger built within Nell, and she gritted her teeth and nodded, urging the girl to continue.

“It was Ramose,” Muet said, her gaze dropping to the ground. “And the physician. I overheard them talking a few days ago. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, really.”

“I know, honey.” Nell touched Muet’s arm lightly, wanting to reassure the girl that she had her full support. “What were they saying?”

“I didn’t hear the first part of the conversation. I was there, picking flowers from the bushes.” She indicated with a slender finger toward the back of the garden. “And they had been strolling down the path. When they came to the spot where I was standing, they stopped walking but continued chattering on. I didn’t pay much attention to what they were saying at first ...”

“At first?” Nell prodded.

Muet nodded, then lifted her gaze to stare into Nell’s eyes. “Then Ramose mentioned the pharaoh’s treasure. He said Akhenaten had been a fool to entrust him with all the royal wealth.”

Nell narrowed her eyes. “I knew it. Go on.”

“He said he’d given orders to have a magnificent temple built for worshipping Amun-Ra; then he laughed at the irony of it all. I was shocked, I must have made a sound, because they found me.” Large tears had welled in Muet’s bright eyes, and one escaped down her cheek.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Nell said, wiping the tear away with the back of her hand. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“They said they’d kill you.” The girl’s eyes went wide with fear, and she clamped her hand down on Nell’s arm. “Nefertiti, I believed them! They did this to me,” she said, brushing the bruise on her cheek lightly with the tips of her fingers, then wincing at the contact. “They could do much worse to you.”

“Well, they certainly tried,” Nell said, looking down at her hip at the blood seeping through the white garment. “And Akhenaten --”

Akhenaten would be looking for her! She’d been so intrigued by what Muet had told her, she’d forgotten

the urgency which propelled her forward, to the tombs.

“I have to go,” she said to Muet, hugging her one last time. “Tell the pharaoh what you’ve told me.”

She turned and bolted into the darkness before Muet could ask where she was going, before she could try to follow her, or stop her from going through with her plan to return home. Too many things had stood in the way of her return to the tombs and to a time she understood and belonged in. A time where there were no mad viziers, and no sexy pharaohs.

Tears stung the back of her throat as she ran, and the wound in her side throbbed with a dull pain.

Dark, gloomy clouds passed over the yellow moon above, obscuring its comforting light as Nell ran for home.

“Where is she?” Akhenaten asked, bewildered. He’d seen her fall out of the physician’s grasp. By all rights, she should be lying here, on the ground, being tended to by the women in the crowd who had come to her aid as he chased the physician.

Ramose.

“Did he take her?” Akhenaten yelled, grabbing a nearby man by his bare shoulders and shaking him. “Did you see them?”

The man nodded, and after what seemed an age, finally answered. “She left.”

“What do you mean, she left? Didn’t you see her collapse? She was in no condition to walk away from here.” He shoved the man backward, and he stumbled onto the group of onlookers.

“Who took her?” He asked, turning around in a circle, fixing each guest in turn with a menacing stare. “By Aten, if someone doesn’t tell me soon, I’m going to throw the whole lot of you in the dungeon!”

“He’s telling the truth,” a thin, pale woman said from the back of the crowd. “She fell to the ground, then awoke a moment later. She said she was alright when we asked, so we -- I,” the woman corrected, seeming unwilling to get anyone else involved in this, “assumed she was going back inside the palace, where she’d be safe.”

Akhenaten paused and stared into the woman’s eyes. She appeared to be telling the truth, and as far as he could tell, she had no reason to lie. But tonight had been full of surprises and revelations. Men he’d assumed he could count on, men he’d thought could be trusted with the wealth of Egypt and the welfare of his family, had turned out to be traitorous, murderous bastards.

Other guests huddled close around the woman nodded their agreement.

Akhenaten turned to a group of his guards who had settled in by his side. “What about Ramose? Where did you take him?”

“Uhh ...” One man shuffled his feet. “He’s gone.”

“Gone?” Akhenaten shouted, unable to believe what he was hearing. “My royal guard let a raving

madman who had not only risked Aten's wrath with his traitorous words, but had uttered grave lies about the queen, get away?"

"We didn't know which was more important," the man said, flushing a deep red from his neck up to his forehead. "We rushed to aid the queen, then thought we'd go back for Ramose. He hadn't harmed anyone." The guard struggled to maintain his composure, and Akhenaten sighed. The guards had done as well as could have been expected under the circumstances.

"Fine. I want them both found. Ramose can join his companion in the dungeon. Bring the queen to me."

It seemed to take Akhenaten a lifetime to make his way through the crowd. People around him shouted, and bodies pressed close together. He elbowed his way through the throng and absently thought that Nefertiti shouldn't have invited so many people. A private party would have been so much easier to navigate.

"If you people don't move out of my way," he said between clenched teeth, "I'm going to order the guards to do whatever they may with you, as long as I never have to look at another one of you as long as I live."

People gasped loudly at the strength and viciousness of his words, but Akhenaten ignored them. His power was absolute, especially here, tonight, in his palace garden, with his wife missing. He didn't give a damn what his subjects thought of him as he pushed through them, naked and menacing.

A voice reached his ears as the crowd parted, and it was as welcome as the warm heat of the sun after a dark day. "Tell the pharaoh what you've told me," Nefertiti said, and Akhenaten rushed toward the sound of her voice.

She was there, just a few steps away, hidden behind the archway leading out of the garden.

"Nefertiti," he called out as he turned the corner, and found himself staring at Muet.

"Where is she?" he asked the girl, gripping her arms. She squirmed a little in a feeble effort to get away, then lifted her chin and looked him right in the eyes. Taken aback by her unaccustomed boldness, Akhenaten released her, dropping his hands to his sides.

"Nefertiti," he said again, gentler this time. "Where is she?"

"She had to go."

Akhenaten looked around for any sign of his wife's enticing naked rear end, but there was none. He'd heard her voice only a moment ago. She couldn't have gotten far.

"Where?" he asked again. "Inside the palace?"

Muet hesitated, then shook her head. "I don't think so. She was in too much of a hurry."

Akhenaten swore loudly, then looked back at his sister-in-law. "What did she want you to tell me?"

"Ramose," the girl whispered feebly. "He has your treasure."

Akhenaten nodded, unshaken by the revelation. After the atrocities Ramose had been spewing from

Akhenaten's throne in the garden just minutes ago, this divulgence hardly came as a surprise.

"He's building a temple to Amun-Ra," Muet continued, and that bit of news astonished him.

"A temple? Where could he do such a thing that I wouldn't hear of it?"

"In the mountainside."

Akhenaten remembered the large, looming cliffs in the desert, carved as if by magic. He hadn't been too concerned with them, since he'd been more eager to find a spot close to the Nile on which to build Akhet-Aten. Now, they seemed like the perfect hiding spot for a forbidden temple.

"I'll deal with him later," he told Muet, then turned to leave.

"You're going to find Nefertiti, aren't you?"

Akhenaten stopped in midstride, touched by the tenderness and concern in Muet's voice. He smiled despite himself.

"Absolutely. I think I know exactly where she is."

Chapter Sixteen

Nell paused outside the threshold to the tombs to glance behind her. The night was perfectly still, and she found she missed the music from the festival, the sounds of celebration and sexual excitement that had filled the air only a short time before.

She took a deep breath and entered the tombs, now unguarded. The torches seemed to be lit throughout the chambers, so she hurried down the hall, searching each room in turn as she came to it.

The first large chamber that made her pause outside the doorway was empty except for a large sarcophagus. The lid had been closed. A shiver ran down Nell's spine. She couldn't help the apprehension that rose in her throat as she quickly scanned the walls; Akhenaten could be right behind her, asking questions she couldn't begin to answer. She had to hurry. Instinctively, she knew this was her last chance to make it home, to find the symbol that opened the portal to her own world and slip through it before she lost that chance forever and became trapped here, with the man of her dreams, in a time she didn't belong, in a place where she couldn't ever hope to fit in.

She couldn't even fool Muet. Nell had seen the look in the girl's eyes when she spoke about Ramose's claims.

She knows I'm not her sister. And yet ...

And yet she hadn't turned away. Neither had Akhenaten.

Nell pushed that thought out of her mind as she left the chamber. Its walls had been empty, devoid of any decorations or glittering symbols that could bring her home. She had to keep searching. She halted as

a sound reached her ears. It was soft, like a scuffle of wood against rock, or -- footsteps!

She grabbed the hem of her makeshift garment and pulled it up, freeing her legs as she ran through the hallways. She glanced into each chamber she passed, but they were all too small, too private. The one she'd come through had been large and impressive, with riches glittering on the floor and covering the walls. Even the sarcophagus had been covered in opulent golden hieroglyphs.

The footsteps grew closer, louder. Nell's pulse leaped as she turned a corner and slid along the marble floor. She propelled herself through an archway leading to yet another chamber, but this one was empty as well. She sighed in frustration and was about to backtrack out into the hall when a glimmer of recognition made her pause. She stared around her, imagining how the room would have looked if the treasure had still been there.

She walked to the opposite wall where she'd collapsed after her sudden arrival and ran her hand along the cool stone. She turned to survey the room from that angle, and excitement surged through her. This was it -- she was certain of it. The angle of the archway leading to the hallway was right. It would have been just across from where she'd been sitting. Muet had walked through it when she came to get her. Nell's heart pounded in her chest, and her hands shook. She could barely contain her excitement.

She spun back to the wall, tears streaming freely down her cheeks.

I'm going home.

Akhenaten -- oh, God.

There was no symbol. No golden symbol of Amun-Ra, or of any other god, adhered to the wall. Nell beat her fists against the stone, its texture digging into her skin, while sobs escaped her throat unchecked. She had come too far to let this be a dead end.

But the room had been emptied, most likely by Ramose when he'd been here the last time, in his eagerness to make away with all the pharaoh's treasures. He'd left the torches in their sconces on the wall, probably only because they were made of metal and wood, nothing he could sell or profit from.

Torchlight fell in large pools over the cool marble floor, but there was no shiny, telltale sign of gold, no hidden entrance, no portal that would magically open at the utterance of a secret word.

Nell pounded and kicked at the stone, and her hands burned from the effort. The pain in her side had turned to sheer agony, but it would all be over soon, if only she could find the right spot --

She felt his presence without having to turn around. Nell hadn't heard his footsteps approach, since her own sobs had drowned out every other sound in the place.

She turned, slowly, and at the sight of Ramose filling the archway, her heart froze in her chest. This was it, then. He'd come to finish the job, to do what the physician hadn't been able to. His eyes glinted darkly beneath his hood, and he stood motionless, watching her.

She wiped the tears away with the back of her hand, struggling to regain her composure. She was going to die, that much was certain, and she didn't want to give the bastard the satisfaction of seeing her weep before him. She wasn't going to beg for mercy.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked, lifting her chin to stare at him with a level gaze. “We both know why you’re here, and I’m obviously unarmed.” She lifted her hands in the air in a gesture she’d used so many times in action movies. Only then, she’d been able to reach for a gun and blast away the bad guys with a well-choreographed move.

Fresh tears sprung to her eyes at the thought of the sets she’d been on, the job she loved and would never get to do again. Images of her stubborn agent and her handsome leading men sprung up in her mind, and above all, Akhenaten’s face -- his eyes, his full lips curved into a sensual smile.

She closed her eyes to banish the images, and when she opened them, Ramose stood inches away from her. She stifled a scream that threatened to break free from her throat. She looked at him wildly, expecting another knife to plummet toward her, but his large hands were empty at his sides.

No. I can’t die like this.

Nell placed one hand protectively over the small swell of her belly.

“If you kill me, Nefertiti dies, too,” she said, lifting her gaze to Ramose’s. She hoped to appeal to him in even a small way, since he’d shown concern for the real Nefertiti in the garden.

“I doubt that,” he said, and Nell found her breath knocked out of her. Her head slammed against the back of the wall with a resounding crack, and her body went numb for a moment. Her mouth tasted like copper, and she realized, belatedly, that he’d hit her.

She flattened herself against the wall and willed her legs to hold her. When she opened her eyes a moment later, it was just in time to duck out of the way of another blow.

Ramose growled, a deep, menacing sound that resonated through the empty chamber.

“I will kill you,” he promised as she spun away from his approach. She looked at the exit, which seemed miles away. The pain in her head cast black flashes across her vision, making her stumble through the dim room.

Her knees buckled, and she put out her hands to steady herself against the wall. Ramose grabbed her by the back of her hair, and Nell immediately wished she’d cut it when she had the chance, into one of those fashionable boy-cuts that were all the rage in Hollywood.

He yanked her head back, then threw her with a powerful shove to the floor. She put out her hands to brace her fall, but the icy pain of the impact ran up her arms and into her elbows and sent her reeling to the ground.

She moaned and rolled over on her back, watching as Ramose came for her again, knowing that he was much stronger, much faster.

Unarmed, she and her baby didn’t stand a chance.

If only the room weren’t empty. She only needed one object, anything, sharp or blunt, with edges she could use to impale him on or something she could shatter over his head. But there was nothing. He’d been so thorough when he’d cleaned out the chamber, leaving her without hope, without even the smallest object to use to defend herself.

He stood beside her, a maniacal smile revealing bright white teeth in the flickering torchlight.

Oh, God. The torches!

He lifted his foot and kicked her in the ribs. She groaned and rolled to the side, the pain and impact propelling her close to the wall.

Ramose walked toward her at a leisurely pace, cracking his knuckles against the flat of his hand. He was enjoying this, Nell realized. He thought he had all the time in the world.

Nell scrambled to her feet before Ramose could compose himself for another attack. She glanced up at the nearest torch, its long wooden handle sticking into the sconce in the wall, and she felt her heart leap at the prospect of a weapon, of hope.

She reached for it and saw an instant of blank astonishment on his face, followed by the beginning of comprehension. He lunged for her, and she pulled on the torch with all her strength, freeing it from the wall.

A blue light filled the cavernous room, and she blinked against it, lifting her arm to shield her face from the dazzling radiance.

“What is this new trickery?” Ramose yelled, but he’d stopped in his tracks and was squinting against the brightness.

Nell blinked again, this time in disbelief.

The portal stood open, a large circle of incandescence emanating from the middle of the room.

Aten, don’t let me be too late.

Akhenaten gritted his teeth as he stepped into the tombs, the chill of the passage penetrating his flesh.

He’d always hated tombs. The scent of death seemed to permeate this one, even though he knew it had never been used. The sarcophagi were empty, devoid of mummies or any denizens of the underworld. Yet there was something about this place, its closed-in chambers and narrow halls, the darkness pierced only by the glow of torches set too far apart.

Death surrounded him, called out to him. His feet moved faster, as if of their own accord. If Nefertiti was here, the one place she kept returning time and again, she wouldn’t be here for much longer.

Death lurked in the shadows, waiting to take her. He could feel her slipping through his fingers, heading farther and farther away. He couldn’t bear to lose her, not after he’d just found her, the real Nefertiti, the woman he’d yearned for and craved his entire life and never thought he’d have.

Voices. There were voices echoing from somewhere deep in the tombs, and though Akhenaten couldn’t make out the words, he broke into a run. He bolted past chambers, down long narrow corridors, following the sound that would lead him to his beloved wife.

Nefertiti.

Her name sprung to his tongue, along with the lingering flavor of honeyed kisses and something else -- something bitter and metallic, something that told him she wouldn't be his much longer.

Akhenaten turned a sharp corner to his right and entered a chamber filled with a bright blue glow.

Understanding ran through him, painful and swift.

"Don't go!" The scream was torn from his lungs, leaving him breathless with need, but he felt glued to the doorway. "Don't go." The words were softer now, and his heart leaped in his chest.

Nefertiti turned to him. Her white dress was stained with blood, blood that ran freely down her face and slender neck. A dark bruise shadowed the base of her throat. She stared at him, wide-eyed, as did Ramose.

It all happened in an instant. His yell still echoed through the chamber, and Nefertiti's eyes gathered a new determination. She screamed, too, a bellowing sound that seemed to come from deep within her core. Then she lunged at Ramose.

She shoved him, hard, and the surprise of her attack knocked him off his feet and into the blue door of light.

His arms flailed as he fell through, and he said something unintelligible, but the light faded as soon as he dropped through it.

Akhenaten didn't care how this was all possible. It didn't matter where Ramose had gone, where the light had taken him. He only knew it had to be Aten's doing, the god of light, the god who had come to him so many times before and had listened to his fervent prayers for a wife and a love like no other.

"Nefertiti," he said, rushing to her.

He caught her as her knees gave out, and she lost consciousness in his arms.

Chapter Seventeen

The world spun around Nell as she struggled to open her eyes.

No, it bounced. It bounced and quivered -- or maybe that was her stomach. Her body throbbed with lingering pain, and her head felt like it had been hit with a brick. And it had been, she realized. It had been slammed against the hard wall of the tombs, and the floor, and then Ramose, he --

Nell gasped and struggled to stand, but found that she wasn't lying down, not in the usual sense. She opened her eyes to a myriad of stars above, stars that moved slowly, as she moved with them. She turned her head and inhaled sharply as pain spread through her neck and shoulders. She tried again, slower this time, and found herself staring into Akhenaten's deep green eyes.

She was in his arms. A slow, languid smile spread over her face.

“I --” she said, but he covered her mouth lightly with his, and she lost herself in the feel of his luscious lips, the taste of honey, and the scent of jasmine.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and relaxed against him. She thought about the portal closing behind Ramose, sealing off her only way home. She’d missed her chance.

Except she hadn’t. She’d had the option right there before her, but when Akhenaten had stood in the archway to the chamber, she’d known she could never leave him.

She’d only be another empty, unhappy actress when she went back home. There were a lot of men in Hollywood, but none could ever compare to this one. She lifted her head and kissed his jaw, and he grinned and held her tighter.

Akhenaten carried her into the palace, and she saw the guards and servants lined up along each side of the hallway, all beaming welcoming smiles at her. She smiled back, happiness spreading through her and reaching into the deepest recesses of her heart to eliminate all doubts about her decision. She did fit in here, with these ancient people who seemed so glad to see her home.

Home. Yes, this is my home now.

They entered her bedchamber, and Akhenaten placed her gently on the silk coverings atop her bed. The luxury and comfort drew a deep breath from her tired body. Her eyelids felt heavy, but she didn’t want to close them and miss a moment of looking at Akhenaten’s handsome face.

“You rescued me,” she said, running a finger down his naked chest. He’d thrown on a loincloth since the last time she’d seen him, running naked after the man who had threatened her life.

“You rescued yourself,” he corrected her. “I let Ramose get away.” His mouth tightened into a thin line.

Nell gripped his strong hand in her smaller one. “You didn’t let him get away. If anyone’s to blame, it’s the guards, and even then ...” Her voice trailed off as another image of Ramose stumbling back through the portal shattered her thoughts.

He’d be in the twenty-first century now. An unbidden smile formed over her lips. What would he do there? A man from an ancient land, a time of pharaohs and gods and the pampered life of a royal official, thrust into the modern world.

Akhenaten leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, then lay beside her, his arm curling over her midsection.

Nell turned to him and held her breath, knowing what had to be said and understanding that it could destroy everything.

“I’m not your wife,” she blurted out at once, then clamped her mouth shut and waited for his reply.

He didn’t answer for a moment, but trailed his hand along her arm, sending shivers of pleasure down her spine. His caress paused at her breast, and he tweaked a nipple, gently, aware of the bruises forming all over her body and carefully avoiding them.

“Then you’ll just have to marry me again, so that you are.”

Tears stung the back of her throat, and Nell found she couldn't speak. There was nothing in her acting career that had prepared her for this moment of real tenderness and emotion.

"I love you," she whispered finally, when she could trust her own voice.

"And I love you, my queen," he said, grasping her lower lip between his teeth. She leaned into the kiss, into him, wrapping her arms around his firm body and pulling him close. A sharp stab of pain in her side told her they couldn't consummate their love in the way she craved, and she pulled back reluctantly.

"The baby," he said, laying a hand on her stomach.

"She's fine," Nell whispered, relishing his caress on her abdomen. "She's as strong as her father."

"She?" Akhenaten asked, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "How can you be so sure?"

Nell shrugged, and grinned at him. "Call it intuition. Or destiny."

She pulled him back into a warm embrace and pressed her head against his chest. She breathed in his scent, jasmine and male, and closed her eyes.

She was home. And this was a brand-new journey.

 THE END 

Lacey Savage

Lacey Savage began her love affair with romance at an early age. In high school, she checked out steamy romance novels from the public library and would often be found reading them in the middle of class.

Lacey still reads more than she cares to admit, and probably more than her husband would like, considering how many books she keeps bringing into the house. Her favorite genres have always been erotica, romance, fantasy, science fiction and mystery, so she tries to incorporate a little of each into her writing.

She initially majored in Marketing, then went back to school to major in English Literature. After earning

her degrees, she decided to turn her efforts to her true passion: writing. A hopeless romantic, Lacey loves writing about the intimate, sensual side of relationships.

She currently resides in Ottawa, Canada, with her loving husband and their mischievous cat.

You can learn more about Lacey by visiting her website at www.laceysavage.com, and can reach her at laceysavage@rogers.com.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Take on Me

by Lacey Savage

Available Now from Loose Id

Take on Me

Silwen didn't stop to look behind her as she fled into the kitchen. She wanted to put as much distance between herself and the rogue captain as possible, and if she never laid eyes on him again, that would be just fine with her.

She swiped at a loose tendril that had escaped her carefully bound tresses and picked up a large carving knife. A half-plucked chicken lay on the wooden counter and she headed for it, intent on doing as much damage as she could to something that wouldn't fight back.

"Do you remember the first time we were together?" His voice was smooth and deep, like rich Karavian wine. It traveled down her spine and left a soft warmth in its wake.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to face him. "No."

"You're lying."

"As far as I'm concerned, we were never together. If we had been, you wouldn't have left --"

She bit her lip, her teeth digging into the tender skin. Why couldn't she ever keep her mouth shut?

"I can see you're still upset about that. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"If?" She stared at him incredulously, knife pointed toward his chest even though he was still halfway across the room.

"I left because I had too. My father..." Drax's voice faltered, his long lashes shielding his eyes as his gaze

fell to the floor. Silwen fought the urge to run into his arms, to comfort the obvious tension that had settled upon his strong, broad shoulders.

When it was clear to Silwen he wasn't going to continue, she risked a question of her own. "How is your father?"

He looked up at her, his eyes unreadable. "I don't know. Dead, I guess."

"I'd hoped..." She struggled to find the right words. "I didn't know your father was on the *Bravehearted* ." She gestured toward the journal pages. "And when I read that, I'd hoped I misunderstood."

Drax scrubbed his hand over his face. "The morning we were last together, I learned that the *Bravehearted* never made it to the port in Cauldemon . I jumped on the first vessel leaving the docks in search of them, but the trip amounted to nothing. We never even came close to finding the ship, Captain Barbarosa , or my father."

"I'm so sorry." Her heart constricted with the knowledge that Terrem Attir was dead.

Silwen placed the knife down on the table. Giving in to her initial urge, she crossed the distance between them quickly and wrapped her arms low around his waist, pressing her cheek against his chest. The smell of the ocean mingled with the slight scent of sweat, bringing back a deluge of memories. Memories of sounds and images treaded vividly across her mind.

The close proximity of his body was driving her to distraction, so Silwen closed her eyes and tried to focus on something else.

Drax's father -- dead. Unbelievable! Terrem Attir had never been the type of man to succumb to anything, and she'd always thought he'd stare death right in the face and tell it to come back later. But if even he couldn't stand up to the forces of nature, what chance did any of them have?

"Want to take another stab at that question?" Drax asked, his husky voice shattering her thoughts.

"What question?"

He placed a soft kiss on her temple, sending a wave of desire rushing through her body. "You know what question."

"Ah." She cleared her throat. "That one."

"And don't say no again. I won't believe you." He placed his hands on her hips and held her tightly to him, his fingers swirling in slow, sensual circles. The sensation penetrated right through her clothes and made her shudder in anticipation.

"Why did you really come here?" she asked, avoiding his question.

"I need a navigator. That's the truth." He placed a finger under her chin and exerted pressure until she looked up and stared into his eyes. She wanted to turn away, knowing that if she studied his handsome face much longer, she'd lose whatever common sense she had left.

"I'm not a navigator anymore --"

The rest of her words were lost inside his mouth. Gently, he parted her lips with his tongue, the silky soft texture, the taste of him invading her senses. She couldn't fight her body's reaction to him. His kiss felt too good, and it had been too long since she'd been in his arms. She opened to him, an unexpected groan escaping her throat as their tongues met, teased, explored.

The force of his kisses drove her back, but Drax moved with her, licking and sucking at her lips like a parched man at an oasis. The firm edge of a table stopped her retreat and she pressed herself closer to his chest, losing herself in the embrace.

He hadn't changed at all. Not a bit in six years. She ran her hand over the firm muscles of his arms as his kisses moved lower, down her neck, stopping just above her breasts.

Drax swept her off her feet before she even thought of protesting, setting her down on the table. The wood creaked and her knees spread almost of their own volition, a wave of pleasure rushing to her pussy. He stepped between her open thighs, his mouth clamped hard around a nipple.

Ecstasy flowed through her, wetting her thighs with cream even as she pushed her cunt closer to him, needing more, yearning to know if he'd feel as good now as he did back then, if he could still fuck her with that same ravenous intensity.

“May I see them?”

It took Silwen a moment to gather her thoughts enough to figure out what he meant. His gaze was fixed on her hard nipples, one soaked with a wet circle, straining through her cotton tunic.

“You've seen them before,” she murmured, undoing the laces of her tunic. As the only serving maid at this hour, Silwen knew no one was likely to come into the kitchen. She wiggled her wings and held them close together, pulled them through the small slits in the restraining garment and tugged the tunic over her head.

His eyes widened, and she gasped with pleasure as his large, weather-worn hands cupped the full weight of her breasts, squeezing gently.

“You're magnificent,” he whispered.

She groped for composure. Her entire body hummed with a sensual buzz, instinctive and intense.

Damn him for making this so easy.

“All right,” she said. “You have a navigator.”