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# Caress of the Dark God

**Toni L. Meilleur**

CARESS OF THE DARK GOD

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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I would rather spend my life searching for that one special love, than settling for less.

# CARESS OF THE DARK GOD

TONI L. MEILLEUR

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## Chapter One

“Who could that be?” Hathor asked when the doorbell rang as she Thoth and Anubis shared a cup of brandy. Who cared if it was early in the morning? They were celebrating; Ralabos had sent word that he and Rene would be gone for quite a while.

“I will attend to it.” Anubis set his empty glass down and went to answer the knock. He flung the door open, wanting to startle anyone who would come calling to a home so early in the morning. What did it matter to him? He would seek his end very soon and, unlike Ralabos, he wouldn’t have anyone to stop him, and he would be successful.

What greeted him on the other side of the door was shocking, to say the least. A woman stood there. A human woman, tall, it would seem, even for a human woman. She had huge light-brown eyes and curly hair that went halfway down her back. Her figure, though slim, was extremely curvaceous. But it was the long sexy legs in the miniskirt that caused him the most excitement. Her luscious lips pursed slightly as she perused him as well.

“May I help you?” he drawled, surprised to find his cock was more than interested in helping her.

“Yes. My name is Tessa Michaels. I work with Dr. Selkis. She called me yesterday a little, er, well, drunk. Anyway, I was concerned and jumped on the first plane out and even though she said she’d never come back here, there are no hotels with her signed in so this is the only address I have.” She stopped suddenly. “I’m sorry, I’m rambling. I’m just a little tired.”

“And?” Anubis asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, is she here? I’m concerned.”

“And well you should be,” Anubis answered as he stared at her. Dr. Tessa Michaels. She more than interested him, she fascinated him. Perhaps he could seek his end another time ...

\* \* \* \*

Right off the bat, he was annoying her. After a long, hot flight and an endless search, Tessa was in no mood for wordplay. Even if the guy playing was gorgeous. It was quite unusual to run into a guy taller than her. But this dark man with the midnight-black eyes made her feel like a munchkin right from Oz. Glossy black hair was tied smoothly and neatly at the nape of his neck. Briefly, she wondered how long his hair was. Tessa shook her head. She wasn’t here for a love connection. Rene was obviously in trouble and, without family, Tessa felt obligated to help the woman.

“Is there a particular reason I should be concerned for her? Has she been hurt, Mr. ...?” Tessa shifted her weight to the other leg and tapped her heeled foot in agitation. Was the emergency number in Cairo 911 as well?

“To my knowledge she is doing quite well.” His black eyes seemed to be glued to her legs before he languidly brought them up to meet her eyes, which she hoped were sending daggers his way.

“How recent is your knowledge? No, forget that. I want to see her, talk to her. Is she here?”

“As of this morning.”

“What?”

“You asked how recent was my knowledge. This morning, she called to say she was fine and not to worry.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

“How do I know you’re really a concerned friend?”

Tessa squinted at him. Okay, so despite his dark looks, he reeked of intelligence, and something else. There seemed to be a heavy aura about him. She got the impression he had great power and was used to not being challenged. Too bad. She wasn’t leaving without answers. “Only a friend would come this far, believe me. Now, if you would just produce her, she will tell you that we work together.”

“Ah, you mentioned that before. Interesting. Tell me, what is your specialty?”

“Perhaps we can have this conversation when my friend’s safety and whereabouts are not in question.”

“Fair enough. Come in.”

Tessa hesitated. This was the same house that Rene had stayed in and seemed in a hurry to leave. Tessa thought about the note she had left in her office detailing her trip, should she not return. Like Rene, she

had no family either, and no one would come looking for her should something happen. "For a moment," she said at last, picking up her small suitcase. She hadn't packed much, more intent on finding out what was going on with Rene and returning as quickly as possible.

As she entered the house, the light smell of incense enveloped her. She brushed lightly against Tall, Dark and Annoying and felt a zing reverberate through the shoulder that touched him. Surprised, she paused, but then the décor of the house arrested her attention. Statues of Egyptian origin were scattered elegantly about. Rich tapestries hung against walls that were adorned with sconces that Tessa would bet were made of pure gold. Beneath her feet, the most beautiful of rugs cushioned her feet. "This house is beautiful."

"I used to think it the most beautiful thing I laid my eyes upon. But right now I am rethinking that notion." His deep voice wrapped around her, his meaning not lost upon her as he flirted with her. "Come this way." His hand performed an elegant flourish as he invited her further into the house. "And don't worry about your safety, Dr. Michaels, you've already entered the devil's lair. You're mine."

Tessa stopped as alarm slammed through her. A deep chuckle wafted back to her, and she realized he was intentionally baiting her. Despite her slight irritation, a small grin surfaced. So the man had a sense of humor. Duly noted. She now owed him one.

"Just who the devil is remains to be seen," she murmured.

"Perhaps."

His reply shocked her, as she had said the words so low, she barely heard them coming out of her own mouth. He led her into an occupied room. A woman too beautiful for words sat on an elaborately fashioned sofa, and next to her sat her male counterpart. "Anaise, Jonathan, this is Dr. Tessa Michaels. She is here inquiring about Rene. She seems to think something foul is afoot."

Tessa's jaw dropped at his declaration. She set her suitcase down with an audible thump and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Maybe if someone were more forthcoming I wouldn't have to think that."

A delicate laugh cut the air as the woman stood. "Please don't mind Torian, he's not used to dealing with civilized people. Don't let his manner fool you. He spends much of his time at the hospice." Finally, a name, Torian. Unusual indeed, Tessa mused to herself. The woman's exotic accent seemed mesmerize her. "Please, have a seat. Is there anything I can get you, a cool drink, perhaps?"

Tessa felt suddenly thirsty and she licked her lips. She was tired and a cool drink sounded heavenly. Tessa nodded as she walked towards an overstuffed chair that matched the sofa. She was well aware of Torian's eyes on her the whole time. "Water would be fine," she said around a suddenly dry throat.

"Torian, would you like something?"

"Most definitely," he said, low his eyes never flicking away from Tessa.

"Torian, please behave," Anaise admonished lightly as she left the room.

"So, you seem to think we have done something to Rene?" Jonathan asked, running his fingers through his thick brown hair. His voice boasted the same hypnotic accent as Torian and Anaise.

"I didn't say that. Your friend here has a flair for the dramatic."

“I’m offended.” Torian looked deadly serious, but there was a devilish twinkle to his eye.

“I don’t care,” Tessa retorted, torn between liking him and wanting to smack him.

Jonathan smirked. “Well, Torian, it would seem you have a knack for wooing the better half of the species.”

“There is and will be no wooing,” Tessa corrected just as Anaise walked into the room carrying a fancy glass filled with water so cool that moisture beaded along the side of it. She really wanted that water now to cool off the heat Torian seemed to generate in her. Anaise eyed her speculatively as she gave her the glass before perching on the couch next to Jonathan.

“Rene is fine. You have my word.” Anaise smiled as she said it. For a second, Tessa felt as if everything was fine, but then she shook her head and took a sip of the water. Every time Anaise spoke it was as if her words came to life, making her believe them.

“No offense, but I would really like to speak to Rene myself. See her, if at all possible.”

Anaise looked a bit surprised, but said softly, “No offense taken.” She looked at Jonathan. Tessa was willing to bet they were the kind of couple that didn’t need to speak to communicate. They just knew what the other was thinking. “You’ve had a long trip. Perhaps you’d like to stay the night here, before you continue on.”

“Rene?” Tessa reminded her firmly. She was really beginning to wonder what she had gotten herself into.

“I will have her call you,” Anaise assured, “while you settle in.”

“No need for that. I plan on catching the last flight back to the States if she’s fine.”

Anaise stood then. “I’ll get right on it then.” She left the room, but not before pausing to look at the two men. Tessa felt like the monkey in the middle. What was she missing?

“Well, it seems we have a little time then. Perhaps you’ll be inclined to answer my question now.” Torian walked quietly towards a window, where dark but sheer panels rippled in the light breeze. He seemed to blend right in with the darkness of the cloth.

“How about this,” Tessa began, watching for his reaction. “For every question you ask me, I get to ask you two.” Torian turned to look at her, his eyes revealing something she couldn’t name. He stared for a moment before nodding slowly in acquiescence. “All right. I’m a general practitioner. I also work in a hospice.” Both of his eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“My turn.” Tessa grinned. “What is your connection to Rene and what do you do for a living?”

He paused before answering. “I’m an old friend of hers, recently reunited. As for what I do for a living,” he paused again, seeming to search for the right words. “I help lost souls find their way.”

“So you’re some kind of counselor.” He lifted a long, tapered finger and slowly tsked her. Tessa rolled her eyes, remembering the rules of play.

“Well, it would seem I’m not needed here.” Jonathan rose. “I’ll check on Anaise’s progress with Rene.”

Tessa barely registered his exit as she kept her eyes trained on Torian. He walked slowly away from the window, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes never leaving her. Tessa followed his progress around the room. She sipped nervously at her water while she waited. Eventually, she lost track of him as he walked behind the chair she was sitting on. She waited for him to come around the other side, but he didn't.

She could feel him directly behind her. In her peripheral vision, she could see masculine hands lightly gripping the furniture on either side of her shoulders. She took a deep breath as she felt his cool breath brush lightly against her neck. It made her shiver with awareness.

"Do you currently have a lover, Tessa, that brings this magnificent body to multiple orgasms?"

Tessa choked on her water as she set the glass down quickly on a nearby side table. She twisted around without thinking. It only brought her lips close to his. For a second, she wanted to lean forward those few extra centimeters, but caught herself. This man was like a drug. She turned back around and got up, smoothing the miniskirt as she collected herself. She had to give it to the man, he knew how to rattle her cage. He stood to his full height as he waited for her answer. Tessa would not back down; she ate men like this for lunch. Well, not exactly like him, but enough that his raunchy question shouldn't have fazed her.

"Such a man does not exist for any woman. Contrary to men's belief, it is the woman who *allows* the man to bring her to orgasm. No man has the skills to bring me such pleasure without me telling him exactly what to do." She smoothed out a few more imaginary wrinkles before she gathered the nerve to look at him. She was surprised at the look of pity of his face.

"I had no idea American women were so unsatisfied. Perhaps what you need is a man who knows what he is doing in bed. A man who needs no instruction other than the moans of need he elicits in a woman. A truly talented lover can sense the specific desire of every individual woman."

He began to walk around the chair towards her. His slow gait was more reminiscent of a stalking predator than a man. His voice alone wove a spell around her.

"He would know the honor that is truly his to please a woman, especially a woman like yourself." He was so close to her now, she could smell the very masculine scent of him. "He would treasure every moment he was with her, every touch." He took one finger and ran it down the column of her throat. Tessa swallowed as she wondered why she didn't stop this bold man.

"She would want to surrender her lips willingly to this lover. She would demand that he never stop touching her." She could see his head lowering and she swallowed again. His lips, firm and sensuous, were but inches away from hers as her mind raced. How would he taste? Exotic? Spicy? "But never, never," he whispered, "would he need her instruction to seduce and satisfy her." He lifted his head then, drawing back with a knowing grin.

Tessa was furious that she had fallen so easily for his machinations. She looked a fool. What the hell was wrong with her?

Just as a scathing comeback came to mind, Anaise burst into the room, waving a cell phone. "I have Rene," she practically squealed. For a moment, Tessa had forgotten exactly why she was here and what she was waiting for. She tore her eyes away from the gloating man and turned to face Anaise with a plastic smile.



“Whatever is the matter?” Anaise asked in alarm. “Torian, what have you done?”

Tessa reached out for the phone, ignoring her questions. Rene’s very familiar voice bubbled out of the phone. Tessa listened patiently as Rene apologized for worrying her, but assured her everything was fine. She even promised she would return soon, but insisted that Tessa return home as there was nothing to worry about. Tessa asked a few questions just to make sure everything was fine.

Moments later, feeling satisfied, Tessa clicked the cell phone shut and handed it to Anaise. “Well, she is fine. It seems I’ve made this trip for nothing.” She retrieved her suitcase from across the room. “I’ll be leaving now.”

“Please stay, you shouldn’t make such a trip. Rest first,” Anaise suggested.

“No, it’s fine. Cairo is beautiful and I’ll enjoy the warm air back to the airport. I’m sure it’ll invigorate me.” Tessa wanted to get as far from Torian as she could.

“It’s going to storm,” Torian warned.

“No, there’s nothing but clear skies. Not to mention I got the forecast before I came. There’s not a storm in sight. Thank you again for your hospitality, but I really have to—” She paused as she looked out the window to see that the sky that was once blue and cloudless, was now populated with storm clouds. A grumble in the distance warned of its impending fury. “But that’s impossible.” Tessa stared at the skies in disbelief. Not more than a minute ago, it was sunny...

Tessa looked at the two other people in the room and immediately felt like she was the butt of some joke. Anaise had a slight grin to her face as she stared at Torian. He shrugged gallantly, but said nothing. “You’re more than welcome to stay here,” Anaise offered, finally looking at her. “We’ve plenty of room.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. Maybe I should wait and see how long the storm lasts.” Another grumble boomed from the clouds, this time much closer. Tessa glanced out of the nearest window. A bolt of lightning flashed quickly as the wind noticeably picked up. “This is the weirdest storm I’ve ever seen,” she said, almost to herself. The rain came down suddenly in sheets until Tessa could no longer see anything but gray out of the window.

“Well, it certainly appears necessary to me,” Anaise said in an amused tone.

“Well, I don’t want to seem ungrateful.” Tessa conceded. She was tired, after all, and Rene was okay. A rest would do her good. She just needed to stay away from Torian, then she could rest peacefully and leave this evening, weather permitting.

“It’s settled then, Anaise,” came Torian’s rumbling voice. “Tessa will be staying. I’m sure she’ll be comfortable in the room next to mine.”

## Chapter Two

*What are you up to, Anubis?* Hathor's curious voice slid into his mind.

He couldn't help but stare at Tessa. She was breathtaking and the more she stood there, the more interested he became. As she took the phone from Anaise, Anubis was entranced with the way those lips moved. How he wanted to kiss those lips. To get a kiss from her under compulsion was one thing, but to get a kiss because she desired him was another. He wanted her kisses compulsion-free.

As he watched her speak on the phone, he couldn't help but think how she'd been resistant to Hathor's compulsion and, to a degree, his as well. A strong human mind was indeed hard to find. He and the others like him never interfered with the will of humans, unless it was in their best interest. Once worshipped as Egyptian Gods, they now stood as secret guardians to the human race. Blending in with the humans could be taxing and as of late he had grown tired of existing the way he was. That was, until he met this human. Yes, Tessa would amuse him until he decided to... He dropped the thought. As Tessa snapped the phone shut and handed it to Hathor, he had already decided on a course of action.

"I'll be leaving now," she announced as she walked the short distance to her suitcase and picked it up. That's what she thought, Anubis mused as Hathor tried to convince her to stay.

"It's going to storm," Anubis announced, already feeling the power generating through him. Everything dark was associated with him, for good reason. He began to darken the sky, being careful that his eyes did not take on their supernatural state as he used his abilities.

Tessa began to argue, but stopped as she stared out of the window at the gathering clouds. Anubis watched as confusion washed over her face. "But that's impossible," she breathed.

*Anubis, shame on you.* Anaise couldn't keep the humor from her voice.

*I'm not done with her yet.*

*Don't harm her.*

*Have I ever harmed a hair on a human's head?*

*No, but you have broken the hearts of many of the females.*

*She is different.*

*We shall see, old friend. We shall see.*

Tessa looked from him to Hathor and he knew she sensed there was some sort of communication between them. "This is the weirdest storm I've ever seen." Anubis wasn't sure which of them she was addressing. Hathor chose to respond.

“Well, it certainly appears necessary to me.”

“Well, I don’t want to seem ungrateful.”

“It’s settled then, Anaise. Tessa will be staying. I’m sure she’ll be comfortable in the room next to mine,” he announced, gauging Tessa’s reaction. He saw her spine stiffen, and the uncomfortable shock that crossed her haunting features.

“So you’re staying as well,” Hathor directed at him.

“Yes.”

“You’re staying the night?” Tessa’s question was riddled with irritation.

“Most certainly.” Anubis walked took her before she could protest. “Did you not see the storm out there? It’s impossible to travel in. Besides, I am often a guest in this house, therefore I have room reserved just for me.” For the second time he held out his hand, indicating she should precede him. “I can show you to your room.”

“Is he kidding?” she asked Hathor.

“Torian is a very good friend of ours and, yes, he does reside here occasionally.”

“This house appears to be very big; surely there are other rooms I can stay in. You know, one that’s at least a wing away from him.”

“I am sorry, Dr. Michaels, but our house is going through some remodeling. I redecorate a lot and right now there aren’t any other rooms fit for a guest.”

“I apologize for being difficult,” Tessa said tiredly. “Any room is fine. Hopefully, I’ll be leaving tonight if the storm subsides. I’ll just take this opportunity to catch up on some sleep.”

“You plan on being holed up in your room all the day, then?” Anubis asked as she finally fell into step beside him.

“I know it’s early for you, but I’ve been traveling all night. I’m sure I could use the rest.”

“You don’t look tired to me.”

“You don’t know me well enough to ascertain when and if I’m tired,” she snapped. Anubis looked at her sideways, admiring the long lines of her body.

“I’m hoping to change that.”

“Not going to happen.”

Truly, he had angered her. Good. He liked a challenge. “How can you be so sure, after what went on just a few minutes ago?” There was no mistaking the attractive flush to her cheeks.

“What happened a few minutes ago ensures that it will never happen again.”

“Are you denying the obvious?”

She sniffed. “What would that be?”

“Desire.”

“Jetlag,” she countered.

Anubis stopped. A second later she stopped as well and turned on her heel slowly. “What?” She shifted her weight to one leg and tapped her foot. He was really becoming accustomed to that little habit of hers.

“Are you saying that you have no desire for me whatsoever?”

“I’m saying I have jetlag. That in and of itself means I can’t really judge anything with a clear head. However, I am willing to bet even after a good night’s sleep I’ll still find you incredibly annoying, but certainly not desirable.”

“Want to make a bet?”

“Why? I’m leaving this evening, if I’m lucky. There’s no way to actually activate the bet.”

“First of all, Dr. Tessa Michaels, never underestimate a determined suitor. Second, this is your room.” He lightly nodded towards the closed door. He watched with hungry eyes as she walked the distance back towards him and reached for her suitcase. The moment her smooth skin brushed against his, a fire flared inside him. Pure desire, undiluted, shot through him. It had been too long since anyone had captured his interest. This fiery creature had no idea the beast within him wouldn’t just let her slip away.

At the brief contact she seemed out of sorts, but quickly pulled herself together. “Thank you, Torian. You’re quite the, uh, something,” she finished wryly, entering her room without once looking back. But Torian knew she fought the impulse.

With the lightest of touches, he looked inside her mind to see that despite her interest in him, her reluctance to become involved was overwhelming. He pulled out of her mind, not wanting to intrude. Now his interest was piqued. Why a woman like this was insisting on living a solitary life was puzzling. His life was led in solitude through no choice of his own, but hers was self-inflicted.

He walked the whopping twelve feet to his own room and, without using the door, became a shade to phase into the room. The room, dimly lit because of the storm, posed no problem to his keen preternatural vision. With deliberate intent, he stopped right in front of the door that connected his room to Tessa’s and knocked. He could hear her bare feet on the carpet as she approached. He could hear her breathing on the other side. He knocked again, assuring her that she had indeed heard a knock at the door.

“Yes?” she said queried hesitantly.

“Torian.”

“What do you want?” There was no mistaking the annoyance in her voice, and a second later the door swung open. “Seriously, our rooms connect? You know, if I didn’t know any better I would swear you planned all this. If it wasn’t for the fact that you didn’t know I existed half an hour ago and that storm came out of nowhere, I would bet my life on it. What do you want, Torian?” she repeated.

He smiled, liking the way his name sounded on her lips, even if she was a little perturbed with him.

“You owe me.”

She squinted. “What?”

“I would stop doing that if I were you.”

“Doing what?”

“Asking questions.”

“Wh—” she began, then stopped. “Explain yourself.”

“We had an agreement. For every two questions you ask me, I get to ask you one. By my calculations, you owe me...” Anubis pretended to calculate. “You’ve asked me ten questions, which means you owe me five answers.”

Her brown eyes were hard as she looked at him without blinking. Tessa took a deep breath before she leaned against the doorframe. Her hand fluttered in the air, indicating he should start asking questions. Anubis smiled. “It’s not going to be that easy, Dr. Michaels. You see, in the short time we’ve known each other we have two deals in effect, the first one being the question arrangements and the second proving that you have no desire for me by the time morning comes.”

“Okay,” she said carefully. He knew she was trying to avoid asking him a question. “I’m very tired, Torian, and really am not good company. I honestly don’t feel like going anywhere and you’re not stepping foot in this room. So I do not understand how you propose to prove such a thing.”

“You should be hungry.” His statement took her by surprise. She nodded yes and Torian mentally asked Hathor to send up food and drink. “Good. I’ve asked Anaise to have some food brought up for you.”

He unfastened two of the buttons on his shirt and walked over to the desk in his room to drag the chair in front of the connecting door. “There’s one just like this in your room,” he informed her as he sat down.

“You don’t seri—” she began, then stopped. Without a word, she turned around and quickly scanned the room for the desk. Finding it, she dragged its chair back and sat down opposite him on her side of the doorway. “I’m assuming you’re ready to begin.”

“You’re getting a knack for this.”

“Seeing as I’m five questions in, I don’t need to go deeper into debt.”

“You should find your room quite comfortable. Anaise goes through a lot of trouble decorating.”

“The room is beautiful.”

“If you need something to sleep in, just ask Anaise. She loves to shop and I am sure she has plenty of clothing for a slew of women.”

“Thank you, I’ll do that.”

“The food should be here any minute, as I’m sure after all that traveling you are famished.”

“I am, actually. The last thing I ate was,” again, she stopped herself and grinned. “You’re good, Torian. You’ve managed the art of conversation without actually asking a question.” For just a moment, her smile was unguarded. He could see the smallest dimples and found them quite charming. Her eyes held a light to them before she apparently realized she had dropped her guard, and immediately lost the smile. A knock at the door from her room to the hallway made her jump.

“Please come in,” she said hoarsely. Torian remained quiet while the servants brought in the food. She kept her eyes on the servants, deftly avoiding his gaze. She wouldn’t be able to avoid him much longer. He was determined to find out as much as he could about this fascinating human. More than that, he was determined to bed her.

“Please set up a table right here,” He instructed the servants. Tessa’s eyebrow went up, but she kept her lips tightly shut. Tessa got up, making room for them to drag the small nightstand between her and Torian and set the food out rather attractively on top. Once they were done and closed the door behind them, Torian trained his gaze on her.

“I hope you find that meal to your liking.” She nodded as she speared a fork into the scrambled eggs. He watched as she chewed, even more closely as she swallowed. The simplest things she did piqued his interest. He couldn’t recall in his extremely long immortal life ever being so fascinated with a female as he was with Tessa.

“I’m assuming you’re going to stare at me until I’m done.” She looked at him, defiance overtaking the uncomfortable body language of just a moment before. “I’m also assuming you’ve already eaten.”

“It would seem you learn quickly, Tessa,” he said admiringly. “No, I am not going to stare at you until you’re done. I believe I will always stare at you, Tessa. You’re a very beautiful woman.” His compliment didn’t seem to have an impact on her. No doubt she had heard it a million times before. When he had called her beautiful, he noticed her face harden for just a moment. She obviously had a lot of painful secrets. “And, yes, I’ve already had sustenance.” Her posture relaxed a bit as he laced his words with the faintest hint of compulsion for her to relax.

She drank the last of the orange juice before she leaned back in her chair — and burped. “Excuse me.” She seemed not the least bit embarrassed, as most women would be. He was willing to bet she was hoping that bad manners would turn him off and make him leave. “I am hoping this won’t take long, I’m very tired.” She crossed her legs, and he wished the nightstand wasn’t between them so he could drink in the full length of those gorgeous legs.

“Then let us begin, Dr. Tessa Michaels. First question: how did *he* break your heart?”

She swallowed as her gaze locked with his. He wasn’t prepared for her abrupt reaction. She stood up quickly; her chair tumbled backwards, a dull thump on the carpeting.

“We’re done,” she bit out and attempted to push the nightstand into his side of the room to close the door. Torian moved faster, gripping the other side of it to prevent her from pushing it. He’d obviously struck a nerve.

“Quite the contrary. We’ve just started,” he answered, already on the other side of the nightstand and pulling her further into her room.

## Chapter Three

“Get out,” she managed between clenched teeth. The nerve of him, asking such a personal question when she barely knew him. He stood less than three feet from her; those black eyes never faltered as he seemed to study her. “I said get out.” She brushed past him, hating that the contact sent hot shivers down her spine.

“I’ll withdraw the question for now.”

“I would like you to withdraw,” she snapped, fiddling with her suitcase on the bed. She just needed something to do until she got him out of her room. He was disturbing her in ways she hadn’t thought possible. It was absolutely none of his business what Roarden had done to her.

“I took you for a gentleman. When a lady asks you to leave, you should do so.” Without really taking in what she was doing, she began to idly move garments around in her suitcase.

“I’ve upset you. That was not my intention.”

“Well, the road to hell and all that,” Tessa snapped again, spinning around to face him. “Look, I’m sure you’re a nice enough guy and I’m equally sure women love the caveman mentality you have going on, but no respectable lady,” she began, pointing at him to punctuate her point, “would kiss and tell about a relationship with a man she just met.”

His very inviting lips turned into an even more inviting smile. His eyes were trained on ... Her gaze dropped to the hand she’d pointed at him. Her pink thong still waved slightly to and fro from her finger. Mortified, she put it behind her back and hoped the blush she was sure was staining her face wasn’t too bright — or noticeable. “Now, if you’ll just leave I can get some rest.” She used her most professional voice and hoped like hell she still had some dignity left.

His head tilted slightly to the side as he remained quiet a heartbeat longer. “I have some phone calls to make. I will give you respite from our agreement — for now. And for the record, I took you for a lady the moment my eyes laid on your divine form. I do, however, hope you are a lady of your word and will give me the opportunity to use the five questions you owe me.”

Tessa opened her mouth then closed it again. What did he think was going to happen between now and this evening? She had every intention of getting on a plane back to Arizona as planned. “I can only tell you this: I plan on getting on that plane tonight. So without bothering me while I sleep, I really don’t see—”

“Perhaps it would be better if I called the airline on your behalf and let them know you’ll be rescheduling your return flight.”

“Really, that’s not necessary. It can’t storm forever. I’ll just take a nap and when I wake up I’ll head towards the airport.”

“Storms in Cairo have been known to go on for days.” He walked over to the window and peered out. “You could be stuck here for quite a while.”

“Or not.”

He turned to her. He had a look on his face that suggested he knew something she didn’t and he definitely wasn’t sharing any information. “Very well, then. Let us see how the storm plays out and we’ll go from there. Meanwhile, you rest.” He sauntered over to the dividing door and, with little effort, returned the nightstand to its proper place. He bowed to her and she almost smiled at his Old World manners. He shut the door softly behind him and Tessa let out a breath. He was exhausting.

She ran her fingers through her tangled curls in disgust. Exhausting or not, he was gorgeous. She had to remind herself that she was definitely not in the market for a relationship, let alone a one-night stand. She returned the offending thong back to her suitcase and shook her head. Could she have done something more embarrassing?

\* \* \* \*

*It was so dark. She felt along the walls in fear. Where was she? Her eyes couldn’t make out anything in the uninterrupted darkness. The warm floor beneath her feet turned into a carpet of cool grass. It tickled her soles as she walked. Relief coursed through her as the stars above twinkled and the moon shone through the trees. She’d made it outside; from where, she didn’t know. A scurrying sound caught her attention. She turned, trying to make out what it was. It ran so fast her eyes barely registered the form. It looked like a large dog. Without realizing why, she began to follow it.*

*The creature came out of the trees; its coat was black and glossy. It was one of the most beautiful animals Tessa had ever seen. Jackal, whispered in her mind. She approached it slowly as it sat on its haunches. She held out a hand in a friendly gesture. Hello there, she said in her mind, for words didn’t seem natural coming out of her mouth. It stood up and slowly came towards her. She knelt slowly, still reaching for it. The nose of the jackal touched her hand lightly, sending a shiver through her. This creature was wild and yet it came to her. It licked her hand and she smiled. She leaned closer and began to caress the shiny, coarse coat. It came closer until its muzzle was in the crook of her neck. She sighed as it sniffed at her.*

*A strange energy began to circulate around her and she realized the jackal was changing form. Startled, she fell back and stared at it. Its canine features were turning into those of a man. Her eyes traveled the shape of the now half-formed being. Right before her eyes it morphed into a gloriously naked man with the most perfect body she’d ever seen. She raised her gaze and stared into the dark eyes. Those familiar dark, sensual eyes beckoned her. She stood then, afraid and curious. He wasn’t human, wasn’t natural. She backed up. Part of her wanted to go to him, part*



*of her wanted to flee.*

*Don't run, his thoughts came to her.*

*But she turned and ran, blindly. Deep inside, she wanted him to chase her. Run her to ground. Her feet barely felt the grass as she ran. She could hear him behind her, very close. A growl rent the air, then a howl. In seconds she felt his arms about her waist and she tumbled to the ground. He landed on the bottom, but quickly rolled until he was on top, his naked body hovering over her as he settled between her legs. His eyes spoke not a word, but she knew his intention. He grasped the base of his engorged cock and she could feel the tip against her—*

“Dr. Michaels.” The woman’s voice jolted her awake. “Are you awake?”

Tessa groaned as her skin tingled from the dream. She felt hot and needy, very unsatisfied. The servant continued. “Mistress Anaise told me to wake you, as you wanted to be up this evening.” Tessa willed her wild heartbeat to calm down. Her mouth was dry and she found she’d been clutching the sheets.

“Uh, thank you,” Tessa rasped out. The servant nodded when she saw that Tessa was awake, and told her if she was hungry to just let her know. With a fully stocked kitchen, there wasn’t anything she couldn’t make. Tessa thanked the other woman again and waited for the tell-tale click of the door latch closing.

“Damn that man,” she muttered. She’d only known him a few hours and he was bothering the hell out of her. She winced again when she picked up the sound of the storm still raging outside. “Great, now I have to spend the night.” Tessa dragged herself out of the bed and went into the bathroom to splash water on her face.

When she came back into the room, she found the adjoining door was open, with Torian leaned deliciously against the doorframe, wearing nothing but a towel. “What do you think you’re doing?” The words were out before she thought about it. “Look, the deal is off about our whole question arrangement,” she stammered.

“You sound as if you won’t make good on the questions I clearly earned.” She had to think about his question, as she couldn’t help but stare at the glistening six-pack before her. Her eyes traveled down to the towel that bulged over his very manly parts. He looked exactly as he had in her dream, at least the parts she could see.

“Um, I plan to. Look, can you go put on something?” She was still aching from her dream, and he wasn’t exactly helping the desire to disappear.

“I don’t think I’ve ever known a doctor to be a prude.” His exotic accent was tinged with teasing.

“I’m not a prude.” She turned around and tried to smooth her wrinkled skirt. She just knew she had bed-head hair. No longer able to resist, she began to try to tame the unruly curls by smoothing her hand across them. “It’s just, I don’t know you, so you shouldn’t be half naked in my room with me.”

“I suppose a better arrangement would be you half naked in my room.” His tone seemed thoughtful, but Tessa could hear the teasing and the dare in his voice. “I take it you noticed the storm outside.”

“Yes,” Tessa sighed. “I need to call the airport. I’m sure everything is canceled anyway.”

“I called for you. I didn’t want to wake you. The officials will inform us as soon as flights are cleared.”

“That was very thoughtful of you.” Inwardly, Tessa rolled her eyes. Now he had to start being nice.

“This can’t be easy for you, being in a house with people you don’t know. If there’s anything I can do to make you feel more at home ...”

“No, really, I’m a big girl. I’ve been in stranger spots than this.”

“You really came all this way to make sure Rene was all right?” He shook his head. “That’s admirable. I didn’t know the human race could still care about one another.”

“I know what you mean.” Tessa rubbed her arms, more for comfort than warmth. “But Rene and I are a lot alike. She keeps to herself, but she’s really sweet.”

“You seem fond of her. Besides being doctors, why do you believe you’re so much alike?”

Without thinking, Tessa answered. “We’re alone in this world. She doesn’t have any family and I don’t either. While she never knew hers, mine were killed in a stupid accident.” Tessa shook her head, trying to will away the memories of being seventeen and a disinterested cop telling her that her parents had been in a car with their friends on vacation. One of the friends had been drinking and killed them all by losing control of the vehicle. “It’s hard sometimes living every day without that special connection to family or anyone special.” The words were out before she caught them.

“But you thought you had that connection once, yes?”

“Yeah, once.” She looked out the window, desperate to change the subject. “I really could use a bath.” She couldn’t face him. She’d revealed a little more of herself than she’d intended.

“Very well. I’ll come for you later.” She barely heard his soft words as Roarden came to mind.

“Thank you,” she managed, the pain still too fresh. She closed her eyes, letting the tears that clouded her vision fall. Roarden had nearly destroyed her, but she’d fought tooth and nail and she would come out stronger. Right now she was too vulnerable, and that meant keeping Torian at arm’s length.

\* \* \* \*

A fresh shower, fresh clothes and makeup did wonders for Tessa’s mood. She pulled her hair through the elastic band and was satisfied with the ponytail. There was something about a well-worn pair of jeans and a favorite T-shirt that simply relaxed her. So maybe her plans were askew, but she could adapt. All she had to do was stay away from Torian and she could get out of this unscathed. The dream she’d had of him surfaced in her thoughts and a flush came over her entire body. Yes indeed, staying away from Torian was plan A, getting on the plane without getting hot and sweaty with him was plan B.

She opened the door to her room to find Torian waiting for her, a single perfect white rose in his hand. “I told you I would come for you,” he reminded as he handed her the rose. He stood there in a dark tailored shirt. Plan A was going to be hard to implement. “Anaise has gone through the trouble of

arranging the cooks, to make,” he paused, his accent sounding adorable as he continue, “fettuccine with Alfredo sauce, and mixed greens with tomato and Italian dressing. I’m sure you can smell the homemade banana pudding. Come, I’ll lead you to the dining area.”

“How in the world did Anaise know I loved those dishes?” Tessa found herself salivating at the thought of the meal waiting for her. “My goodness, it’s as if they were plucked right out of my head.” Her stomach rumbled and she looked at Torian sheepishly. “Sorry about that. I’m starving and the menu is making me ravenous.”

“I can certainly relate to certain dishes evoking immense desire.” His words, blatantly sexual, made her smile.

“You never stop, do you?”

“Going after what I desire? No. How else would I get everything I want?” he asked in mock seriousness.

“I assumed you to be the type that took what you wanted.” Tessa lifted the rose to her nose as she watched him, waiting for his response.

“You are right,” he said right before they were about to turn a corner. Without warning, Tessa found herself pushed against the wall. One of his long legs was planted between hers, an arm on either side of her face as he looked down at her. “How about I trade a question for a kiss?” he murmured. Tessa swallowed, trying to will her mouth to say no. He smiled. “You do realize no answer is as good as a yes?” Without giving her time to respond, his lips were on hers, soft but firm. Then his tongue gently probed her lips apart.

He was an excellent kisser. He made her knees turn into melted rubber. She felt him gently stroking her curls at the nape of her neck as he deepened the kiss. His tongue slid against hers, retreated and came back, teasing her, making her taste him back. She’d never known a man to taste like him. There was a wildness to him that quickly infused her desire. Her hands found his narrow hips as she pulled him closer. It felt so familiar, him practically between her legs. His body heat enveloped her, making her need for him rage so fast it astounded her.

Slowly he broke the kiss and she looked up into his eyes. For just a second she thought she saw black tornado funnels. She blinked and when she looked again his black eyes stared at her with undiluted lust. “Again I ask you, Dr. Tessa Michaels, will you still deny you desire me?”

The beast in him came forth with unbridled desire. He broke the kiss, knowing his control was slipping fast. “Again I ask you, Dr. Tessa Michaels, will you still deny you desire me?”

Anubis could barely get the words past his raw throat. He wanted to turn her against the wall and rip the clothing from her body. He looked down at her, for the first time having to concentrate hard to ensure his eyes didn’t turn in front of her. His control slipped by an inch every time he saw her.

She put her hands against his chest and cast her eyes down. “I won’t deny there is a sexual spark between us,” she said softly. His satisfaction at her admission made him want to pursue her even harder. While he certainly couldn’t keep a storm raging in Cairo forever, he needed to devise a way to keep her here.

“Oh.” The exclamation came from Hathor as she rounded the corner and spotted them both in a very compromising situation. Reluctance hummed through him as he gathered his composure and stepped away from Tessa.

Hathor handed the cell phone to him. “Gale sounds just frantic. She said you left your cell phone at the office and she couldn’t reach you.”

“Yes, Gale.” He listened intently as his office manager began to explain. Anubis felt his mood go grim immediately. After Gale finished, he handed Hathor her phone. “I have to go.”

“Is everything all right?” Hathor asked in concern.

“A lot of patients are being admitted to the hospice.”

“I don’t understand. Isn’t that why it’s there?” Tessa asked, looking him in the eye for the first time since the kiss.

“They’re apparently being overflowed from the hospitals.” Something about the situation made him uneasy.

“The only time a hospital overflows ...” Tessa’s voice trailed off. “Torian, is there a highly contagious disease flowing around Cairo?”

“Not that I was aware of. But apparently the patients are all coming in with the same symptoms, then dying soon after.”

“I see why they’re sending them to you.” Tessa began to look thoughtful. “Anaise, is it possible to get a plate of food to go?”

“Wait a minute,” Tessa said. “The weather is still disagreeable, you could get caught in it.”

Immediately, Anubis began to draw back the storm. If he traveled through the storm, she would insist on traveling through the storm to the airport.

“In case you forgot, I am a doctor. Don’t tell me my services won’t come in handy. How many doctors do you have on staff?”

Truth be known, only one, for appearance’s sake. Anubis himself saw to each and every patient. It was

his job to lead the souls to the other side after they had been judged. Doctors had no place in his hospice.

“One.”

“Will that doctor be there tonight?”

Anubis looked at her and relented. He shook his head no, seeing as he made sure the doctor was always away on some conference. “Then you could use the help,” Tessa continued. “Anaise? Could I have a plate of food to go as well?”

“No problem.” Hathor immediately glided around the corner, leaving the two of them alone again.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I know, but as a doctor I can’t sit here and not try to help unfurl a medical mystery.”

“Thank you.” Anubis smiled. The more he learned about Tessa, the more he liked her. “The storm looks like it has settled.”

“I’ll get my purse.”

“I’ll retrieve your food.” They nodded at one another, a little uncomfortably after what had recently transpired and so abruptly ended.

On his way to the kitchen, Anubis couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling that had come over him as Gale explained what was happening at the hospice. Something was wrong. It didn’t make sense for so many humans to fall ill and go comatose. He would have to examine them himself, and then he could tell if there was interference from travelers like him. And that kind of interference never ended well, for the travelers or the humans.

\* \* \* \*

“I appreciate the help, Tessa.” Anubis broke the silence in the car. Tessa was sitting as far away from him as the seat would allow. He glanced at her. “I thought you were hungry. You haven’t even touched the meal Anaise had packaged for you.”

“It’s hard for me to retain an appetite when my mind is working overtime.”

“You let your work consume you?”

“I wouldn’t say consume.” Even in the darkness of the car, he could see her smile. “When something puzzles me it’s hard for me to concentrate on anything else. It’s just odd that so many people would get sick so quickly and die.”

“I agree. Let us hope it is something that can be brought under control quickly.”

“I wonder if this has spilled over into the States.”

“That is definitely something we need to find out,” Anubis agreed. Cairo was a city visited by many tourists, and tourists went home. It was well within reason to think that this thing, whatever it was, could have already spread worldwide.

As they pulled into the parking lot of his hospice, Anubis caught the faint scent of something vaguely familiar. He sniffed the air, concentrating, but the memory eluded him. Of course, the faint smell of death always surrounded him, but there was definitely something foreign mixed in with this scent. But then the thought nagged at him that it wasn't foreign.

“Is something wrong?” Tessa asked, gripping a plate of food in each hand. She looked around nervously and it was then he realized she could pick up on his emotions. That fact astounded him.

He shook his head no, slowly, and wondered just how sensitive Tessa was. Though prone to falling under compulsions, she'd proven that she could shake them off. Now it seemed she could read his emotions. He motioned for her to follow him into the building. He planned on taking his time finding out everything about the beauty that he could, but right now he needed to get to bottom of what was behind the humans dying.

\* \* \* \*

“The first wave came last night,” Gale explained, placing files in his outstretched hands. A small, mousy woman, Gale was a giant when it came to efficiency. “They all have the same classic symptoms.” He indicated that she give some of the files to Tessa. “So far they all have been dying within three hours of arriving.”

“Three hours?” Tessa asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Gale answered, looking Tessa up and down. Anubis was well aware of Gale's feelings towards him and he had repeatedly sent compulsions to turn her attentions elsewhere. One thing Anubis had found was that compulsions had no power over obsessions. So he simply ignored the woman's fixation on him, since she really wasn't hurting anyone.

“They come in comatose, with fever, bleeding from the ears and eyes. Difficulty breathing, and this.” Gale took the opportunity to lean on Anubis and point out the picture of the skin lesions one of the patients. “They appear ten to fifteen minutes before death, right above the heart. It's how we know when they're about to die.”

Anubis looked at the lesion and his gut dropped. They weren't exactly lesions, but tags. “Gale, from now on, don quarantine scrubs.” He scented her and was relieved she wasn't infected. “Have this place scrubbed down. Tessa, follow me and don't touch anything.”

“The symptoms don't sound familiar,” Tessa said. “It seems to be a hodgepodge of different ailments.” Her long legs easily kept up with his strides. “Obviously, this is highly contagious. I would guess this was airborne as well as passed by touch. Hell, I believe any damn way one human can spread germs to another, this disease is transmitted. Question is, what is it and where did it come from?”

“I don’t know where this is originating,” Anubis answered, bringing her into the lavatory to scrub up. “But it ends here.”

“We should be so lucky.” Tessa set the files down and began to wash. “Is there a lab in here?”

“Yes, state of the art.”

“Should I ask why a hospice has a full state-of-the-art lab?”

“I allow research to be done out of this facility. Many patients die from incurable diseases. This is as good a place as any for research.”

“Makes sense. I would like some samples from the live patients as well as the ones recently deceased.”

“There’s quarantine suits behind that door. After you scrub up, put one on.”

“Seeing as I’ve already entered the premises—”

“Doesn’t mean anything. We don’t know what we’re dealing with, so every precaution needs to be taken. I’m going to call the local hospitals and find out what exactly is going on and how long it’s been happening. There’s a fire escape map on the back of the door where the suits are. It should lead you to the lab. I’ll get you the samples you need.”

“You know how to procure samples? You sound like more than just a counselor, Torian.”

“Trust me when I say I am more than meets the eye.” He went over to her, and surreptitiously sniffed. She didn’t smell of impending death or even that familiar scent that assailed him when they first arrived. She wasn’t infected. “Don’t take any chances.”

“I know, I know. I am a practicing doctor, you know, and a damn good one.” Tessa stuck out her tongue.

That small teasing gesture lightened his heart. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone joked around with him. Not that he inspired joking when humans were around, but seeing her so naturally respond to him was endearing. “That I do not doubt.” He smiled and realized he’d smiled more at Tessa in the few hours he’d known her than he had in the last few years.

He made his way to his office and began making phone calls. Apparently this epidemic had started innocently enough more than a week ago, but it spread at an alarming rate. No one could tell him exactly where it began or even how to treat it. The virus responded to nothing. Not one person that had been afflicted with it recovered. Anubis opened the rest of the files Gale had left on his desk and stared at the tag in the photograph. *Bleeding from the ears and eyes*, Gale had said.

The tag above the heart was no coincidence either. He needed to talk to Thoth. First, he and Tessa needed to find out as much information as possible. His gut told him one thing, but the facts disputed it. One thing was indisputable — if he couldn’t stop these deaths soon, the humans were about to suffer a fatal blow.

\* \* \* \*

What was that human saying? *Like shooting fish in a barrel*. Green eyes that flashed serpentine-like surveyed the area. So many humans packed into one place was stifling, repugnant, convenient. He stood six foot five, with dark hair in thick braids that rested along his back. Looking around once more, he grinned and closed his eyes and called to *him*, for he had another offering. With raised arms he waited, already accustomed to the pain that traveled through his body when it was used as a conduit. In seconds, *he* accepted the offerings. The lights flickered and people murmured their curiosity. Machines stopped, as did the murmuring when the wind kicked up inside the building.

Too late they realized that they were in danger. The stranger mentally sealed any outlet the humans could use for escape. Screams began to pierce the air as *he* fed upon their energy. A stampede started as panic ensued. But there would be no escape. Fear became a palpable scent in the air. Pain racked the conduit's body as the force greedily raged through him, taking, eating all that was offered. A thin sheen of sweat began to cover his almost-human skin as his knees threatened to buckle. *That is all I can take for now*. Immediately, the invading force pulled back, barely satisfied, demanding more.

As the lights regained their brilliance, it was easy to see that bodies were littered everywhere. Blood poured from their ears as well as their eyes. He had done well. There were a few, however, who still lived. He could not let them live. He needed to replenish the energy he had exuded feeding *him*. His preternatural senses told him which were dead, and which were dying. The green eyes again flashed serpentine for just a moment as the excitement of the kill rushed through him. *Like shooting fish in a barrel*.

## Chapter Five

"We need to stop." Torian's voice seem to come out of nowhere, causing Tessa to jump. She stepped away from the microscope and tried to rub her eyes. It was impossible in the suit and that was just as well. "You've been in here for hours, the sun is almost up. You need to rest."

Tessa wasn't about to argue. She would have gone on forever if she had not been interrupted. Her maniacal work ethic was the source of many migraine headaches. "I can't believe this, Torian. It's like these cells were invaded and the insides were just scooped out." She tiredly made her way to the lavatory to decontaminate. "Hell, it doesn't even look like a virus, just looks like the cells just ... died." Torian began to help her out of the suit and she got a good look at him. "Hey, why aren't you wrapped up?" her tired brown eyes looked at the man still dressed irresponsibly in his casual clothing.



"I assure you, if I were going to catch anything, I would have caught it already." His words were teasing, but something about them gave her pause. What was it about him that seemed so powerful and indestructible? She gently pulled off the suit, which he took care of for her. After scrubbing down yet again, she finally rubbed her tired eyes. Torian came back with a worried look. "I am awful for letting you come down here."

"You couldn't have stopped me if you tried." Tessa yawned.

"I appreciate the help." Torian stood in front of her and slowly smoothed a curl away from her face. "You truly are beautiful, Dr. Michaels." His voice dropped at least three octaves and despite her fatigue, her body flared to life with interest at his touch. He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but refrained.

"Thank you, Torian. Right now I just want to—" Tessa stopped when she realized Torian's attention was no longer on her. His eyes took on an almost vacant stare, as if he were looking at something she couldn't see. She waved a hand in front of his face, and he didn't blink. Perhaps he was a lot more tired than he let on. "Torian." At the mention of his name, his eyes riveted to her.

"We have to go." He grabbed her by the hand and headed towards the exit.

"What's wrong? Is there another storm?" His long legs ate up the short distance, and though she had no difficulty keeping up, she was tired and would have rather walked at a normal pace. He didn't reply as he paused at the front desk, where Gale had left the newest files neatly stacked. Torian grabbed them in one scoop and kept heading out the door. "Don't you want to lock up or something?" Tessa looked at all the lights being left on, and the unlocked door.

"It will be seen to." Torian seemed really distracted, but at the same time focused. "No harm will come to the inhabitants. I have a full staff and they see to such things. They are very competent."

"Oh." It was strange the way his behavior suddenly changed. Still the gentleman, he opened the car door for her and closed it securely as she buckled in. He slid behind the steering wheel with a grace Tessa had never seen in a man so tall. "Did something happen that you just remembered?" Torian didn't speak as he navigated the car towards Anaise and Jonathan's home.

"No," came his reply at last. "I apologize for my abrupt behavior, Tessa. I promise I will make this up to you."

"You don't owe me anything. You're probably just as tired as I am." He slid her a quick glance, and Tessa wished she could see the expression in his dark eyes.

"That's very ... thoughtful of you." He seemed to stumble over the word.

Torian still seemed preoccupied with his thoughts, so Tessa took the opportunity to shut her burning eyes. The silence in the car seduced her into sleep. She tried to stay awake, but found she could no longer keep her eyes open.

She was floating, it seemed. Strong arms cradled her to a chest as hard as oak. She snuggled closer, loving the scent that flowed into her nostrils. It was so earthy, natural, and masculine.

Then, for the briefest of seconds, she felt as she was free-falling, before landing in something soft. Strong fingers lightly caressed her face, and lilting words urged her to go deeper into sleep. The fingers played

lightly in her hair then traveled back to her face. She could feel the outline of her mouth being traced, then the faintest of kisses against her lips. Tessa moaned at the kiss, loving the feel of the warm lips against hers. Sleep, my beauty. *The words seemed to echo in her head, sending her tumbling into a deep sleep.*

When Tessa awoke in the bed in the spare room, it was to the dying refrains of the mantra that seemed implanted in her brain. *Sleep, my beauty*. How odd. She couldn't for the life of her figure out where she had heard it. Tessa sat up, reluctant to get out of bed. The soft sheets against her naked skin felt wonderful. With that thought, Tessa froze. She swallowed and with all her will wished she were just now waking up, fully clothed. She closed her eyes, opened them again and looked under the covers. Yep, as naked as a jaybird.

Memories of but a few hours ago involved nothing whatsoever of drinking, so why was she naked? She couldn't even remember walking from the car to the bedroom. She slapped her hand against her forehead as she realized the floating dream was not a dream at all. She didn't need to be a rocket scientist to know that Torian had not only carried her in, but had undressed her as well. Her cheeks flared hot as she thought about being so vulnerable and naked in front of a man she didn't know very well.

The more she thought about it, the madder she got. How dare he? He had taken too much of a liberty. Tessa flung the covers back and marched naked into the bathroom to splash cool water on her face. After drying her face, she caught sight of her hair and with quick, jerky movements, braided it, all the while mentally stroking her anger even more. What the hell had he been thinking? Surely he'd heard of people sleeping with their clothing on?

Caught in the eye of her anger, Tessa wanted to confront him, now. She marched right to her suitcase and pulled out a fresh pair of jeans and a tank top. She didn't even bother to put on shoes. She knocked on the adjoining door and received no answer. Undaunted, she decided to hunt him down.

Barefoot and angry, she strode down the hallway looking for the tall, dark and handsy individual who had stripped her. It only took a few moments for her to realize she didn't know where the hell she was going.

She slowed her pace when she heard the deep timbre of male voices. In seconds, her ire picked up. She followed the sound of the voices until she stood outside a door of the main floor. Just as she was about to burst in, she remembered she was a guest in this house and certain manners were required of her.

"Are you sure?" She knew that voice belonged to Jonathan.

"You saw the pictures," Torian responded.

"This doesn't make any sense."

"I know. Who would do this? The tag almost looks like a serpent."

"Who do you think is behind this?"

"I don't know. Perhaps Ammut. But whoever it is, someone or something has to be stopped immediately."

"Tessa, can I help you?"

Anaise's voice made her jump. Tessa turned with a guilty look on her face. Caught eavesdropping, she smiled weakly. "I was looking for Torian and I thought I heard his voice."

"He and Jonathan are having a meeting. Are you hungry?" Anaise put her arm around Tessa's shoulders and began to lead her away from the door.

"Not really. Anaise, I know what that looked like. I'm not an eavesdropper. Well, I know what you just saw begs to differ, but—"

"I won't mention it if you won't." Anaise flashed her a perfect smile that eased her guilt just a little. "Do you like coffee?"

"Coffee runs through my veins." Tessa grinned, suddenly in the mood for the strong concoction. Anaise chattered about everything, but nothing at all, until all Tessa wanted was to be left alone to think. "Will it be all right if I took this to my room?"

Anaise excused her, citing she had errands to run anyway. As Tessa made her way back to her room, for a second she considered finding her way back to the room Jonathan and Torian were in. She thought better of it and went straight to her own.

She pulled the thin laptop from her suitcase and prayed she had a place to plug it in. After hunting down an outlet, she immediately booted up and typed in "Ammut." The results that came back were confusing. Ammut was some sort of Egyptian god. The words "Devourer of the Dead, also called Eater of Hearts," seemed to jump off the screen. Deeply interested, Tessa clicked on link after link, learning about this being.

Apparently, Ammut was linked to the Dark god Anubis. Anubis decided who crossed over into the netherworld. For those who did not pass judgment at the scales of truth and justice, their hearts were eaten by Ammut.

Tessa couldn't stop clicking on the links, becoming more and more obsessed with Anubis, who was often shown with the head of a jackal. Tessa's finger paused after reading the caption beneath one picture of Anubis. A jackal. She had dreamed of a jackal. Tessa shook her head to clear her thoughts. She was being ridiculous. Egyptian gods and jackals? She snorted out loud. Her imagination sometimes got the better of her.

"What amuses you?" Torian's voice was so close to her ear, she jumped, spilling the coffee onto the carpets.

"What is it with you and sneaking up on me?" Tessa rose out of the chair and went into the bathroom. She came back out with a damp washcloth. "What are you doing in here?" As she approached her computer, she saw a peculiar look upon his face.

"What are you doing?" He jerked his head slightly towards her computer screen.

"Research." Getting on her hands and knees, she dabbed at the stain. "I don't recall inviting you in."

"I knocked several times and you didn't answer." He pushed a button on her keyboard, closing the web page she had been reading about the Dark god.

“In case you didn’t realize,” Tessa stood, freshly irritated at his audacity, “that’s my computer. You had no right to—”

“You had no right to eavesdrop,” he said, his voice soft. He put a finger under her chin and lifted it so he could see into her eyes. “What did you hear, Tessa?” His voice seemed hypnotic.

“I, I didn’t hear much,” Tessa stammered, trying to clear her head.

“Tell me what you heard.” His words seemed to invade her mind. She felt herself going under as if she were in a pool of water. She fought the urge to tell him she had heard of Ammut. He seemed to be inside her head, probing around. But that was crazy. Tessa shook her head and stepped away from Torian. His eyes seemed to be funnels and then black. That was the second time she’d imagined that. As her thoughts became more focused, Torian continued to stare at her.

“You were mad at me.” It was a statement that surprised her. How would he know that?

“Yeah,” Tessa latched onto the change of topic. The anger cut through her fog. “How dare you undress me?” She put her hands on her hips and began tapping her foot.

“You want to even the score?” His tone seemed accommodating, but there was a meaning behind them, she was certain.

“Of course,” she said carefully, trying to see where he would go with this.

“I undressed you and saw you naked. I have to say, your form is more exquisite than I imagined. However, you want to even this up, yes?” Tessa nodded. Torian walked over to the bed and lay across it. He propped his head up with his hands behind his head and seemed to just wait.

Tessa stopped tapping her foot as curiosity took over. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you the chance to even the score. But if you’re not brave enough ...”

“Oh, no, you think I’m going to strip you naked in that bed? That’s not going to happen and I hardly see how that evens things up.”

Torian looked thoughtful for a moment, before he suddenly bounded out of the bed to stand right in front of her. “I love the way your mind works.” Grinning, he took her by the hand and pulled her towards the door that linked their rooms.

Tessa didn’t know why she didn’t protest more. Hell, why she didn’t protest at all. Her mouth had gone dry just thinking about undressing him. He was certainly challenging her endeavor to be celibate. He flung the door open and pulled her through it, and immediately shut it behind them.

“You are absolutely right, *my beauty*. That’s certainly not going to even the score.” Torian then lay down on his bed and assumed the exact same position he had on hers. “Now let’s see what you’re made of.”

“You expect me to strip you?” Tessa felt her palms get sweaty. A thrill shot through her body at the thought of unwrapping this virile man. Somewhere between her room and his, she’d taken her common sense, bound and gagged it and thrown it in the back recesses of her mind. She licked her lips as she looked at Torian. Her feet seemed glued to the floor. Her anger had deserted her, leaving nothing but the

desire to rise to his challenge.

“Strip me? No, that’s quite crass, my beauty. I peeled your clothing off, savoring every inch of your skin as it was revealed to me. I drank in the perfect beauty of your form. You see, I couldn’t let you sleep in such uncomfortable clothing.” He looked at his own clothes. “I’ve had these on for a while. I need to shower and change. So if you could just give me the same care, I would more than appreciate it, *Dr. Michaels*.”

He was baiting her. Reminding her that a naked body shouldn’t make her this nervous. He was a cad, rubbing it in at every chance that she desired him and he knew it. Slowly, she approached the bed, every fiber vibrating with the anticipation of seeing him unclothed. She stopped in front of the bed and took a breath.

“Unbraid your hair forme.” he ordered, his voice husky as he watched her. Of their own accord, Tessa’s fingers moved to unbraid her hair. “Toss it for me.” Tessa obeyed, tossing her head lightly side-to-side, shaking out the ringlets until they hung wild around her face. “Now, undress me,” he commanded.

## Chapter Six

He could see the flight or fight instinct kick in. Tessa’s scent was one of arousal, her demeanor that of frightened prey. However, the steel that ran down her spine was intriguing. Despite her ambiguous feelings, she stayed rooted to the spot.

Anubis rose from the bed, never breaking their locked gazes. “Well, if you’re just going to stand there, I will undress myself.” He undid the leather belt around his waist. “Don’t say I didn’t give you the opportunity for retribution.” His shoes came off and her eyes tracked his movements with sharp scrutiny. “I have had a long night and I need to bathe before I tackle the problem at hand.”

She snapped her attention back to his face. “Has there been any more news?”

Anubis laid the now discarded belt neatly across the bed. Deliberately, he took his time answering. He had to word his answer carefully. He and Thoth had been trying to piece together the mystery. As of yet, he couldn’t figure out where that strange source of power he’d felt earlier had come from. It was raw power, evil. Thoth had gotten right into investigating it.

“A few hours ago, there was an incident at a casino. Several hundred people were found dead. They exhibited the same traits as the people in my hospice. Whatever the cause of the illness, it is no longer giving people a few hours to live. It’s killing them instantly.”

“You mean the virus has mutated?” Tessa shook her head. “What the hell could it be?” She seemed to ask the last question more to herself. Anubis kept undressing. He made sure his next comment garnered her attention.

“Surely you’ve seen a naked man before, doctor?” He watched as her eyes traveled all over his body. A flush came to her face, as well as raw desire. He couldn’t resist reading her thoughts. She wanted him. Thought him beautiful. Her arousal climbed until he could smell nothing else. He could hear the rhythm of her breathing. Her reaction heightened his own. In response, his manhood reacted, and her eyes grew round as she watched.

“Wh—, what do you think you’re doing?” her strong voice belied the panic in her eyes.

“Undressing in my room. I don’t know about you, but I have a nasty habit of bathing in the nude. Care to join me?” he whispered, careful not to put a compulsion into his words. “We’re adults, Tessa.” He held out his hand in invitation. “It’s been a long night. Let me take care of you. I promise I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do.”

But I want you to do everything. He plucked the thought from her mind as it surfaced. He grinned and made his way towards her. Her eyes watched his cock as it bobbed. If possible, he got even more aroused. “I’ll behave,” he promised. He watched as she wrestled with her thoughts. Gently, he took the edges of her tank top and began to pull it up, slowly revealing part of her smooth, toned belly. “Tell me to stop and I’ll stop.”

She swallowed, but held her arms up so he could remove the top. His breath hitched as he stared at the average-sized, but tempting globes before him. The pink nipples were hard, enticing him to bend down and suck one into his mouth. He let the top fall from his hand and he wished he could just think her clothes away instantly, but that would frighten her. Besides, there was something very erotic about seeing her form being revealed before him so slowly.

“We’ll simply have a nice, hot, well-deserved shower together.” He murmured as his hands undid the button, then the zipper on her jeans. Her soft skin against his was heavenly. He paused to feel her belly and watched as her abs contracted in reaction to his touch. He tugged gently at the form-fitting jeans, bending low as he worked them past her hips and down her long legs. He stopped as he found his mouth directly in front of the juncture of her thighs. The womanly scent of her washed over him and he swallowed hard before he could speak. “I intend to help ease whatever aches you have.” Not able to resist, he blew softly at the soft curls, directing the small thermal draft to her clitoris. Tessa shivered.

Anubis stood and stared down at her. Her luxurious locks wound over her breasts and shoulders, and he imagined what they’d feel like as they grazing against his chest as she rode him hard. He tried to clear the image from his mind as his cock relayed that it quite liked that notion. “Allow me.” He turned so that her glorious firm ass was for his viewing pleasure. Slowly he began to gather her hair until nothing but beautiful curls hung to the middle of her back. He stepped up to her, his arousal between them, nestling against her backside. His hands traveled lightly up and down her arms, simply loving the texture of her skin. “Stop me at any time, Tessa,” he said lightly into her ear.

She didn’t respond and that was enough encouragement for him. He picked her up and carried her to the bathroom. It was a lavish room, with black glossy tiles on the floor and walls. A large, two-person shower with sliding doors lined in pure gold took up only a small portion of the area. An elegantly styled sink with an hourglass pedestal that was made of pure marble was matched in beauty with the large, sunken tub. It boasted clawed feet with the claws tipped in pure gold. Normally the beauty of the dark

room would arrest his attention, but this time he was focused purely on Tessa.

He set her down and again resisted the urge to turn on the spigots mentally. After adjusting the water to a comfortable temperature, he beckoned her to join him. For a split second, she faltered, then followed him inside. His cock continued to surprise him, becoming even more aroused as he watched the water sluice down her body. Ribbons of water snaked their way around her waist and between her thighs. He stood transfixed, watching the water as it traveled down her long, smooth legs. He was suddenly thirsty, wanting to lick every drop of water from her body, and lick her wantonly between her legs.

“Are you just going to stare at me?” she lightly teased. “You promised to soothe my aches.” She turned until he could see her wet curls plastered to her back as water ran through them and over her backside. She was the most tempting woman he’d ever seen in his very long life. He made the soap appear in his hand, knowing she couldn’t see him. Soaping his own hands generously, he set the bar down and began to run his hands slowly over her shoulders, making the slippery substance a lubricant to massage her muscles. She moaned in pleasure as he kneaded the muscles at the back of her neck. He found everything about her fascinating.

Anubis began to rethink his promise of simply taking a shower with Tessa. He had no idea what gave him the idea that he could just shower with such a tempting creature and not want to push her against the wall and enter her — repeatedly — giving them both so much pleasure that neither could stay standing. He stepped in closer, loving the feel of his cock against her wet, slick body. He cupped a breast in each hand as he gently manipulated the globes. Tessa laid her head against his chest, just under his chin. Timidly at first, her nails gently raked his thighs. He closed his eyes at the touch as he ran one hand down her stomach until it stopped at her core. He paused, waiting for a protest, then his fingers gently worked their way into her folds. Her moan was loud.

His heart raced as he felt the difference between the water and her own cream. His fingers circled her clitoris as it budded for him. Her body became tense with pleasure as he placed kisses along the side of her neck, his other hand still caressing her breast. As her hips began to move in rhythm to his stimulation, her ass pressed against his cock, sending waves of pleasure through him, and it was his turn to moan. She was close to climaxing as he stealthily entered her mind, wanting to experience her orgasm with her. She was on the cusp, seconds away from falling into an abyss of ecstasy and he wanted to fall with her.

Anubis, I think I might have found something. Come quickly. Thoth’s words instantly cauterized the impending climax. He pulled from Tessa’s mind quickly, but he knew it was too late. Because he had been in her mind when Thoth summoned him, more than likely she had heard it too.

“What?” The word came out confused and she turned her head to look at him. “Did you hear something? I thought I heard someone talking.”

Anubis knew his frustration must be palpable and Tessa stepped away from him breathing heavily. “We should probably...” She let the sentence trail off as she found the soap and began lathering herself.

“This isn’t over, Tessa.”

“I didn’t come here for a tryst.” Her movements became jerky and he knew she was frustrated as well.

“Let me finish giving you pleasure.”

She paused in her ministrations and he picked up on the bolt of desire that went through her. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t know you and yet here I am.” She did a quick glance at the

shower. "You must think I'm some sort of slut." She mumbled the last part to herself.

"I think very highly of you, Tessa." Anubis frowned, not liking the idea that she feared he thought her any less than a beautiful and intriguing woman.

"Here's what you know about me." Tessa looked at him. "Within a very short space of time from the moment of meeting you, I was seduced like that," she snapped her fingers, "into letting you almost kiss me. The very next day I'm naked and in the shower with you. Yes, Torian, I could see why you think so highly of me." She turned away, washing the soap from her body.

"That's your version." He turned her around to face him. "My version goes like this. A beautiful woman, a doctor, no less, comes halfway around the world to help out a friend she thinks is in need. This same woman volunteers to slave the night away trying to help people in a foreign land where she barely knows anyone. I'm willing to bet, beautiful lady, that you don't take the time to relax and enjoy what life has to offer." As he said the words, he thought how ironic it was that he had not appreciated his own life. He had grown weary of it, exhausted from living it alone. He saw in her a reluctance to reach out, and knew it stemmed from a relationship that had been very negative. "I'm not asking you to make promises, just enjoy yourself. With me."

"Torian, I have nothing to offer you. I will stay and help with this medical emergency, but then I'm leaving. I can't be anyone's plaything ever again." Anubis was shocked at the hurt that echoed in her words. She exited the shower, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around herself. "I don't know what I was thinking." She grabbed another towel and began to blot at her hair. "This shouldn't have happened."

"I don't think of you as a plaything." Anubis was out of the shower as quickly as he could without causing her alarm. He wasn't letting her get away from him this easily. "I want to—"

"I want to stop this before it goes any further."

Anubis? Jonathan's voice entered his mind again.

I will be but a moment. He laid a hand on Tessa's shoulder. "Fair enough. I need you here right now, Tessa. But I am warning you, this isn't over. You want me and yet you try to deny it."

"I don't need this in my life right now." She backed away to the door. "I can't deal with entanglements right now. Even casual ones."

She left the bathroom and Anubis let her go. For now. Casual, indeed, he thought as he mentally dressed. Nothing he did was casual. Every move had a purpose. Tessa had awakened something in him that had been dead a long time: The desire to enjoy what life had to offer. Once he set his sights on prey, it was as good as caught. Tessa just didn't know it yet.

\* \* \* \*

"What have you found?" Anubis was still frustrated from the incident in his shower. He hoped Thoth had a good reason for interrupting him. Thoth raised an eyebrow at his agitated tone, but didn't comment on it.



“While going over records, I found a possibility.” Thoth picked up a heavy tome filled with records from ancient times to present. “From what you described to me, it reminded me of Apep’s power somewhat.”

“He’s been imprisoned for thousands of years.” Anubis wrinkled his brow in curiosity. “He’s no longer able to feed off anything.”

“Correct. The priests who perform the ritual believe it keeps him just outside their realm. They are usually very dependable. This year however I received no confirmation from my sources that the ritual had been completed. I did not think it that important and thought to look into it at a later date. However I became otherwise distracted by Ralabos and his reawakening.”

“Yes, but the humans don’t have the power to hold him at bay. It’s just a ritual that we gave the people to make them feel safe and empowered. He caused them great harm.”

“Are you aware that humans today join cults that cause them harm?” Jonathan ran a hand through his hair.

Anubis stroked his chin in thought. “It is one of the oddities I have found among the race. What is your point?”

“The priests that usually perform the rituals have a website.” Jonathan retrieved his laptop and set it on the desk in front of Anubis. “Instead of keeping him at bay, a cult has developed to worship him. The priests decided to try another approach at controlling Apep. According to this website, they offered him a gift instead of trying to imprison him.”

“Which is why they didn’t report the ritual.” Anubis got a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Correct, and look at when it took place.”

Quickly Anubis scanned the screen. “They did it during the one time of year when the veils separating the different realms are at their weakest.”

“It’s possible that with the right knowledge they could have let something out, or in.” Thoth plopped in a nearby leather chair. “It’s worth investigating. I’m leaving within the hour. The priests know enough about the old ways to have stumbled upon something.”

“I will never understand many of the things humans do.” Anubis shook his head. “I will investigate the casino deaths.”

“And what do you plan to do with Dr. Michaels?” Thoth grinned.

“Everything I can,” Anubis answered as he phased out of the office.

## Chapter Seven

He crawled out of the hole, his tongue darting out to scent the air. The sun was not at its strongest, which was good, for he had no intention of sleeping the day away. There was too much to be done, lots of preparation. Teremun stretched his tall frame as hunger pains gnawed at him. It was time to feed. Feeding *him* took all of his strength and then some. It would not be too much longer, however, before the Great One would have enough energy to arrive, and Teremun would have enough to usher him into this world.

He detected the familiar coppery-sweet scent of human blood. Just to be sure, his tongue shot out again, and this time it was bathed in even more of the intoxicating scent. Teremun began to follow the trail. In a short time, it led him to a small family of three, picnicking. *How sweet*, Teremun thought mockingly to himself as a dark-haired toddler ran after the disk the human male threw. It landed at Teremun's feet and he picked it up. The child stopped just short of him and reached out her chubby arms for the disk. Teremun picked her up as well and began to walk towards the child's parents. The mother smiled. The smile wavered as he got closer. "Thank you, I'll take Femi now," she said nervously.

Teremun looked at the mother, mildly surprised that her human intuition had targeted him for the danger that he was. It didn't matter. "No, I think I'll keep her," he responded with a dark smile.

\* \* \* \*

She jumped at the sharp rap on the door, even though she'd been expecting his knock. Tessa smoothed her sweaty palms on the skirt of the long summer cotton dress. The lavender color of the dress meshed well against her skin tone. Her hair was drawn back in a high ponytail. This was her all-business hairdo. She kept saying that to herself as she went to answer the door.

There he stood, every bit of tall, dark and gorgeous. This time he was dressed in dark linen pants and a crisp white shirt. His hair was combed back, giving him a barely tamed look. She had the sudden desire to muss up his hair and see what he looked like all the way wild.

"Are you ready?" His thick exotic accent wound around her, and she had to mentally add two more beams of steel to her spine. Tessa stepped quickly out of the room, almost pushing him back. She'd already ascertained that enclosed private environments were not conducive with her will not to let him further seduce her.

"I am. Where are we going?"

"Casino."

It was the last answer she expected. Tessa looked at him sharply. "Why the casino?"

Torian put his hand at the small of her back and began to steer her toward, well, she didn't know where. The warmth of his hand was seeping through the cotton dress. She wanted to arch her back like a cat and have him rub her all over.

"The latest victims were at the casino. Because the local hospitals and my hospice are filled, triage had to be set up at the casino. There is a shortage of medical help. I've already called the person in charge and they are expecting you. Just so you know, Cairo has been quarantined. There is no projected time when the quarantine will be lifted."

Tessa figured as much. It was just her luck to get caught in some sort of epidemic. Quickly she counted her blessings, as all the people affected by the illness surely were having a tougher time. She was determined to find out what was going on. "I'm not worried about that for now. I had vacation leave piled up high anyway."

"It is a shame you are spending your vacation in this manner."

"I would say it could be worse, but I won't." Tessa laughed.

"Perhaps later, time will permit me to show you Egypt has much in the way of pleasure to offer."

His tone was suggestive and by the sideways look he gave her she knew without a doubt he intended a double meaning. Tessa thought the best course of action was to not respond at all. In fact, that was her whole plan of action. Even during the car ride, she kept her lips tightly clamped. A few times he tried to engage her in conversation, but Tessa was firm. If she didn't talk to him, he couldn't wreck havoc on her senses and then subsequently seduce her with the ease of a warm knife through butter.

Instead, Tessa chose to look at the beautiful scenery unfolding before her. Since Anaise and Jonathan's home was on the outskirts of Cairo, there were spots of natural land that were beautiful. When Tessa started to question Torian about the name of the property they were passing, she noticed he had a dark look upon his face.

The car began to slow down alongside a copse of trees. Tessa suspected Torian wasn't mentally in the vehicle with her anymore. He seemed distracted and agitated. "Stay here." His tone was crisp and with any other person Tessa suspected it would have brooked no argument.

Tessa was immediately annoyed with his tone. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know."

"Then I guess I get to go."

Torian looked at her with a scowl. Tessa quirked up one eyebrow in challenge. He could just give in now or waste precious time arguing with her. "On the condition that if there is any danger you will do what I ask without question." Tessa opened her mouth to protest, then recognized that he wasn't budging on that particular request. She nodded her agreement.

As soon as the car stopped, Torian was out of the car. He seemed to be looking for something. Tessa got out and immediately a feeling of ill will washed over her. It was as if an entity of evil blanketed the area. She shivered and Torian looked at her questioningly. She gave him a shrug and began to follow him. As they made their way through the trees, the stronger the sensation of evil. Torian glanced back at her periodically, but he seemed preoccupied. Then he stopped suddenly, causing Tessa to slam into him.

“Go back to the car and lock the doors.” His voice held a strange note. Tessa forgot about their deal as impulse took over and she stepped around Torian. Up ahead, quite clearly, she could see that three bodies littered the ground.

“Oh my god!” Tessa gasped, going for the bodies. Torian grabbed her by the arm, stopping her.

“Go back to the car.”

“No. They might be alive. I can help.”

“They’re dead.”

“How do you know that?” Tessa wrenched her arm free. “I’m a doctor, don’t ask me to go against that.”

She didn’t wait for his answer as she rushed towards the bodies. Instinct made her go to the smallest body first. Tessa had seen death before, but the sight of a child dying or dead always shook her. It was a little girl. Her dark hair was fanned about her wildly on the ground. Her face had a serene expression. Almost. If not for the small tears of blood that had leaked out the corners of her eyes and her ears, she appeared to be at peace. Tessa forbid the tears gathering in her eyes to fall. She gently put a hand to the little girl’s neck, wishing for a pulse. Finding none, Tessa swallowed over the lump in her throat as she rose and checked what must have been the little girl’s parents. Torian was right. They were all dead.

She undid the man’s shirt and looked at his chest. There was no visible mark, at least, not at first. Tessa watched in awe as the now-familiar mark began to embed itself on the skin of his chest. “That’s impossible,” Tessa breathed to herself. She rushed to the woman and pulled up her shirt. The mark was already half formed and becoming darker. “Torian, look at this.”

But she didn’t need to call him, he was already standing over her and knelt to be eye level with her. “It is the same mark the others bear.” He gently took her by the elbow and rose, pulling her with him. “We have to get this family to their loved ones.” At his words, Tessa’s eyes strayed over to the body of the little girl. She was just a child. As Tessa stared, tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. Her vision blurred until she could no longer see the child. Within moments, Torian had gathered her against his chest as Tessa tried to get herself together.

With tenderness, he kissed her on the top of her head. The gesture was so thoughtful Tessa sighed as her arms wrapped around him. More than ever, she wanted to find out what was happening to these people. She sniffed and pulled away, slightly embarrassed by her actions. “Sorry, that was unprofessional of me.”

“That was very humane of you.” Torian used a thumb to wipe the remaining tears from her eyes. “Being a doctor does not mean you have to deny yourself emotion.” He smiled. “One should never get used to death.” The last part he seemed to say more to himself. “Please, Tessa, go to the car and wait for me. I’ll call the local police.” He took out his cell phone.

Tessa looked at him and wondered just for a second how much more to him there was than his good looks. He genuinely seemed to care what happened to these people. More than that, he had so effortlessly comforted her.

As Tessa made her way back to the car, a chill went down her spine. She looked around, sure someone

was following her, but when she turned no one was there. She shook her head. She was just freaking herself out now. Tessa saw the car just yards ahead when that feeling came over her again. This time she was determined not to turn around and kowtow to her imagination. That is, until the area around her suddenly fell deathly quiet. Tessa swallowed hard and turned slowly.

A tall man stood directly behind her. He had long, thick braids that went past his shoulders. His eyes were a curious green and she did a double take as they seemed to flicker and become slitted like that of a snake. He just stood there with a curious expression on his face.

“Can I help you? Are you sick?” Tessa looked at him, and a warning bell went off in her head.

He came closer and Tessa found herself instinctively backing away. She could almost feel his aura reach for her, dragging her into an abyss of malignancy. Tessa kept backing away, trying to clear her thoughts. For a second she thought she heard Torian calling to her. She shut out the phantom voice, knowing that was impossible. But something pushed at her mind and Tessa felt her knees start to buckle. She wanted to crawl away from the man as he advanced on her. The curious expression had changed to maniacal joy as he stood over her. He raised his arms in the air, and Tessa felt something hot course through her body.

It was like an army of phantom hands squeezing her from the inside, her breath became hitched as her lungs felt like an iron vise was clamping them. Her vision swam and her eyes burned as sweat began to form in rivulets down her face. A tremendous pressure suddenly manifested in her ears, and all sound was cut off. *I'm dying*, she thought. Suddenly a wind kicked up, cooling the sweat on her. The pain was gone and Torian was there. She wanted to call out to him, but it was too late. Her world went black.

\* \* \* \*

Her fear assailed him. Anubis called to her, but she blocked him from her mind. Whatever or whoever had caused the little family's deaths was still here. Anubis tried to fight his way into Tessa's mind, but she prevented it. Without access to her mind he would have to take the time to track her. Anubis scented her and followed her trail as fast as he could. To his horror, a tall man stood over Tessa — draining her.

In a rage, Anubis rushed him, knocking him away from Tessa. As she slumped to the ground, her eyes focused on him for a moment. Anubis turned to the man, taking in his appearance. He had never seen this being before, yet something about him said he was a traveler of some sort. Anubis darkened the sky as the braided hair man laughed at him.

“So, I finally get to meet you, jackal.” His words were clipped with an Egyptian accent.

“It is my pleasure,” Anubis responded, pulling a bolt of lightning from the sky and hurling it at his opponent, scoring a direct hit.

The man stumbled, then paused. A smile lit his face and Anubis realized he had absorbed the bolt. “Can I have some more please?” he asked with a dark smile. “I've hardly eaten at all today. Well, that is if you want to count that small meal back there.” He indicated the area where he and Tessa had found the bodies. Anubis realized he had no idea who or what he was dealing with. More than that, he could feel that Tessa's life force was nearly gone.

Anubis moved faster than the killer could track him, circling him until he grabbed the other male from behind. With his hold tight, Anubis began to siphon the life out of the being. The stranger screamed. At times his screams sounding more like a hiss. He didn't know what this being was, but it was full of natural energy. It would take days to bleed him dry. Anubis didn't have that kind of time, not with Tessa practically dead. He kicked up a small funnel of wind and pushed the traveler inside. He could only hope that it would hold him.

As Anubis backed away from the makeshift trap, a startling realization came upon him. It was not natural energy that coursed through the killer. It was *souls* converted into energy. The energy he had siphoned into himself was from souls! Anubis could hear their cries as he released them. He looked at the thing he had captured again. If he left it here, the creature could get away and cause many more deaths. He needed to take this thing to Jonathan and imprison it. His gaze shifted to Tessa. Her eyes and ears bled profusely. He could not take them both. He had no idea if the being could break the bonds during transport. It could prove dangerous for Tessa if that happened. But if he left her here, there would be no saving her. It was a question of one life versus hundreds, maybe even thousands.

He made the only choice he could. In fact, it wasn't a choice at all. It was what had to be. He could not live with any other scenario. Anubis summoned Tessa's lifeless body into his arms.

## Chapter Eight

I need your help. Anubis sent out the call to Jonathan as he whisked Tessa through the dead plains, aiming for the pyramids. She had but the smallest spark of life left in her. He didn't know what that being was or exactly what it had done to Tessa, but it was damn near lethal. She lay limp in his arms. Her breathing was so shallow that more than once he had to check to make sure she still lived. Damn him! He should have known better. He had sensed the creature in the area, but thought it further away. He had sent Tessa to the car thinking to make her safer. Instead, he had only endangered her more.

What is it? *You sound... worried.* Thoth's almost immediate answer lessened his fears slightly.

The one responsible for the deaths is captured in a 'clone. I do not know how long it will hold him.

Why not just bring him here? There was no mistaking the puzzlement in Thoth's voice.

I am otherwise engaged.

Anubis you know how dangerous this person is. Why would you leave him—

Tessa has been hurt.

There was a long moment of silence. Anubis knew Thoth was thrown off by his behavior. If nothing else, he was always dependable, efficient and a mechanical killer. Anubis always did what needed to be done. He could feel Thoth trying to read his emotions, but blocked him. As important as this being was, right now his main concern was Tessa. It was no one else's business. For the first time in his life, Anubis wanted to do something for himself. He wanted to save Tessa. He wanted her more than he wanted anything in his long life.

Show me where he is, Thoth said at last. Anubis flashed him a quick image of the area in which he had left the prisoner, then he promptly shut down all communication with Thoth. It would take all of his concentration to save Tessa. With little effort, he entered the great pyramid. An object that had been the subject of curiosity for thousands of years, no living human really knew its purpose. Anubis set Tessa down gently in a large chamber and mentally lit the sconces adorning the walls.

This was a place of rebirth, of metamorphosis, to be more exact. Anubis and the other travelers built the pyramids to aid the humans. It healed them when they were sick. However, the power changed the humans more than intended. It gave them talents humans had not had before. They gained the ability to see the future, and some could read minds. The effects were various, but one thing was clear: It was in violation of the code of the travelers. They were not to interfere with the natural life of a species by drastically altering it. The pyramids were shut down and no one had used them. Until now. Anubis quickly transferred himself into a shade and entered a nearby forest. As quickly as he could, he gathered the necessary herbs and twigs for the ritual and returned to Tessa. He made a fire, throwing the herbs into the flames to begin the ritual. Carefully, he cleaned the blood from her face. He knew the moment Tessa's soul left her body and he met her at the river.

Her soul was beautiful. A golden glow surrounded the outline of her body. He stood in front of her as she tried to get around him. She had no idea she was dead. He knew what was happening — she was following the powerful song of the dead. Its melody lured souls to the other side. It was within his judgment to allow them over to cross and either live out their days in happiness or punishment. If there was a question, he judged them using a scale. He would not judge Tessa. He would not let her pass.

What are you doing? Where are we?

Do you not remember anything?

Pain and lots of it. Is he gone? Did you save me?

Her words cut through him viciously. He had not been quick enough to save her. *Come with me, let us walk.* Anubis took her by the hand. She looked past him, her eyes full of her longing to move on to the other side of the river. *It has been a long day, Tessa. Tell me, how do you feel?*

Strange. I feel light. Can you hear that, Torian?

You hear a beautiful song, do you not?

Yes. I've never heard it before. Listen to it. Where is it coming from? She frowned in confusion.

Anubis began to lead her away from river, away from the lure of the song. In the land of the dead there were many places to explore. In many of the places, Anubis had made a home for himself. He tugged at her hand lightly, but her feet dragged as she looked upon the other side of the river. Shortly the house he had built in the gray-skied land rose on the horizon. Upon seeing the home, Tessa gasped.

It's like a castle. Who lives in a castle near a lake? Tessa joked. Her light-brown eyes took in every detail of the outer veneer of the castle. Anubis flashed them inside to his favorite room. Tessa laughed. *I'm dreaming. This is a dream.*

The walls were covered in long, flowing fabrics made of silk. The windows held no dressing save a billowy panel that ran across the tops. The floors were made of black, gray and white marble. A large bed with dark red pillows was pushed against one wall. A fireplace was directly across from the bed. One large golden candle stand next to the bed, with a burning red candle giving the room a romantic ambiance. Wrought-iron sconces were on every wall.

Yes, Tessa, it is a dream. Anubis hated telling her that small lie. Right now was not the time to tell her she had died at the hands of a murderous madman. She wouldn't believe he was saving her. No, this was no dream. What happened in this plane was real.

Well, if this is a dream, I can do what I want with you. She turned to and traced the outline of his jaw with light, caressing fingers. *I've wanted to touch you, Torian. Something about you draws me .*

Do what you want with me, Tessa. I am not going anywhere. Anubis pulled her close, loving the feel of her body against his. Yes, in this plane, everything was real. The spirit was just as corporeal as a body. She molded against him without hesitation. Her soft, firm body fit perfectly with his. He lowered his head for a kiss that was eagerly met by her hungry mouth. She gave him total abandon in the kiss. She swirled her tongue around his with an expertise that was only rivaled by her exotic taste.

She pressed her body closer, grinding her hips against his. One hand grabbed his ass and pulled him even closer as her other hand pulled the tie from his hair and ran her fingers through the loose tresses. *You're so damn sexy*, she purred against his lips as she turned her attention to taking off his shirt. Impatient, Anubis mentally willed their clothes away.

Tessa let out a sexy laugh as she stepped back and studied him. *I wondered what you looked like completely naked* . She stalked around him, oblivious to her own nakedness. Anubis knew that if she were aware this was no dream she wouldn't be half so bold. He had three days before the ritual was complete, not to mention he had to make sure the sweet song of death didn't seduce her. He had to keep her distracted. He would be sure to tell her before their time here ended. He wouldn't do anything that she seemed uncomfortable with. He would make sure she was in total control. And right now she seemed to covet being in total control of what she thought was a dream. Far be it from Anubis to take that away from her.

She continued her slow perusal of his naked body. He really liked this side of Tessa, the dominating, controlling Tessa. She stood behind him and ran her hands over his naked backside. *Mmmhmm* , she hummed in approval. *Very nice* . Anubis was taken by surprise when she spanked him on his backside and squeezed. She walked around him and faced him. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her. Her breasts were perfect. His eyes drank in the narrow waist and toned belly. However, it was her slightly flaring hips and long, gorgeous legs that made him swallow hard more than once. With a thought, he tweaked her lack of attire a bit.

Tessa looked down at the red pumps he had put on her feet, then she looked up at him and a sexy smirk surfaced. *I like that* . Anubis figured she would. She was really a temptress, inhibited by a hurt she had experienced at the hands of a cruel lover. Right now she was in her element and he could tell she was enjoying it. She took a step forward and boldly wrapped her hand around his cock. Anubis no longer had the control to hide the reaction in his eyes. He knew his power surfaced in his eyes.



Well, would you look at that. I could have sworn I've seen that in your eyes before. She brought her face closer to his and Anubis knew she was staring at the small funnels churning inside. *How beautiful*, she breathed, then planted her lips against his, not in the least afraid of him. Anubis was trying very hard to let her have control, but she was pushing the limits of his control. He had not desired a human — or anyone, for that matter — in a long time. Now his desire was full-blown and he wasn't sure she could handle him.

She kissed him passionately and it was Anubis's turn to feel her backside. That glorious, firm, round backside that had been taunting him. She gripped his cock tighter as he deepened the kiss. Using what little room they had between them, she stroked him, her small hands heaven on his well-endowed arousal. Under his command, the bed rolled forward until it was behind Tessa. He walked her backwards as he kissed her until they both tumbled into the bed.

Anubis broke the kiss and looked down at Tessa. Her hair was wild and her brown eyes were dark with desire. He brought one finger to her lips and her tongue snaked out, wetting the tip. He kept eye contact with her as he brought his moist fingers to one of her nipples and rubbed it between his thumb and finger. Her back arched slightly and she moaned. Again he brought his finger to her mouth and repeated the process, this time on the other nipple. With both nipples hard, he clamped his mouth over one and suckled hard. Her hands immediately went to his head, keeping him in place and pulling him even closer.

Between then, his manhood seemed to pulse with anticipation. A storm began to brew outside the windows. Thunder rumbled as the first large raindrops slammed against the glass panes. *I love a good storm*, she said on a small, kittenish growl, not realizing that the storm was merely the manifestation of his desire being unleashed. *Harder*, she directed him. Anubis responded with a playful bite on her nipple, then the fleshy part of her breast. He began to trail kisses down the length of her body, but Tessa stopped him.

This is my dream, rebel, she chastised him, *I want to have my way with you*. He hadn't thought it was possible, but he became even more aroused at her demands. Reluctantly, he stopped what he was doing and rolled over onto the bed. He propped himself up on one of the many black silk pillows and put his hands behind his head as he studied her next to him.

Have at it.

I plan to.

Tessa then stood rather gracefully on the bed in the red pumps. She planted a foot on either side of his thighs and looked down at him expectantly. It took Anubis a moment to understand what she wanted, but soon a raunchy, slow beat began to flow out of the speakers built into the walls of the room. She began to slowly gyrate her hips to the music and Anubis was lost as he followed the movement of her hips. Her patch of hair just above the apex of her thighs was neatly trimmed. He didn't know where to look first.

Her long, curly hair swayed side to side and she began to lift her hair, only to let it cascade softly around her shoulders and down her back. Her hands traveled over her breasts as she squeezed them and played with them. *How am I doing?* she asked playfully.

You're killing me. I want to be inside of you.

Good. She then squatted down suddenly so that her bottom just grazed his penis then she was back up

again. She grinned. *I learned that in my Strip To Get In Shape DVD* . One red-pumped foot was in the middle of his chest, light enough so that the heel wouldn't dig into his skin. Her hips then began an oval gyration that made him salivate. Tessa then removed the foot from his chest and turned so that her backside was to him as she continued to dance for him. Anubis was mesmerized watching that toned bottom bounce and sway madly to the beat of the music.

Then his heart almost stopped when she bent totally over and grabbed her ankles. Her hair spiraled down to the bed as she looked at him upside down from between her legs. *Aroused yet?*

Not only was he aroused, he could smell she was as well. Given her present position, he could see the wet glossiness of her vaginal lips. He'd had enough. She'd more than had her way with him. He reached up and grabbed her about the waist, causing her to tumble. She giggled as she landed on top of him. Her sweet-smelling soft hair spilled around them and he quickly changed positions so that she was on the bottom and he was solidly between her thighs.

He looked into her face and could see the raw desire and the years of pent-up passion that she denied herself. Only here, when she believed herself to be in a dream, did she let her passions run free. More than that, she had included him as the object of her desire. To him, there was no greater honor. *I want you, Tessa*. Her naked skin against his soothed him. It filled his desire for a closeness he had not wanted with anyone else. He didn't know why this human affected him, but she did.

I want you too, Torian.

What if this isn't a dream, Tessa? Would you still have me?

Her expression turned thoughtful. *You know what they say, Torian. If this is a dream, don't wake me up* . She ran her fingers across his lips. *Do you know how sexy you are? Of course you do* . She giggled. *Make love to me, Torian*.

The desire to tell her it wasn't a dream was strong. Her desire for him was real. Even if he were to tell her, she wouldn't believe him. She would assume it was just another aspect of her dream. He paused, not sure if he should stop and attempt to tell her or just lose himself in the moment. While in the midst of his pondering, she grabbed his cock and pushed her hips up, effectively pulling him halfway inside of her. The shock of the feel of her stunned him. She was so hot and wet for him. He swallowed, and looked down at her. Her eyes begged him not to stop. With a growl, his hips surged forth and he buried himself deep within her.

## Chapter Nine

The blissful sensation of him inside her almost made Tessa choke on a cry of pleasure. Tessa's eyes rolled as Torian thrust into her slowly and forcefully. His beautiful but strange eyes entranced her as their bodies connected. He felt as thick and long as she'd imagined he would be. His body was nothing but muscle and sinew. She ran her fingers along his upper arms, wallowing in every aspect of pleasure where their bodies touched.

She wrapped her legs about his torso as he slid sensually in and out of her. Tessa sighed in unmitigated pleasure. His lightly scented hair cascaded about his face, making him seem even more primal. Electricity crackled in the air as her pleasure built. Like a machine, he pistoned in and out of her, relentless and powerful. With a grunt he stopped and pulled out of her. Tessa found herself being repositioned on her side, her legs pushed up until she was in a half-fetal position. Then he was entering her with one hand on her hip the other on her thighs as he pushed himself in to the base of his root.

She gasped at the sensation. Being entered from this position was wonderful. She reached up her left arm and ran her hand down his chest. Her nails lightly scored his darkly bronzed chest. She closed her eyes, feeling nothing but the sensation of being thoroughly pleased. Vaguely, she could hear the storm raging outside. Thunder boomed and the windows shook from the vibrations. Rain pummeled the windows and lightning cracked close; there was a wildness in the air that catapulted her senses into overdrive. It seemed as if she were being literally ridden by a storm.

Open your eyes. She heard the command in her head. In this dream neither she nor Torian actually spoke. It was as if they could hear one another without saying the words. Tessa opened her eyes and looked into Torian's. Shock went through her as she stared into eyes that were no longer even remotely human. They no longer held the dark funnels of before. With the briefest of glances she looked to the window and saw that his eyes matched the clouds exactly. Different shades of gray swirled like living marble. It was frightening and exciting at the same time.

Your eyes...

You are seeing me as I am.

Tessa couldn't think. She felt the pressure building and knew she would climax soon. She opened her mouth to speak and only a stunted cry escaped. He surged forward faster and faster and seemed to swell even thicker. Tessa gripped the sheets in an attempt to hold on to her consciousness. She was drowning in a pleasure she had never known before. Then it hit her with unrivaled intensity. Her whole body shook as the waves of her orgasm possessed her. Torian showed her no mercy, but kept pumping into her, dragging out the orgasm and taking it to a height that left her breathless. Colors swirled before her as she tried to focus. She went under the crushing waves of bliss, crying out a single word. *Torian!*

He stilled at the sound of his name. His head went back and a roar sliced through the air and shook the windows more than the thunder. Tessa could feel his hot seed as it poured inside of her. As she struggled to breath, she could see Torian was having just as much trouble trying to regain focus. His eyes were heavy and hooded as he looked down at her. A thin sheen of sweat covered his body, causing another wave of desire to flow through her. Tessa couldn't ever recall having a dream as vivid and real as this one. He slowly pulled out of her, still somewhat hard. He lay behind her and molded his body to hers. Her head lay on his arm; the other was thrown almost possessively around her waist. At the same time, they took a deep breath and released it.

I do not think I've ever climaxed so hard, Torian confided.

I know I haven't.

I do not know what you do to me, Tessa. My body is drawn to yours.

Tessa paused. His words bothered her. It was just her body? In all fairness she had not known him long. But suddenly she found herself, wanting to know more about this man. She wanted him to want all of her. Then Tessa chided herself. What exactly was she thinking? First of all, this was just a dream. A sex dream. What did it matter if he knew her or not? In reality she would never sleep with him so wantonly. She kicked off the red pumps. She'd sworn off men. But here in this dream she could let herself go, do whatever she wanted without getting hurt. She changed her position until she could look him straight in the eyes. Eyes that were now simply dark. No dark tornado funnels, no swirling storm clouds.

You are the first lover I've had in a very long time.

Why? Will you tell me about him, Tessa?

Tessa breathed deeply. Again, what did it matter? *His name was Roarden. I met him the night I graduated from medical school. You know that old saying, never expect a long relationship from someone you pick up in a bar? It's a damn good one. We seemed to mesh. Had all the same interests, even knew a few of the same people. It turns out we knew a lot more of the same people that I realized.*

He was not faithful?

He was never faithful, apparently. For two years, we dated. He got to know my family, as I got closer to his. Of course, as fate would have it he had known my cousin in high school. Apparently he knew her well beyond high school, because he fathered a child by her while she was still married to someone else.

Ah, that can be a bit awkward.

Not as awkward as finding out he fathered another child by her while we were engaged. I didn't know this at the time, none of it, in fact. You want to know when I found out? Tessa didn't wait for him to answer. *When she crashed my wedding, saying she had left her husband for him and now it was time he owned up. Needless to say, I was devastated and embarrassed.*

Is he the reason you do not like to be called beautiful?

He called me that all the time. Said I was the most beautiful and only woman he desired. Tessa snorted. *I fell for that hook, line and sinker.*

Tessa could feel the bed shift and Torian gently tugged at her until she lay on her back. His dark eyes looked deeply into hers. *It is too bad this Roarden could not appreciate the woman that you are, Tessa. But you are beautiful, in that he was accurate.*

It is all men see.

I am not like the men you have known.

They all say that.

What can I do to prove it?

Can you give me the sun and the moon? Tessa asked jokingly .

A serious expression came over Torian's face. *In a way, yes* . He turned towards the window and Tessa followed his line of sight. Almost immediately the rain stopped and the thunder quieted. The clouds began to roll away and in a matter of seconds, sunlight burst through the window. Tessa sat up in bed and looked from Torian to the window. She had to keep in mind this was just a dream. Even so, it was a damn good one.

That's remarkable. How did you do that?

I control this plane. Though the sun is not real, I can make it real enough.

Where are we exactly, Torian? I know this is just a dream, but I do not think I've ever seen this place to dream it.

If you believe this to be a dream, then it should matter little where we are. Come.

Torian rose from the bed and held his hand out to Tessa. She grinned and took it . *Where are we going?* Torian said nothing as he led her towards the back of the house and then outside. The dirt from the garden under her feet was rich and smelled good. Huge flowers swayed gently as drops of the fallen rain dripped slowly from the petals. She followed his long steps until they came to a round wooden structure. Tessa squealed when she realized what it was. *You have a shower outdoors?*

Now I do. He smiled at her. For a second all she could do was look at this handsome man who insisted on invading her dreams . *Come*. He opened the door and there was nothing but mirrors everywhere. The floor looked to be made of Italian marble. Her nose picked up the scent of sandalwood incense. Various vines crept over the walls of the structure, giving it an almost jungle feel. Some of the plants even sprouted large blossoms that Tessa couldn't even begin to identify.

This is beautiful.

I hoped you would like it.

Tessa watched as he closed the door behind them and automatically the water switched on. The huge, plate-sized showerhead let loose a light, massaging torrent of warm water. Torian turned her around and began to gently stroke her hair, allowing the water to penetrate the thick tresses. His fingers felt so good in her hair. He stopped for a moment and through the mirrors Tessa watched as he plucked a blossom from one of the vines and crushed it in his hands. A beautiful scent began to permeate the air and he began to rub the crushed blossom into her hair. Tessa was astounded to see the blossom produced a thick lather. This had to be the oddest dream she'd ever had.

As he worked the lather, he massaged her scalp, sending Tessa into a trancelike state. A girl could get used to this. As the lather snaked its way down her body, so did his hands as he rubbed it into her skin, first her shoulders, then his hands cupped her breasts. He began to knead her breasts. The slickness of the lather plus the abundance of Torian's skill made it a heady experience. Tessa leaned back against his hard body as he alternated between squeezing and kneading her breast. His hands traveled even lower until he could work the soapy substance between her legs. Her core instantly reacted and she pushed her hips forward.

A deep chuckle vibrated in his chest and he began to pay special attention to her clitoris. While one hand still attended her breast, the other slipped further between her thighs. Tessa widened her stance a bit

more to give him better access. Rhythmically his fingers began to slide in and out of her and Tessa couldn't believe she was ready to have sex again so soon. She could feel his hardened cock nestled between them and she wanted it inside of her again.

Tessa reached behind her, pulling the thick member between her legs. Slowly he began to slide it between her folds, causing such delicious friction she was soon on the cusp of another orgasm. He picked up the pace of his fondling and Tessa could feel herself getting wetter and wetter. *Open your eyes. Watch as we make love, Tessa.*

Tessa opened her eyes and looked into the mirrors. In them, two slick, water-soaked bodies rubbed against each other. The picture was so erotic she couldn't stop watching. As the water poured down their bodies, the tempo of their desire rose. Torian's strokes became stronger and more intense. His fingers worked her clitoris so vigorously that soon Tessa was crying out as the climax slammed into her. As the effects worked their way through her body, Torian entered her, stealing her breath for a moment.

I love the way your body grips mine, Tessa. I can feel you orgasm on my cock. It is the most wonderful sensation. His words coupled with the image of him pumping into her sent her over the edge again, and this time she wasn't alone. He almost growled as he came, tweaking her nipples and still rubbing her clit.

Tessa didn't know how long it was before she was able to stand on her own. Somewhere between her first and second orgasm, her knees had buckled and she felt Torian catch her against his hard body. He stayed inside her as he rinsed the blossom lather from her hair. Reluctantly, he had to end the connection between them. *Time for bed, Tessa. You've had a long day.* She wasn't about to argue with him. Her strength now eluded her. Not one iota of protest slipped from her mouth when he picked her up and carried her out of the shower. She didn't even remember going back through the gardens. It was as if one second they were in the shower and the next, they were back in his bedroom.

This time a fire roared in the fireplace. He settled her against the pillows, and somehow she was completely dry. All dry except for her hair, which she knew was just a tangled mess. He sat on one side and gathered a small mass of her hair and began to gently comb out the tangles. *Where did you get a comb?*

He said nothing as he tended to her hair. His touch was so gentle Tessa found herself getting sleepy. Section by section he combed the tangles from her hair. She could smell the sweet scent of the blossom in her hair. It was now her favorite scent. Well, at least in this dream it was. He combed her hair until it was tangle free. When she reached up to touch it she was at a loss as to how it could be completely dry so soon. Not only that — it held beautiful, thick, shiny curls. *I have to get me some of those flowers*, she mused.

Torian nudged her until she was completely lying down. He spread her hair around the pillow before he nestled next to her. Tessa found herself curling against him, her hand against his chest. Tessa thought it odd that she was falling asleep while she was in the middle of a dream. *Sleep, beautiful one*. She heard his words, and yet this time they didn't bother her. Her eyes grew too heavy to keep open. She opened them one last time to see Torian looking at her with a tender expression. There was no lust, no teasing, just an expression so soft that Tessa immediately recognized it. It was the expression of one who had been lonely for a long time and finally found contentment.

She knew it because, somehow, she could see the reflection of her own expression in his dark eyes. It was the same expression, slightly sleepier, but the same. As her eyelids finally shut, Tessa couldn't help but think what a shame that this was all a dream. She knew she would never find this sort of companionship and connection in her waking hours.

## Chapter Ten

Anubis, where are you? Jonathan's urgent call brought him out of sleep. Tessa's warm body was against his and he had no desire to move.

What is it?

He was not there.

Anubis knew the chances of that creature breaking free had been good. Still, he had not regretted his decision to tend to Tessa. *What of the bodies of the family?*

I took care of it.

This thing, Thoth, I have not encountered anything like it. It takes their souls and uses it as energy.

Why did you not make sure it was securely apprehended?

There were other matters to attend to. Anubis could not keep the irritation from his voice.

What exactly has happened to the doctor?

I am tending to her.

You know the side effects of the pyramids on humans.

You've no need to remind me.

Are you prepared for that Anubis? Is she?

I will deal with this, Thoth. If you will keep me informed about the creature, I would appreciate it. I will see you in two days. Anubis cut the contact with Thoth. There would be no guilt. He had chosen and had not regretted it. When it came time to tell Tessa the truth, he would do it. He pulled her closer and inhaled her scent. She was his. Whether she knew it or not, she belonged with him. He had waited too long to find a mate who excited him, in the bedroom and out of it.

All he needed was two more days to heal her. What she would become or what she would be able to do would only remain a mystery until time unraveled it. Meanwhile, Thoth and Hathor and anyone else he

could call upon for aid could help with the traveler. He knew he needed to get back to the pyramid to make sure the fire burned continuously. Not to mention he had to make sure the proper herbs were administered to keep her body in stasis until it completely healed.

He phased into the chamber where Tessa's body slept. He examined her closely and saw the tag upon her body like the others, only hers was fading. It was eerily familiar and yet Anubis couldn't bring to mind the one who owned this tag. He fed the fire and threw more herbs upon it. That thing was out there, killing — no, *feeding* — off humans. It was a soul eater. He had known no traveler that ate souls, not in the thousands of years in his life. Perhaps this thing was some sort of hybrid. His senses told him Tessa was stirring. He checked the fire and the perimeter of the pyramid one more time before he phased back into bed with Tessa.

\* \* \* \*

"How long have I been sleeping?" Anubis watched as her sleep-ridden brown eyes opened in curiosity. She stretched languidly as she eyed him. The moment the realization hit her, her eyes opened wider. She put her hand to her lips as she spoke. "Oh. This seems odd. Before it seemed like—"

"What?" Anubis asked, already knowing what she couldn't quite understand.

"It just seemed like, I don't know, I can hear my voice. I know this sounds crazy, but for a while there it was as if I heard you here." She pointed to her head a little warily. "I know, I'm a loon."

Anubis pulled her body close to his. The fact that she was now speaking out loud instead of telepathically let him know she was healing fast. Soon, he would have to explain things to her. "You are not completely crazy." She playfully punched him. "However, you do need to eat."

"I do feel a little weak."

"Well," he pulled her up with him, "come with me and we will see what my abode has to offer you."

"Wait a second." She pulled the sheet up with her. "Don't you have anything here for me to wear?"

"I'm sure I could find you something. But I think the real question would be, do I want to?"

"I can't just walk around naked."

"I am."

"It's your house. No one is going to say anything."

"No one is here but you and I." Anubis watched as her jaw dropped.

"You mean to tell me in this big place, we are the only two occupants?"

"Yes, now come along. Take the sheet if you want. I must admit you are the most modest doctor I have ever known." He led her out of the bedroom and down one of many long corridors. He didn't miss the



fact that she held the sheet around her for dear life.

“Is that admitting you have known many doctors?”

“I admit no such thing. But doctors by profession should have no modesty. The naked body is a common sight to you.”

“Just so you know, it’s not like all of my patients *have* to be naked. If I were your patient, I would insist on it whether it was necessary or not.” She teased him.

Anubis stopped and kissed her hard and quick. The small sound of surprise was quickly swallowed by her immediate response to him. He broke the kiss, loving the way her eyes smoldered. “As you can see, I like being naked.”

Tessa’s eyes combed his body from head to foot. Her eyes lingered on his arousal. He liked her lusting after him. Already he could smell her desire for him building. It would seem her appetite was as insatiable as his. He chuckled lightly as he continued to lead her down the dining hall. “I have servants who come here periodically. I am sure there is something for you to eat.”

“This has got to be the longest, most realistic dream I’ve ever had,” Tessa murmured as she followed him.

Anubis chose not to comment. He had so much explaining to do. Perhaps it would be easier once she was fully healed. There was no doubt that she would gain something paranormal from the healing pyramids. Maybe once those new gifts were revealed it would be easier to explain things to her. He shook his head; right now he was going to enjoy just being with her. There would be plenty of hard stuff to deal with later.

On the dining room table, a bowl of fruit sat in decoration. Of course, it was edible. “What about fruit?” he asked as they approached the highly polished oak table. Tessa eyed the fruit greedily as she chose a delicious-looking green apple. He indicated that they should sit while she snacked. As soon as Tessa sat with the first bite of apple in her mouth she spat it out. She clawed at her throat as she gagged.

“What is it?” he asked, alarmed.

“I’ve never tasted anything so repulsive. I’m sorry for my manners, but that was just gross.”

“You don’t like apples then?”

“No, I love them. Maybe that was just a really tart one.”

“I’ll get you some water.” His curiosity was piqued as his suspicions rose. In little time, he had retrieved water for her. He set the glass in front of her and suggested she try a different fruit. Picking an orange and peeling it quickly she placed a slice in her mouth and chewed slowly. In seconds the orange suffered the same fate as the apple.

“Torian, I am really sorry and I will clean this up.” She rose, tightening the sheet around her. “I hate to say this, but that tasted as bad as the apple. Are you sure your servants are bringing you fresh food?”

Torian eyed her for a moment before responding. “It was more for decoration. It could be the fruit had been sitting out much too long. We can always go to the beach and see if we can catch you something.

Maybe fresh fish cooked over an open fire would be more to your taste?"

Tessa squealed at his suggestion. "I love fishing. I haven't been able to do it often since I started practicing. That's a great idea."

"Then let's go to the beach."

Tessa eyed him as if he were crazy. "Like this?" she looked down at the sheet she was wearing.

"I own this property. There is no one here but me." It was partially true. The spirit zone was his domain. He could come and go as he pleased. He could do whatever he wanted in this plane. Still, she looked hesitant. "Doctor, heal thyself, isn't that the saying? Let yourself go, Tessa, have some fun. But if you're afraid of me I understand."

"I am *not* afraid of you."

"I think you're afraid you won't be able to keep your hands off me. And with you and I naked, well, it would be so easy to take advantage of me." Tessa looked at him incredulously before she burst into laughter. "Are you suggesting I don't tempt you?"

Tessa did exactly what he thought she'd do. She unwound the sheet, giving him a succulent eyeful of her body. The sheet pooled around her feet. "Let's see who gives in first. Now, which way to the beach?"

Anubis grinned, loving her spunk. He pointed towards the back of the house, and as he followed her he couldn't help but observe the exaggerated sway of her hips as she walked. She was going to play dirty, that was obvious. The minx even had the gall to throw her long hair over one shoulder seductively, as if she was just checking to see if he followed.

As soon as they hit the beach, Tessa ran full speed ahead into the river. For a split second he thought she would try to swim to the other side, unable to resist the seductive song of death. But she appeared oblivious to it as she dove under and came back up. He followed suit quickly until he was at her side. They swam close to one another, and even dove underwater at the same time. She swam into his arms and pressed her lips against his as they broke the surface together.

He continued to kiss her as they treaded water, loving how slick her body felt. Her long legs wrapped around him and it seemed as if his cock honed in on her core instinctively. He entered her in one stroke, and her legs tightened about him. Anubis cupped her bottom as he swam to shallow water until his feet were firmly on the ground. There he stood, holding her tightly as he pumped in and out of her slowly. Her soft lips traveled to his ear and traced the shell of his ear with her tongue. Her arms were tight around his neck as their passion increased. She bit him, hard, on his shoulder and he slammed into her harder.

Anubis began to walk them towards the beach, each step he took sending him deeper into her. Her mouth found his again and she kissed him with complete abandon. He'd never had a woman kiss him so hungrily — and that's when realization sank in. Anubis would give her not only what she wanted, but also what she so desperately needed. He sank to his knees on the beach, and leaned over until she was on her back. Harder he thrust into her, feeling the energy he called upon build. She unwrapped her legs from around him and spread them wide, giving him better access.

Her small moans became louder, her hands clawed at his back as she raised her hips to meet his. Anubis couldn't put into words how good she felt. Her chasm was gripping him, sliding him in further, taking him to heights of pleasure he had never known with a woman. His mating with her was more than just

physical and it made it all the more arousing. “More.” She demanded gruffly, her hands gripping his backside and urging him deeper. The loss of his control was almost an audible snap.

He felt like a wild animal as he mated with Tessa. His cock was so hard, it demanded a release. He could hear his own grunts as their mating became almost violent.

“Yes!” she screamed as her hip thrusts became stronger quicker, more demanding. The pressure of energy coupled with his need to release his seed was overwhelming. Tessa’s thrusts stopped for a scant second before her body shook and she cried out. Her body convulsed as her orgasm stole over her. Her nails dug into his back as she gripped him, her body milking him in strong waves.

Anubis roared as he expended the energy and his seed inside of her. It seemed as if long founts of semen spurted inside of her and he was powerless while in its grip. He couldn’t remember an orgasm so strong that it made him lose all sense of equilibrium. The river water thrashed just as violently as it reacted to his power, splashing over their hot bodies and instantly cooling them off. Tessa didn’t seem to notice.

As his orgasm subsided, he watched her more closely. Her eyes were transfixed on the sky above, without exactly focusing on anything. Anubis’s suspicions were proven, as the water subsided almost as quickly as it had churned wildly. Her body shook every now and then. Eventually her eyes focused on him and she smiled. “That was wonderful.”

Anubis pulled out of her and lay on his side as his fingers made small circles on her belly. He said nothing, the thought that assailed him both comforting and shocking.

“Are you all right?” Her voice bit into his thoughts. He looked down at her. Tessa, the beautiful doctor who spent her life helping others. That was the Tessa of the past. This Tessa was not only a doctor, she was a hybrid. A hybrid that needed to feed off the life force of another to survive.

## Chapter Eleven

He let the darkness comfort him as the earth healed him. He burrowed deeper as pain lanced through his body. He had been caught unaware. Never had he run into such power before. Teremun had underestimated his enemy. As precious energy flowed through him, he knew it would not be enough to take nourishment from the earth. He needed more. He required the type of energy only a life force could give. His father had only briefly told him of the others. Obviously there was more he had to learn.

Teremun sat up in the darkness of the cavern and contemplated. He certainly couldn’t run the risk of confronting his new enemy. He was too weak. He had to find a simple source of food, one that wouldn’t require much energy to gather. He couldn’t risk the dark man following his trail. He needed a food

source that wouldn't cause attention.

Teremun wouldn't be able to share his energy with *him*, this time. Once fully rejuvenated, he would be able to gather more souls and finally complete the transformation. It was only a matter of days before his power would be unrivaled.

He stood in the cavern, determined to do whatever was necessary to finish his mission. Shame had washed over him when he had to cower as the other being searched for him. Lucky for Teremun, his life signs had been so weak he couldn't be detected. It took every ounce of his power to break out of the funnel that had imprisoned him. He would not be so helpless again. He needed to learn more about his foe, find his weakness. If memory served him, the man had been angry that he had killed the human female. Perhaps his enemy had a weakness for humans. Teremun smiled. If that were true, it was a good thing, for in his own way Teremun had a weakness for humans as well. He simply couldn't resist feeding off them. As he strode out of the cave, Teremun got a good idea of just where he could go for an easy meal.

\* \* \* \*

Thoth rubbed his head in frustration. Books were piled high around the room, with various ones left open for quick reference. Something was staring him right in the face, and yet the answer eluded him. Hathor glided into the room with a drink in one hand. "Here, I thought this might help." She handed him the small snifter of brandy and idly looked into the books. "Anything so far?"

Thoth sighed before he tipped the glass and let the entire contents burn its way down his throat. "I don't know, love. I should know this. I've read the reports of the attacks. I've even seen pictures of the tags left right above the heart. But it doesn't make sense. The cult lead I pursued turned up one interesting fact. Its founding members had died the same way as the people are dying here."

"You will figure this out. There is nothing that stumps you for long." She walked to another book, peering at it with little interest.

"It would help if Anubis—" As soon as Thoth began speaking, Hathor's head snapped up.

"No! For the first time in his life Anubis has a chance at happiness."

"I know that, love, but this is very important."

Hathor came over to her husband and caressed his cheek. "Think about it, Thoth. He is the only one of us who has never had a mate. For his entire life he has lived life alone with nothing but bedmates. I know this is important, but so is he. He has helped the humans enough in the past that he should be able to pass on this. You can handle this. We can handle this. And let us not forget, husband, we have other friends who can aid us. We must stop this dependency we have on Anubis to always do our dirty work."

"Anubis is a good man, but he is a Dark One. I suppose over time we have depended on him to do the work none of us had the stomach for. But you are right, we can do this." Thoth sighed. "I know Apep is linked to this, but I don't know how."

Hathor smiled as she brushed lightly past her husband, still browsing through the books with little more than passing interest. “As for Anubis, that is his nature, dear.” Hathor flipped through pages as she continued. “Just like it is in a woman’s nature to nurture.” She moved to the next book. “You will not bother him with this until he is ready, right, dear?” Hathor waited for an answer, and when she received none she looked up in curiosity.

Thoth looked at her with a mixture of horror and understanding. “Are you all right, husband?” Worry clouded her voice, but Thoth rushed past her to stop at one book, which he flipped furiously through. “What is it?” Hathor rushed to his side. “You don’t think ...”

“It fits.” Thoth nearly whispered to himself, as the serpent symbol of Apep glared up from the faded pages.

“But he’s been banished. Imprisoned in a realm just outside of Creation. He has no power here.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that.” Thoth retrieved his laptop and went to the web page he and Anubis had been viewing days earlier. It had been right there in front of him and he hadn’t seen it. “This woman was a founding member of the cult, and she is dead as well.”

“And?”

“I remember reading the reports. Apparently she had given birth not too long before she had died. They never found the child.”

“You’re going to have to explain this to me.” Hathor sat down in a nearby chair. “You believe Apep has something to do with the killings, yet you also believe he is still imprisoned. What has this woman to do with anything?”

“I suspected during the time that the veils between worlds thinned, something managed to either get in or out of Earth’s realm. I believe Apep managed to father a child with a human woman, probably given to him as a gift during the time the veils between realms thinned.”

Hathor looked shocked. “He would only need a very small window of opportunity to send his essence through. A young, fertile human woman could easily become a host. The babe could grow at an exponential rate! Oh, Thoth, this is terrible!”

“What Anubis and Tessa ran into the yesterday was indeed a hybrid. Anubis said it fed off humans by using their souls as energy.”

“But what would be the point, husband? Apep was not exactly a man dedicated to family. Why would he choose to procreate? That is not in his nature.”

“No, it is not in his nature. But it is in the nature of everything living to survive.” He looked at his wife apologetically. “He is probably using this thing as a gateway, a conduit to somehow break through. I am sorry, wife, but I must have Anubis’s help on this. He is one of the very few powerful ones, as is Ralabos. It will take all of our strength combined to stop this thing. There is no telling what he can do, or even what Apep’s plans are.”

“Thoth, we can’t do that to him. He needs one more day. Can we give him that?”

The possibilities of what this creature was capable of were endless. There was no telling exactly what it

could do or what his true purpose was. It was even possible that Apep shared a mind link with his offspring. They could be implementing the destruction of mankind from across the realms with deadly accuracy. The more Thoth thought about the possibilities, the more worried he became. The sooner they took care of the situation the better. Too many humans had died already. And if his guess were right, more would die before this was over.

“Hathor, I don’t know if we can spare him. However, I will call upon Ralabos first and buy our dark friend more time with his new mate.”

As Thoth concentrated on trying to touch the mind of Ralabos, he hoped they had enough power between them to keep Apep at bay. The last battle with the powerful Apep had ended in many deaths. They had barely defeated him long enough to imprison him. And now he had a progeny who could, with time, have the power Apep needed to break free from his prison.

\* \* \* \*

Teremun walked slowly down the dirty streets. This was the less affluent part of town. The part of town most people avoided if they didn’t live here. As night fell he became more relaxed, since he blended in with the shadows so well. He felt weak and every step he took required too much of what precious energy he had left. His body was racked with pain, but it was bearable. He traveled deeper into the slums, depending on his sight instead of his preternatural senses to find a human. His tongue lanced through the air, hoping to catch a whiff of prey.

Then he found it. He followed the scent until his eyes picked out the victim. There, huddled next to a large waste receptacle, a human was hunched over searching the ground. At the sound of his footsteps the man squinted up at him in the dimness.

“Do you have any spare change? I could really use a meal.” The man’s gruff voice echoed in the alley. Teremun came closer, flinching at the scent of the unwashed human. But this human would do. Who would miss a creature such as this?

Teremun stopped in front of him and knelt down. A smile split his face at the thought he was finally going to be replenished. At the very least it was a start. His eyes flashed into green diamond slits as he stared at the man. “I could really use a meal as well.”

“Wake up,” Tessa ordered for the third time as she kissed Torian on the nose. For just a second she was surprised at her affectionate gesture. The last few days had been wonderful. That is, once she realized she must be in some kind of coma and was having one helluva epic dream. When she woke up this morning she felt strong, different, somehow changed. It could be the fact that she allowed herself to breathe freely in this hallucination. It was easy being with Torian because it had none of the repercussions of real life. Torian opened one dark eye and winked at her. “You were already awake?” She hit him playfully in the chest.

“I found no reason to actually rise. Every time you leaned over and shook me your breasts swayed so delightfully.” Tessa blushed even as she hit him again and rose from the bed and stretched. She was famished and she had no particular taste for anything. Probably one of the side effects of dreaming. One didn’t actually eat when they dreamed, did they? Tessa shrugged. She wasn’t going to think it to death. She simply wanted to enjoy herself until such time as she woke from her coma.

“What goes through that devilish mind of yours, woman? I hate to admit this, but I’m going to need at least thirty seconds before I’m ready to ravish you again.” Torian pulled his long frame from the bed so that he was on his knees, his cock already at attention. He looked down at his member then back at her. “It would seem I’m a liar.”

“Torian, we have time for that later.” Even as she said it, Tessa eyed the tempting arousal with interest. His dark eyes smoldered suggestively as she warred with what she now wanted to do more. Tessa even took a step towards the bed, unaware of her action. “You promised,” was all the fight she could muster. Torian looked at her a moment longer before he got out of bed, every move like that of a predator. He came to her slowly, never losing eye contact.

“Now, which promise are you referring to, love? The one in which I promised to indulge in your addictive charms until you could stand no more?” He placed a finger under her chin and brought her face up to his. “Or the one in which I promised I could never grow tired of tasting these lips over and over again?” He stepped closer so that now the tip of his cock was in the beginning stage of demanding entrance between her thighs. “I know. You’re referring to the promise in which I vowed to satisfy *any* desire you wish to explore.”

Tessa swallowed, her mouth having gone dry from the sight of him. His words further enflamed her desire for him. “That one.” She managed to croak out. Torian looked at her, mildly confused. “I have no other desire than to go horseback riding like you promised.”

Torian grinned at that statement. “You’ve no desire to save a horse?”

Tessa laughed at the innuendo from the popular song. It surprised her he even *knew* the tune.

“First off, you’re not a cowboy.” She stepped back, her ache for him becoming stronger than her excitement at riding. “Second, like I said before, you promised.” She put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot. When his eyes riveted to her breasts, Tessa stopped. She knew that if he really pushed the issue, he could quite easily make her pudding in his hands.

“And you have no other desire than to go riding?” His voice went low, taunting her.

“None whatsoever.” She jerked her head up a notch and sniffed.

Torian closed the gap between them. His cock was now nestled against her stomach and she could swear she felt it pulsing. His head descended until his firm lips were against hers in the lightest of touches. Frustrated, Tessa brought her arms up until her fingers buried themselves in his thick, dark hair. She pulled him closer, and plundered his mouth without inhibition. Then, to her surprise, he broke the kiss. "Liar," he whispered against her slightly swollen lips. "However, if my lady wishes to tell me falsehoods, then so be it." He disengaged her arms from around his neck and walked past her, grinning. Tessa could think of nothing else to do but stick her tongue out at his retreating figure.

"I've other ideas with what you could be doing with that tongue," he called out without turning around. Tessa was surprised that he'd known she'd done that. "Unless you're giving a whole new meaning to the term riding bareback, I think you might want to follow me."

\* \* \* \*

"How is it that you just *happen* to have riding gear just my size?" Tessa stared at herself in the full-length mirror. Torian was behind her blatantly admiring her backside. She snapped her fingers, bringing his dark gaze to hers. The look he gave her almost made her regret it. Her body was addicted to his. Every time they made love, it was never enough. Her body responded to the familiarity, but at the same time, the intensity always felt new.

"How is it *you* just happen to be the size of the riding gear?" he countered.

Tessa looked at him and shook her head, deserting that aspect of conversation. Torian took her hand and began to lead her through the castle. "I take it you have ridden before?"

Tessa nodded. It had been too long since she'd had the pleasure. She and Roarden used to go a lot. After their breakup, Tessa had totally ignored the hobby she loved so much. She frowned slightly at the thought of Roarden. Usually when she thought of him, fresh, sharp pangs would pierce her chest. Now she felt nothing.

"Yes. I love riding." Torian led her to another door leading out of the castle. The horse stables loomed large just ahead of them. As they got closer, Tessa could see he housed an array of breeds. Her excitement grew as she eyed the horses. She didn't know which one she favored more. She stepped up to the dark brown Quarter horse and rubbed its broad head. The horse next to it whinnied and she was immediately drawn to the young male Appaloosa. As Tessa surveyed the animals, she anguished over her decision about which to ride. Then she saw him. At the very end of the stable, the magnificent creature stood proud and majestic. He silently looked her over and Tessa stared at him with her mouth gaped open. "You have a Sorraia?"

"You know horses very well." Torian stood behind her and encircled her waist. "Tessa, meet Balder."

"I didn't think I'd ever get to see one in the flesh, let alone up close." Tessa stroked the long, velvety nose lovingly. "Hello, Balder," she cooed to the horse. "Can I ride him?"

"You may, but let me warn you, Balder can be temperamental." Tessa turned to him questioningly. "He's tried to throw me more than once," Torian admitted rather sheepishly. "But I believe it is a mere personality disagreement."



“Well, I like him well enough.” Tessa couldn’t stop petting the beautiful animal. He seemed to respond to her as he nuzzled her neck.

“And it would appear that he likes you as well.” Tessa barely registered his moving away and coming back with two saddles. He handed her one. “If he’s in a bad mood today it will show when you strap the saddle on him. If he seems twitchy, you will have to choose another horse, agreed?” Tessa nodded. “But don’t get your hopes up. I don’t think he wants to be ridden.”

\* \* \* \*

Ten minutes later, Tessa whooped as the air whipped freely through her hair. Balder was wonderful to ride and he was behaving rather well. She urged Balder to slow down as Torian, having chosen the Quarter, trotted up belatedly next to her. He eyed the horse rather ruefully, then smiled at her. “He now belongs to you.”

“What?” Tessa stammered.

“He’s yours. He obviously likes you a lot better than me.” As if to punctuate his words, Balder whinnied softly.

“But I can’t.”

“Why?” Torian waited patiently for an answer while Tessa floundered for one.

“They’re so expensive, so rare...” Torian cocked up an eyebrow. “Not to mention I have no way of taking care of him.”

“He can remain here and you can see him anytime you’d like.” Torian rode up next to her until their thighs brushed. “My home is your home, Tessa.”

Tessa felt the sadness well in her heart. It was too bad this was all one long, wonderful dream. There was no way in the world she could have a fantastic lover, great conversationalist and everything else and then some in one man. It was even more implausible that man would want her with such intensity. She just didn’t attract that kind of man. She attracted snakes in men’s clothing. Tessa decided to just go along with the dream. Hell, what was the harm?

“Thank you, Torian.” A frown creased his face. “What is it?”

“There is so much we need to talk about, Tessa.” His eyes looked worried.

“Like what?” She watched as for the first time Torian looked unsure.

“How do you feel?” he deftly changed the subject, so Tessa let it drop. She figured whatever it was that was bothering him he had to approach it in his own time. However, at that question she noted she did feel hungry again. And like the time before, she had no particular taste for traditional foods. She totaled it up to things not always being logical in the dream world. Hell, by her count she’d been dreaming for about

three days.

“A little peckish,” she admitted.

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

Torian got down from his horse and beckoned that she do the same. He let the horses roam freely in the lush green expanse. Torian took her hand and walked slowly, seemingly deep in thought. She kept quiet, trying to give him time to collect his thoughts. He stopped and faced her, his eyes telling her something she simply couldn’t understand. Then he stood stock still as if he were listening to something she couldn’t hear. “Not now,” he muttered to himself.

“What is it? Please, Torian, you’re scaring me. Just tell me what it is.”

“I don’t know how. What if all this isn’t a dream, love?”

Tessa laughed shortly. Of course it was a dream. Everything was too perfect. Where were they exactly if not in some place her mind dreamed up? “But it is, Torian.” She caressed his face. She didn’t want this dream to get ruined. She was having too much fun.

“But what if it isn’t?” he insisted.

Tessa looked at him for signs of illness. “This isn’t real. You’re not real.” Tessa knew it was time to wake up. She was having the most bizarre conversation.

“I’m very real, Tessa.”

“I admit it feels that way. But you’re a product of my imagination.”

It was then that Torian kissed her hard. Surprise rendered her immobile until the taste of his mouth next to hers whipped her into action. As usual, she responded strongly to him. She moaned as she tasted the unique flavor that was Torian. Slowly he broke the kiss. “Tessa, you must listen to me. I have something to tell you.”

“Then just say it.” Tessa was worried now. Worried that she might have suffered some sort of brain trauma and that was why she was having this truly lovely, if unrealistic, dream. Torian’s eyes searched her face and still he said nothing. “Trust me, Torian. You can trust me with anything.”

Torian took a deep breath. “Perhaps it is better if I show you.” Right before her eyes he disappeared. For a second Tessa was alarmed. Even if this wasn’t real it was a little disconcerting to have someone just vanish before your eyes. “This is only the beginning of what I have to tell you.” Tessa jumped at the sound of Torian’s voice behind her.

“I need to wake up,” Tessa muttered to herself. “My dream is trying to convince me that it’s real. If that’s not real lunacy I don’t know what is.”

“I wish I didn’t have to tell you this way.”

“What extensive brain trauma I must have,” Tessa reasoned with herself.

“But Thoth is calling me, we have no more time.”

“Okay, how did I wake myself up when I was younger and having a nightmare?”

“Listen to me, Tessa.”

“There’s no place like home. No, that’s not it.”

“Thoth needs our help. People are dying.” Torian’s words cut through her ranting. She stared at him.

“Thoth? As in the Egyptian god?” Tessa winced. She was worse off than she thought.

“I know this is scary and not the way I wanted to tell you. But our help is needed. I have to trust that you are fully healed. I have to wake you now, Tessa.”

“Of course.” Tessa breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn’t crazy after all. This was just her brain’s way of letting her know she was about to wake up. “Though I don’t know what Thoth has to do with this.”

“He and the others need our help.”

“Others?”

“Travelers like Thoth and myself.” He paused on the last bit. Tessa felt her heart speed up; something was definitely odd about her dream. She looked at him in confusion. He explained, “You know him as Jonathan.”

“Oh.” Tessa couldn’t believe her brain was on the fritz. She played along. “And which god would I know you as?”

Torian stepped up to her and his eyes turned into the funnels she was now familiar with. He embraced her then pulled back and sighed heavily.

“I am Anubis. The Dark God or, my more familiar title, God of the Dead.”

## Chapter Thirteen

He didn’t want to tell her this way. He wanted — no, needed — more time. Tessa’s expression morphed into a myriad of expressions. Shock, disbelief and, strangely enough, humor. “Am I on camera?”

No, that can't be because I'm dreaming. You said yourself you had to wake me." His heart splintered as he watched her try to understand what was only the tip of the iceberg of what he had to tell her.

"And I do," Anubis agreed as he took both of her hands in his. "But you're not dreaming in this place. Your body is sleeping in the healing pyramids. I assure you, this place is very real and everything in it. I live here sometimes."

"If you're God of the Dead, then **this is supposed to be a hell of some sort?**" She broke away from his grasp and walked a few worried paces. "Are you telling me that I'm dead?"

"You humans and your heaven and hell." Anubis would have to come back to that topic later. "Do you remember the man in the park?" Torian's anger surfaced as the image of Tessa being drained of her life flashed in his mind. When Tessa nodded, he continued. "He took your life. I brought you here because I couldn't stand the thought of losing you."

"Where exactly is *here*?"

"This is, for want of a better description, a purgatory of sorts. Souls wait here while they are judged. It is where I reign. I escort the souls where they need to be. On occasion I even judge them." Tessa walked back up to him, searching his face. "I wish I could explain everything, but I can't. The only thing I can tell you is the man who killed you is killing again. It will take all of us to stop this. I am ashamed to say that we have no idea what we are dealing with."

"We? You mean you and Thoth?"

"And Hathor you know her as Anaise, more than likely Ralabos."

"Anaise is a god as well?" Tessa let out a nervous bark. "I don't even want to know who Ralabos is."

"We have to go." He knew she needed more time, but unfortunately the killer wasn't granting them any favors of convenience.

"You said souls." Tessa squinted. Anubis shook his head, knowing she was about to come to some understanding of exactly what she was right now. "If this is the place that souls are judged — oh no!" Tessa gasped as she shook her head back and forth.

"Calm down, Tessa, you're not dead." Anubis tried to soothe her but Tessa backed away.

"But he killed me, didn't he? You said so." Tessa ignored his words as she began to walk away, clearly letting the hysteria take over. "I don't know what to believe. Either I'm in a really bad dream and can't wake up or I'm dead. How is one choice better than the other?" she whispered to herself. Anubis caught up with her and encircled her waist to keep her from running. He put his mouth close to her ear to try and calm her.

"I didn't let you die, love. I brought your soul here while your body has been healing in the pyramids. Everything we have shared is real, Tessa, we're just in a different place. A place humans have a hard time believing exists. But as you can see, it does. There is more to life than what you know. Don't run away from it. Don't run away from me." He couldn't bear the thought of her rejecting him once they left this place. It was wrong of him to mislead her. Even though he convinced himself it was for her own good, he knew he had been selfish. He had wanted her to himself. He wanted her to get to know him, as he wanted to know her. He hoped his selfishness did not come at a high price.

“What now?” her voice croaked low.

“Now I put your soul back into your body. Then we go to Thoth.” He turned her around to face him, but still hugged her close. “I promise you, Tessa, I will answer each and every question you have. Just give me this time.”

“How?”

“How?” he echoed.

“How will you do it? Will it hurt? Putting me back in my body.” Her voice went soft as Anubis guessed that different ideas must have been going through her mind. He didn’t respond as he walked her to the edge of the water. He waved his hand over the calm, reflective water and the image of her sleeping body appeared. “This is where your body is. I will take you there using the water as a conduit. It is an easier, but slower way to travel for a novice and less frightening. You will experience the same sensations as vertigo, but it will pass quickly.”

“Why don’t I remember coming here?”

Anubis took a deep breath. This was taking longer than he could afford, but he would do it for Tessa. “A death that happens quickly does not give the soul time to keep track of what is happening to it. Yours was very traumatic.” Tessa’s legs buckled and Anubis slowed her descent into the grass; he waved away the image of her sleeping body. “You’re healed now, Tessa, you can now lead a long life.” How long he had no idea. Long ago the pyramids caused unnatural longevity to the humans. Her beautiful brown eyes were glassy with unshed tears. He could feel her pain. He decided to do the one thing he had avoided since Tessa first came here.

I can feel your anguish.

Tessa’s head jerked up as he spoke into her head. “I can hear you, but you aren’t speaking out loud. I’m crazy, aren’t I?”

Try to talk to me this way. He felt Tessa’s hesitant, light probing.

C—can you hear me?

I can, love. He smiled. She smiled tentatively back. ***Come . He held out both hands for her as she stood. I have to take you back. As she grasped both of his hands, he held on to them tightly. He walked backwards as he led her into the shallow water. Trust me.***

I trust you, Torian.

\* \* \* \*

Carefully he laid her soul to rest in its natural vessel. As soon as her spirit reconnected, Tessa woke up with a gasp as if she had been drowning. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the dimness of the chamber. The

fire had burned low and cast playful shadows on its walls. She sat up slowly, her joints stiff from remaining still for three days. She still had on the lavender dress that now sported small smudges of blood. Hers. Anubis rushed to her side and reached for her — and she flinched. She jerked away from him as if he burned her. Anubis tried to quell the hurt that welled in him at her rejection. He was the Dark One. How could a person like Tessa ever knowingly love a God of Death?

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that,” she stuttered. Anubis stepped back. He had been wrong to pursue her. He had thought that maybe if she knew more of him instead of the legend of him ... but that had been a foolish thought. He was meant to be alone, that was clear now.

“I know you have no wish to touch me, but the only way out of here is through me.” Anubis kept his tone businesslike. “Just give me your hand and I’ll make this as quick as possible. Let me apologize in advance for the way in which I have to travel.” He didn’t wait as he took her hesitant, outstretched hand. He tried to ignore the effect just touching her hand had on him.

He traveled quickly as a shade, Tessa in tow, to the mansion. He only stopped when he was in Thoth’s living room, upon which he released her hand immediately. He couldn’t remember what he murmured to her, but he phased quickly out of the room and into Thoth’s study. Thoth and Hathor looked up in surprise at his abrupt entrance.

“What is it, Anubis?” Hathor asked as she took one look at him. Anubis waved her question away.

“Tessa is here. Could you please see to her?” His voice sounded rougher than he intended. Hathor looked at him a moment before she began walking towards the door. “She knows about us, perhaps she will find you more acceptable.” Hathor paused before she disappeared.

“She didn’t react as you hoped,” Thoth said softly, empathy in his voice. But Anubis didn’t want or need empathy. He needed action. He needed to be able to do something to get his mind off the human. He was the Dark One, after all. He knew his people counted on him when death needed to be served. Anubis ignored Thoth’s observation.

“What have you come up with?”

Thoth hesitated before he began. Anubis half-listened as Thoth told him of his theory. His mind strayed back to Tessa and her rejection of him. He would make things easier for her by avoiding her as much as possible until he could arrange for her to go home. This wasn’t her fight; this wasn’t the type of world she lived in. It was time he reconsidered his decision to end his existence. He was tired of being alone and after falling in love with Tessa ... He groaned inwardly.

**He *had* fallen in love with Tessa. He had fallen for a woman who could not see past his nature. Anubis decided this would be his last battle. He needed his lonely existence to end. For thousands of years he had lived without that special connection to a mate. Now that he had found one, well, it would seem it was only he that connected to her. To live alone was one thing; to live alone knowing Tessa was out there and he could never have her would be torture. He’d had enough of that.**

“Are you listening?” Thoth asked patiently.

Anubis dragged himself out of his dark musings. “I heard you. How do you think we should go about finding him?”

“He’s been preying on the homeless. The police haven’t made the connection. They believe these humans simply caught whatever virus is plaguing the city. I think he’s trying to be inconspicuous.”

“I’ll patrol the underbelly of the city. It’s what I’m good at, right? What I was born to do.”

Thoth got up from the desk and walked around it until he stood in front of him. “Anubis, talk to me.”

“What is there to say? I’ll go hunting for our new friend.” Then he phased out of the room before his good friend could say anything else. He phased through the slums of Cairo, hoping to pick up the scent of the rogue hybrid. With immense determination, he kept his mind off Tessa, refusing to replay the image of her flinching away from him as if he were some type of disease. He had repaid his debt of putting her in danger by saving her life. There was no other reason to continue contact. He and the others could handle the hybrid without her. It was best.

After hours of searching and no development, he phased into his home. Already it was haunted with the image of Tessa. Her smell. He mentally disrobed as he stood in the middle of his bedroom. The blankets were tousled and the sheets were crumpled, and her scent emanated from the bed. He growled low in his throat as her face surfaced in his mind.

She said she trusted him. However, the moment she was back in her reality she rejected him. Anubis took the time to walk out the front door of his home. He took a deep breath and howled at the top of his lungs. His heartache was almost a physical entity beside him. As he let loose his frustration, the water in the lake began to churn in reaction. It began to swirl, forming large whirlpools that reflected his confusion. Why couldn’t she love him? He growled again, the sound deafening as it echoed all around him. Storm clouds quickly moved in, followed by torrential rain.

Here, in this place, is where he could unleash. Here he was a god of sorts, without a goddess with which to share his life. For all his power, he couldn’t make Tessa love him. Anubis fell to his knees in despair. His actions had been foolish. What made him think she could love him? He was the Dark God. She was nothing but light and goodness.

Anubis lay on the bank and let the rain pour over his naked body. He closed his eyes, willing the fates to grant him surcease from his inner turmoil. When it did not seem that would happen, he forced his thoughts elsewhere. His demise. There were very few ways in which he could die. Every traveler had to die in their own unique way. For Ralabos, it was the cold, for him—

Anubis, something is wrong with Tessa. Anubis sat up at the sound of Hathor’s voice.

What is wrong? This was the second time in his long life he felt fear.

She collapsed. I can find nothing wrong with her physically.

In seconds he was dressed and standing next to Hathor looking down at Tessa on her bed. She was pale and fear kept him in its massive grip. What was wrong with her? Anubis could hear her heartbeat was strong. Just as Hathor had said, nothing was wrong with her physically. She was completely healed. What was the problem? **Tessa? he probed gently, but her mind was shut down.**

“What happened?”

“She said she was hungry. I went to get her something to eat. When I returned she was like this.” Hathor’s hand fluttered to her neck in worry. “Did she heal long enough in the pyramids?”

Understanding flowed through him. “She healed long enough. She is just hungry,” Anubis answered. He lifted Tessa and cradled her to his chest and concentrated, willing some of his energy to flow into her unconscious body. He tried to ignore the reprimands in his mind. She had said she was hungry and he had been too distracted to tend to her. What kind of mate was he? Anger at himself began to build.

Her eyelids fluttered, but Anubis pushed her back into a deep sleep as he fed her more energy. He needed to make sure she was well fed. If she rejected him again before he was done transferring energy she could cause harm to herself. It would be like humans starving themselves to death. But Tessa was no longer completely human. Hathor looked on, her eyes understanding. “Does she know?”

“I haven’t been able to tell her everything.”

“She needs to know, Anubis.”

Tessa stirred again, fighting his mind push. She had been mentally strong as a human, but as a hybrid her will to resist suggestion was even stronger. “I will tell her when the time is right,” Anubis answered as he set Tessa back onto the bed. The last thing he needed was experiencing her disapproval of him again. Now was not the time to tell her she was dependent on him for sustenance the rest of her life.

“Tell me what?” she asked.

## Chapter Fourteen

Tessa looked up at the two occupants that she knew for a fact weren’t human. Both looked down at her then at each other. Now Tessa was aware that they *did speak to each other mentally*. **There was no telling what they were saying. Especially Torian, er, Anubis. That was going to take some getting used to. Was she just supposed to start calling him Anubis? Tessa sat up, feeling much better. Hathor and Anubis both looked down on her with concern. However, as soon as she made eye contact with him, he averted his eyes, and his face went expressionless, cold. She deserved that; she’d known she hurt his feelings when they returned.**

It wasn’t even him. As soon as she awoke she could feel the stiffness in her legs. The first thought that rushed to her brain was that she’d been dead. She was a corpse; something dead that had been brought back to life. When Anubis had reached for her, she drew back in shame. Not wanting him to touch her, she’d felt somehow ... unclear. No, that wasn’t the word. She’d felt unnatural. How could she make him understand? Just when she thought to try talking to him mentally like he’d shown her, he phased out of the room, with his cold expression. Tessa lost her bravado, so instead she turned her attention to Hathor.



“What is it that I’m supposed to know?” Tessa asked as she sat up slowly in bed. Her eyes lingered for just a moment on the place Anubis had been. She needed to talk to him and explain. Hathor walked to the other side of the bed and perched on the chair next to it. She seemed to concentrate on Tessa for a moment before she decided to speak.

“You’ve hurt him.” The disapproval in her tone was hard.

Tessa let out a frustrated breath. She already knew that. “I didn’t mean to,” Tessa began as she swung her legs over the side of the bed and faced Hathor. “I just reacted badly.” She wiggled her toes, more for something to do than anything else.

“He has risked much to save you.”

“I don’t know why,” Tessa whispered, the realization that she’d been dead freshly overwhelming her.

“I think you know why.” Hathor sat back on the chair and elegantly crossed her legs. “I know this is all new to you. I even understand that as a human all of this,” a graceful flick of her hand encompassed the room, “that has been revealed to you is frightening and confusing.” She leaned forward, her beautiful face an impressive piece of disfavor. “But even humans should appreciate and understand when a sacrifice has been made for them.”

Now Tessa felt lower than dirt. Hathor was right. It would appear that she was ungrateful. She wasn’t, but right now she didn’t feel like having this conversation with Hathor. “I know you care for him, but I don’t wish to discuss this. Now, can you answer my question?”

Hathor looked at her. A small smile flirted at the corners of her mouth. “Very well. It is not my place to impart such information. I believe you will need to ask Anubis. Meanwhile, I would suggest you get some more rest.”

“What’s going on?”

“My husband and others are gathering as we speak. The traveler that killed you,” Tessa winced as the mention of her killer reminded her she had died, “has caused much havoc. He must be stopped at all costs. There is a meeting and I am late.”

“Wait.” Tessa stood up, noting she was feeling much better. “I would like to help. What can I do?”

“I am not sure you are up to it.” Hathor smiled, her face settling into a more pleasant expression.

“I feel much better. Please, I need to do something or I’ll go crazy.”

“Very well. You may attend the meeting.” Hathor smiled and Tessa briefly wondered what she was up to.

\* \* \* \*

“Oh, my god!” Tessa squealed as soon as she saw Rene. Tessa ran to her, hugging the other woman for

dear life. Tessa broke the hug and looked Rene over. Something was definitely different about her. Her face was the same and yet it seemed so much more beautiful. Rene laughed and Tessa was surprised at the sound. In truth, she didn't think she'd ever heard the woman laugh before.

"Hello, Tessa," Rene responded warmly, giving her another quick hug before both women stepped back to peruse the other. "I thought you had left days ago. Imagine my surprise when Hathor told me you were still here."

"So you know about ...?" Tessa looked Rene over more closely. There was a difference about her. She carried herself much more regally, more gracefully. When Rene nodded in affirmation, Tessa's eyebrow went up in surprise. Apparently she was the only one who didn't know what was going on. "You seem to be handling it well," Tessa remarked. It was then a tall, gorgeous man stepped up behind Rene. His white hair was neatly pulled back in a braid that rested on his shoulder. Armbands complimented the sculpted perfection of his body and Tessa guessed this man had a lot to do with how well Rene was handling this "alternate lifestyle."

"Meet my mate, Ralabos." Tessa thought Rene's terminology a bit odd, but so was everything else.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Tessa." His lilting, exotic tone matched the others' accents, but there was something different about Ralabos. No doubt Anubis breathed power, but this man pulsed with it. Tessa could hardly keep from staring at him. Not that she was attracted to Ralabos, but his sheer presence was almost overwhelming.

Tessa nodded, unable to speak as the reality of the situation hit her yet again. She was not dealing with humans. She had no idea what they were exactly, but they were powerful. Even though Rene seemed at home with them, she was changed. Tessa wondered if Rene had died as well and if Ralabos had saved her, changing her into something ... indefinable, unnatural.

"Well, if you are done ogling another's mate, shall we begin?" Anubis's voice cut through her musings and Tessa's eyes immediately searched the room until she saw him standing in the shadows, blending in. "Thoth, you will update everyone?" He crossed the room fluidly, seeming to glide among the shadows. Rene shot him a look and Anubis looked at her for a moment before he looked away. Could it be that Rene could speak through her mind as well?

Thoth motioned for everyone to sit at the polished wood table that claimed the room. It was a table that was equal in size on all sides. Thoth and Hathor sat on one side. Ralabos and Rene sat across from them. Tessa and Anubis were left standing, and all eyes were averted, as if the others were trying to pretend not to notice the tension between the two of them. Tessa cleared her throat and shuffled into the nearest seat. Anubis sat across from her. Tessa kept her eyes trained on anything but the dark man across from her. Even as he sat down, the urge to be by his side was suffocating. She dug her nails in the palms of her hands to keep from getting up and walking around the table.

Why not? she thought to herself. ***Why not go around the table and show him you did not reject him? Tessa looked up to see him scowling at her and all her newfound confidence melted. To do that would cause a scene because without a doubt he would reject her. She would simply have to get him alone later and try to explain. In the meantime, she tried valiantly to keep her concentration on the matter at hand.***

"Ma'at would like everyone to know she is to be included in this battle. She is otherwise engaged at the moment, but will be here tonight." Everyone bowed their heads briefly in respect at the mention of the name. Tessa wondered who Ma'at was to command such respect. "I haven't been able to contact any

others as of yet,” Thoth continued. “Meanwhile, I will catch everyone up on what is happening. I believe the killer is the essence of Apep, a form of a son. There is only one reason why he would aid in such a creature existing.” Thoth leaned back in his plush leather chair.

“He is trying to break through.” Ralabos trained his storm-gray eyes on everyone in the room. “It will take every one of us to stop this. He must not get through.”

“I agree.” Anubis rested his arms on the table and steepled his fingers under his chin as he spoke. “I have seen this creature and I have witnessed what he can do. He feeds off souls, and uses it as energy. I believe he is gathering enough energy to puncture a small hold through the veils separating Apep from this realm.” Tessa shivered as she thought about how the life had been sucked from her. She felt as if she were suffocating and burning at the same time.

“We have to figure out where he intends to carry out this plan.” Thoth tapped his fingernail lightly on the table. “That is, if I’m right. I would rather we find him first and dispose of him, but there is no way to know when he’ll strike next. We’ll always be just a step behind him.”

“His eyes,” Tessa said softly, as she remembered the way they flickered.

“What about them?” Rene reached out and laid her hand gently on Tessa’s shoulder.

“Strange, they looked like the eyes of a reptile for just a second.” Tessa could see him in front of her and the memories began to flood her mind. The realization rearing its ugly head stole her breath. She had *died* . **Died. The thing they were discussing was what killed her. “He suffocated me from the inside...”** Tessa wasn’t sure if she was speaking out loud or in her head any longer. **“It burned.”** Tessa’s eyes clouded over. **“Oh, my god, he killed me!”** Tessa stood, making the chair scrape loudly against the floor. **She needed air. She needed to breathe.**

“Tessa, calm down.” Rene tried to soothe her and stood as well.

“No.” Tessa began to back away as the panic consumed her. Yes, she had known she had died. But deep down somewhere she had been hoping it wasn’t real. It was a dream still. But this was no dream. Reality smacked her hard. She began to back away from the table, her eyes searching frantically for a way out. She knew she was out of control and yet she couldn’t help it. The memories surfaced, washing her away in a storm of terror. She ran for the door, but a dark shape intercepted and her world became blurry.

She knew the feel of his arms, his scent as it washed over her. He cradled her to him and Tessa closed her eyes as the tears fell. “I’m so sorry, love,” he whispered in her ear. “I should have known.” Tessa clung to him as she tried to get the image of the attack out of her mind. She felt herself being lowered onto something soft, but she didn’t care. Tessa nestled closer to Anubis, feeding off the sense of safety he instilled in her. “It’s over, Tessa. You’re safe with me in my domain.” His voice was hypnotic and calming in her ear.

His voice calmed her and within a few minutes she stopped her hysterics. The abated hysterics left shame in its path. She’d acted like a crazy person. ***You acted the way one should who has been through death.*** His words in her head put her at ease more than they shocked her. **Out of all the things that had been happening to her lately, this way of communicating was one of the few things she welcomed.**

I could have handled it better. I deal with death. I am a doctor, after all.

How many doctors die and come back to life?

Tessa loved the light teasing in his voice. She owed him an apology and an explanation. “I should have taken into account this would be hard for you to handle so quickly. You owe me neither,” he said out loud.

“I didn’t reject you.”

“I know that now. You have had some difficult things to deal with in such a short period of time. It is I who owe you an apology. I should have told you sooner.”

“Hmm.” Tessa considered it a moment. “True, but you saved me, so you have brownie points.”

“Brownie points?” Tessa giggled at the way his accent made the phrase seem foreign. “What are brownie points?”

“It’s a girl thing. Forget it.”

“I’ve much to tell you, Tessa.”

“Yes, you do. Let’s start off with, what am I?”

Anubis pushed her back on the soft bedding so he could look into her eyes. “You are a hybrid. Something wonderful. But you do realize you are no longer completely human?”

Tessa swallowed as she looked into his dark eyes. “I gathered that. I am a hybrid of what you are and human.” Tessa mulled that over. “How will this change my life?”

“I don’t know.”

It took a second for Tessa to realize he’d said exactly what she thought he had said. She bolted up and pointed a finger at him. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

Anubis sighed heavily as he encased her finger with his hand. He then brought her hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it. Tessa swallowed as shivers raced from the spot his sensual lips had been. “I have no idea what you are capable of doing. I don’t even know how long your life span will be. One thing for sure, it will be longer than that of an average human. There is another thing.” He paused so dramatically that Tessa knew it was a major development. “You can no longer consume food.”

“What?” Tessa wrinkled her brow.

“Think about it, love. When was the last time you had *organic food*?”

Tessa squinted as she pondered what he meant by organic food. Her mind raced trying to point out to him that she had eaten regular food. But every time she had tried ... “Am I some sort of vampire?”

Anubis stared at her for a heartbeat before he threw his head back and laughed. Tessa loved the deep rich sound and even giggled from the infection of his laugh. “No, love, you are not a vampire,” he said, composing himself. “Though I must say you are not far off.”

“Is this the thing you and Hathor were discussing?”

“Precisely.”

“All right then. If I don’t eat food, what do I consume?”

Anubis looked her fully in the face. His dark eyes captured hers and there was something in his expression that captivated her. “Me,” he said at last.

## Chapter Fifteen

Anubis watched her closely as she processed his words. His fingers glided along her soft, smooth arms as she tried to understand his words. Staying in such close proximity to her during her healing had developed an unforeseen situation. Some of his attributes had bled into her. One of them was the ability to absorb life or energy. While he had the capacity to naturally absorb the energy the earth gave off to sustain his life, she did not have that ability. He would have to ‘feed’ Tessa in order for her to maintain this new life. There was no telling what other abilities she might have assimilated.

“Could you explain that to me in more detail?” Her forehead furrowed as she struggled with understanding.

“Long ago, when we used the pyramids to heal humans, we did not stay during the healing process. We observed them periodically to make sure all was going well. The pyramid collects energy from earth, amplifies it and uses it to heal. I did not take into consideration that some of my abilities would be absorbed by you as you healed.”

“So this has never happened before?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“So you stayed by my side without considering any consequences?” The last word was barely a whisper.

“There are no consequences I would not endure to ensure your life, Tessa.” Anubis enveloped her in his arms, no longer able to resist the temptation of her warm body. As she settled against him, they both sighed in contentment. He had never known such a feeling of completeness as he did when Tessa was with him. “I am truly sorry, Tessa, for not understanding your reaction to me. Though I have been around humans, I find that their reactions are not always predictable nor does it appear to always make sense.”

“Just what are you saying about *humans* ?”

Anubis was glad to hear the teasing in her voice. “They are fickle, impulsive, puzzling creatures that I cannot seem to figure out.” He received a pinch in his side that he could barely feel. “That is no way to treat the source of your sustenance. The power to siphon energy is something you must learn to control. With one touch you could absorb the energy of another without intending to. But I will teach you. Until then, I will feed you.”

“So are you saying that without you I would die?”

Anubis thought for a moment. “I am saying that right now, as far as we know, I am a source of food. Only the Dark Ones hold the ability to absorb energy or life into themselves. So at the moment that is the only truth we know.”

“And this Apep and his son, they can do it as well.” Anubis felt her shiver when she said *son* . **He hoped to one day wipe that memory from her. The thought of her being haunted by something so traumatic burned his heart. “Why are you called the Dark Ones? Are you evil?”**

Anubis groaned and rolled away from Tessa. He didn’t want to have this conversation and yet it had to be done. He got up from the bed and walked to the window, staring out at the gloomy horizon. Here was the home he had made for himself, not too far from Thoth’s. He rarely used it, preferring his home in the land of the dead. The Dark Ones always stayed close to their roots.

“There are those of us who are born with the sole purpose of spreading joy, light and wisdom. They are meant to create, to save, and to teach. But there is more to life than that, Tessa. There is a dark side that must be tended to as well; death, destruction and chaos. It is the only way life as a whole can be in balance.” Anubis watched the clouds turn dark gray as his mood changed. “I am death and destruction, Tessa. Sometimes I am even chaos. I am the thing that people fear. I kill without mercy because that is what I am. I am the one that is called into action when the task is ... unpleasant.” Anubis waited to hear her gasp of horror, her demand to be taken home away from him. When Tessa’s warm arms wrapped around his torso, he was the one who let out a gasp of surprise.

“It seems humans are not the only thing you do not understand.” Tessa laid her head against his back. “You are not without mercy, because you saved me. You have saved many by doing what is needed. There could be no light without darkness, and most certainly without death there cannot be life. Anubis, your tasks are dark, not you. You are the strongest man I have ever known, rising to the occasion time and time again, knowing that others fear you and don’t appreciate what you do.” Tessa pulled back and urged him to face her. The look on her face brought an emotion he had never known. Pure joy. “Your purpose is just as important as the others. I do not fear you, Anubis.”

Anubis met her lips as she reached up to kiss him. He kissed her deeply trying to convey the emotions she stirred inside him. She knew what he was and she still wanted him. He tangled his hands in her long curly hair, deepening the kiss even more. She moaned and began to rub against him, her supple limbs wrapping around him. Anubis instantly made their clothing vanish and he spun her around so that she now faced the storm that was about to rage.

“Look what you do to me, woman,” he growled in her ear. “You cause chaos in me, and you destroy every ounce of control I thought I had.” His hands slid between her thighs and he quickly followed a path up to the junction of her thighs. “Right here,” he said between breaths “is my home. It’s where I want to be the most.” Tessa groaned as he began to stimulate the bud. She was already slick for him as she pushed against his hands.

“More.”

It was a simple word. It drove him mad with lust. He pushed her down roughly so that her elbows were propped on the window seat, her hands pressed against the window. He entered her in one stroke and she bucked back against him, driving him deeper. Never had he taken a woman so roughly and yet it seemed to excite her. He pulled out and slammed into her again, his fingers digging into her hips as he demanded more leverage to pump into her. The sky darkened even more and rain splattered in heavy sheets against the glass.

Anubis grabbed a handful of the curled locks and pulled, testing to see how far she would let him go. Her chasm clenched in response and he pulled her hair again, rougher this time. One hand was at her hip, the other in her hair as he rode her from behind. His eyes practically rolled from the pleasure as he slammed into her. He took the hand from her hip and smacked her bottom hard and she yelped — but pushed back, taking him as deep as he could go. He squeezed the delicious bottom, his eyes taking in every detail as he mated with her. He loved every inch of her, the finely toned muscles in her back, the way her waist nipped and her hips flared slightly. Even her scent drove him wild.

He pulled out of her and whipped her around. Without words she knew what he wanted. Anubis lifted her and she wrapped her long, beautiful legs around him tightly as he entered her again. The sight of her golden breasts bobbing every time he stroked into her mesmerized him. She leaned against the glass, trusting its strength as her nails dug into his forearms. Her head whipped side to side as she moaned out loud. The storm raged outside and he knew he had to get it under control, but not yet. Right now he had no control.

She was so wet and hot for him. Him. Anubis. A Dark One. He could feel the orgasm building and knew hers was imminent as well. “Tessa, open your eyes, love. Let me see you come for me.” Her chest heaved erratically, her breathing almost an exact copy of his. “Open your eyes,” he demanded again, his orgasm about to capture him in its clutches. Lightning pierced the sky as he felt his seed jet forth. Tessa screamed and opened her eyes as her walls clenched and released rapidly from the peak of her pleasure. He stared at her in shock. For her eyes held two dark funnels.

\* \* \* \*

As they both slowly spiraled downward from their climax, Anubis was deep in thought. He carried her to the bed and laid her down, and he soon followed. Idly he stroked her hair.

“You’re quiet. What is it?” Tessa’s voice broke through his thoughts.

“As of now I have not quite figured it out, but when I do I will tell you.”

“Is it about me?” Tessa propped herself up on one arm and stared down at him.

“Yes and no.” Anubis gave her a light tap on the nose. “How are you feeling?”

“A little tired.” Tessa yawned. “Hungry, I guess.” She looked down at him with a clouded expression.

“It’s okay, love. You have to get used to this.”

“It’s weird.”

“It’s the way things are for now.”

“So how do we do this?”

“I can funnel it right into you.”

“Right now. Just like that?”

“I do believe it’s less complicated than the way normal humans replenish their energy.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Do you recall me hurting you?” Anubis waited while Tessa pretended to think about it. “Let’s try this. Close your eyes and concentrate. Perhaps you can learn to do this on your own.”

The room was quiet while Tessa appeared to be concentrating. Anubis felt no energy being taken from his body. “Try picturing the energy as something tangible.” Anubis suggested. Tessa took a deep breath and concentrated so hard, she began to squint.

“I think you might hurt yourself, love.”

Tessa opened her eyes, revealing the fresh anger underneath. “I’m only saying that you should try to relax, you are making it look like it hurts.” Tessa’s eyebrow went up and her lips pursed together. Anubis watched, fascinated, as small funnels began to swirl in her now-dark eyes. “Tessa,” he began, trying to warn her. The funnels grew bigger and her breathing became a hoarse, ragged sound. “Channel it, Tessa.”

Perhaps that was it. She needed help channeling her power. Anubis sat up and laid a hand gently on her thigh. Immediately he could feel the energy being pulled from his body.

As she fed from him, he felt himself becoming aroused. Her touch was light, sensual. If it were not for the fact that he was helping her get control of her new power, he would have never known he was being stripped of his energy. It was of no consequence; he could immediately replenish whatever she took. The earth was bountiful. Tessa fell back on the bed, her eyes wide as she looked up at the ceiling. “That was ... invigorating,” she breathed.

Anubis looked down at her slightly flushed cheeks. She was beautiful. He ran a finger along her jaw line as he stared down at her. His finger brushed softly across her eyes, and the feel of her eyelashes lightly tickled his skin. When he got to her mouth she kissed his fingers as she looked at him with her now-clear brown eyes. “You did well, Tessa,” he murmured, tracing the elegant line of her neck. “You will have to use your emotions to trigger your feeding.”

“Does that mean I get to feed off others besides yourself?”

It was a simple question meant to tease. At least that was what the logical side of him concluded. However, images of her feeding from another man and causing the sensations he had experienced activated a giant vat of jealousy he did not know he harbored. “You will only feed from me, Tessa.” The



words came out rough and immediately she reacted, sitting up. "There is no negotiating this." He rose from the bed as he strode across the room, trying to expend the jealous energy that was tearing through him.

"You don't own me, Anubis. And certainly you don't get to tell me what to do. I owe you my life, I concede that. But don't use it to control me."

He turned to her then. She could never be controlled, no more than he could be. As she stood there, naked, beautiful and defiant, he realized the fallacy of his thoughts. He **was being controlled. Every time she smiled at him, spoke to him, moaned in pleasure for him, she controlled his heart, his moods. But did he affect her the same way? He began to have his doubts. "Fair enough. You may see whom you like. I will not interfere."** He willed his clothes onto his body.

"Anubis, don't go. That's not what I meant."

Anubis chose to ignore her statement. "We are not far from Thoth's residence. There is a car with a driver here at your disposal. He will take you back. I have business to attend to." He was about to phase out of the room when her hand closed around his wrist.

"If you don't want me running around next to you naked for all the world to see, I suggest you wait." He looked at her in surprise. She had moved so much more silently. It was the second time she had caught him unaware. "I will let go when you promise me you will stay and hear me out." Her foot tapped impatiently and he smiled despite himself. She was not one to be easily dismissed. He nodded and she let go. "Now, if you don't mind doing that thing with the clothes. It's kind of cool." Anubis smiled and in seconds she was dressed again. "Thank you." She walked over to the bed and patted the space next to her. Anubis hesitated, but eventually sat down.

"Now, I have no intention of feeding off anyone else. I could harm them, right?"

"Yes."

"Besides that, I don't want to."

"Then why get upset when I forbade it?" Anubis looked at her curiously, wondering if all human women were this complicated.

**"Because you forbade it," she answered, as if that made all the sense in the world. "I don't like being ordered about."**

It made little sense. If it was something she had no intention of doing anyway, what did it matter if he told her not to?

Would you like me to order you on what you can and cannot do?

Ah, I see you are grasping the use of speaking this way.

I like it.

I enjoy it as well.

Now, promise me two things.

Anubis looked at her and hesitated. *That depends on what is asked of me. I cannot blindly promise.*

Fair enough. Number one, don't order me around.

I will have to work on that. He smirked, waiting for her second demand.

Number two, stop running away every time we have an argument. We're going to argue, you know.

Anubis looked appalled. They could avoid arguments if she just listened to what he told her. Then again, thinking about it, he supposed that brought him back to promise number one. Anubis let out a faux-defeated breath. If this was only the beginning, he could only guess at the trouble that was in store for him. He looked forward to it. More than anything he wanted to explore a life with Tessa. Anubis nodded, garnering her approval. She leaned over and gave him a kiss, which immediately flared into a conflagration of desire.

Anubis, we've found him! Come quickly! Thoth's voice cut into his mind. Anubis broke the kiss and by the look on Tessa's face he knew she had heard Thoth's call through his mind. He stood.

"I must go. Stay here."

Tessa stood as well, her eyes pleading. "You promised not to order me around. Take me with you."

"I don't know what to expect. You could be put in danger."

In his mind the case was settled as he began to phase out of the room. Too late, he felt Tessa's hand snake around his wrist.

## Chapter Sixteen

It was the smell of smoke that first assaulted her senses. Then it was Anubis's anger at her for tagging along. "You should not be here," he bit out as he looked around the room. He had brought them into the back room of the house, where laundry was done.

"I should be wherever you are," Tessa threw back, wrinkling her nose at a foreign odor. "What's that smell?"

"No doubt Thoth has been practicing the arts again," Anubis murmured. "It's mugwort and wormwood.

I believe he has been scrying for the hybrid.”

“Scrying?”

“It’s a very natural way to find someone or something.” Anubis began to walk towards the front of the house to the meeting room. “He must have gotten hold of something to use as a magnet.”

Anubis briefly looked back at her as he took long strides. Tessa refused to let him out of her sight. He was not going to treat her as some sort of china doll to be set upon a shelf. Tessa stayed quiet as she followed him. She took the opportunity to watch him walk. He was sure, confident — lethal. In moments, they entered the room where Thoth conducted business and held his meetings.

Thoth stood at the table with a map spread out in the center. On both sides of the map, but well out of reach, two finger-length bundles wrapped in cord were burning. Tessa guessed this had to be the mugwort and wormwood Anubis spoke of. Ralabos, Rene, Thoth and Hathor were assembled around the table with a woman Tessa had never seen, and all were peering down at the map. Perhaps the hypnotizing small blue light that hovered over the map should have caught and held Tessa’s attention, but it was seriously outdone by the mystery woman.

She was tall, taller even than Tessa. Though her build was thin, it was still somehow very curvaceous. Her small waist belonged on a doll, her legs on a Vegas showgirl. Long, ink-black straight hair fell to the middle of her back and was blunt, but evenly cut. A small part of hair at her temple was braided, and secured somehow with a white feather at the end. When they entered the room, she looked up and smiled, revealing two very astonishing features: tawny eyes that almost matched the color of her skin and a smile that could stun anyone into worshipful silence. As her gaze fell upon them it lingered on Anubis, a little too long, in Tessa’s opinion.

“Anubis,” the woman breathed as she made her way towards him. Her exotic accent made his name sound sinful in itself. As she walked towards them, she oozed sensuality, reminding Tessa no human could pull off such beauty. “It’s been so long.” Her long arms locked around his neck and Tessa couldn’t help touching Anubis’s mind just a tad. She was miffed to find he had completely blocked her.

“Ma’at. Beautiful Ma’at. A pleasure as always,” Anubis responded giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Tessa cleared her throat; her jealousy was another matter altogether. “Oh, of course. You are the doctor Hathor has spoken of.” She unwound her arms from around Anubis and stretched out both hands in greeting. Tessa clasped hands with her, and participated in the very European tradition of kissing the air on both sides of the cheek. “You are most adorable,” the strange woman enthused warmly.

“Ma’at, this is Tessa.” Anubis threw the introduction over his shoulder as he made his way to the table.

Tessa smiled at the woman and instantly found it hard to dislike her. Ma’at, still holding one of her hands, led her to the table. “Hathor has told me very little about you. You are newly converted, yes?”

Tessa groaned inwardly. “Yes,” she replied stiffly. As she approached the table she now let her fascination be captured by the blue light. “What is that?” she asked no one in particular. It seemed to hover in one spot. Tessa looked over the map and found it to be a very detailed rendition of Cairo and its surroundings.

“Simply put, a locator,” Rene answered, smiling at her. “Thoth had the wonderful idea.”

“Really, it’s not that intricate.” Thoth gave her his movie-star smile. “Everything leaves some sort of print behind, an essence. The last victim we found was very fresh. I took samples and managed to use the residual markers of his power to locate him.” He pointed to the map. “He’s in this area. It makes sense, of course. The tricky part is finding him before he bolts.”

“I cannot go,” Ralabos stated, standing to his full impressive height.

“He reeks of energy, the hybrid will know,” Rene explained to Tessa, twining her fingers with her mate’s.

Tessa felt a slight pang of envy as she watched her friend. Truly she had found her soul mate. The way they acted towards one another was something to behold. It seemed they stayed within touching distance and almost always they seemed to touch one another. Tessa snuck a glance at Ma’at and noticed she was looking at Anubis rather oddly. “Then what is the plan?” Tessa asked trying to divert her own attention to the matter at hand and not the anger that was brewing at Anubis. He seemed *open to Ma’at’s attention*.

“Our Anubis is a Dark One,” Ma’at said with a little more than affection. “His power can be cloaked. The hybrid probably won’t be able to distinguish Anubis’s power from his own until it is too late.”

Tessa immediately became irritated. This was just the sort of thing Anubis had spoken of earlier. He was the one called upon to do the dark deeds. Tessa even wondered if anyone considered the possible danger they were putting him in. She looked at Anubis, but his face was shuttered, giving away no emotion. He no doubt was used to this. “Wouldn’t it be dangerous to send him alone?” Tessa asked the room.

“Anubis is the best choice,” Hathor offered. “He will not be alone. As soon as he has the hybrid trapped like before we will aid him.”

“But he is to face him alone?” Tessa persisted.

“I am capable,” Anubis said tonelessly. “There is no need for concern.”

“You said yourself you have no idea what his powers could be. Am I the only one concerned for his welfare?” Tessa glanced around the room at the occupants. Yes, these beings had known him much longer, but did they really know him? “I want to go with him.”

“You’ll be in danger. I cannot allow that.” This time Anubis’s voice held conviction as his dark eyes peered at her.

“It’s my choice,” Tessa replied through gritted teeth.

“You will never change.” Ma’at laughed as she sauntered over to Anubis. “Still ordering people around I see.”

Tessa ignored the familiar way Ma’at laid her hand on his shoulder as she playfully pushed him. “It did not work with me, and I get the feeling it will not work with Tessa. You are more than capable of protecting her.”

This time Tessa noticed the flicker of emotion that skittered across his handsome face. She knew what he was thinking. The last time he had encountered the killer, Tessa had died. He had to know it wasn’t

his fault. Just like they suspected the other hybrid found it hard to detect Anubis, it went the other way around. But now Anubis was wiser and so was she. Not to mention she was no longer human. That evened the odds just a bit.

“If you don’t take me, I will go looking on my own.” Tessa watched the anger as it flared in his eyes. Good, let him know he couldn’t order her about. When Anubis said nothing, Tessa continued. “Okay, so say we find him. Then what?”

“That was our next topic of discussion,” Hathor said. “If Anubis can secure him temporarily, then Thoth must find a way to imprison him permanently.”

“I’ve thought of that,” Thoth said triumphantly. “Last time Anubis told me he had to drain some of the dark traveler’s power in order to imprison him. Why not keep part of the dark traveler’s original plan?”

“I do not understand.” Ralabos frowned as he pulled Rene in front of him and hugged her close.

“Once Anubis secures him, the rest of us will tear a hole in the veil that separates us. We can contain him just as we did his sire. We can only hope to get him through before Apep uses the tear to escape.”

“We have the element of surprise,” Anubis said thoughtfully.

“Sounds simple enough,” Rene offered.

“Why not just destroy him?” Tessa asked. It sounded crazy to leave something so dangerous alive. All eyes turned to her and Tessa felt like the outsider that she was. They obviously knew something she did not.

“He is connected to Apep,” Rene explained. “Apep is very powerful indeed. One of the strongest of us all, besides Ralabos. Destroying his offspring could cause harm to him and upset the balance between the travelers of light and dark. If it were a traveler with lesser power, we would not hesitate in order to protect the humans, but to kill him ...” Rene shook her head. “We have no idea the impact that could have.”

There it was, the balance that Anubis spoke of. “Understood. When do we do this?” Tessa asked. They all looked at Anubis. Tessa couldn’t help but notice that Ma’at, although no longer touching Anubis, was standing close enough that her shoulder had definite contact with him. She bit her tongue to keep from making a fool out of herself.

“I need to speak with Ma’at — alone. Then we will proceed.” Before anyone could respond, he and Ma’at were gone, leaving Tessa to deal with the biting jealousy that threatened to boil over.

“Perhaps you and I can have a word as well?” Rene offered. She appeared to rather reluctantly untangle herself from her mate’s hold. After a lingering kiss on the lips, Rene motioned for her to follow. Tessa huffed, knowing she was merely being dealt with.

\* \* \* \*

“You have no reason to worry.” The words poured out of Rene as soon as the door closed behind them. Tessa recognized the room as the one assigned to her, the one she hardly slept in.

“Seeing as that is the first thing you said, I feel comforted now.”

“Ma’at is, well...” Rene searched for words. Tessa had plenty.

“Gorgeous? Graceful? Sexy? An old lover?”

“It’s true they had a sort of liaison in the past,” Rene hedged. “But that was so very long ago.”

“How long is long ago?”

“At least a hundred years or more.”

“How do you know so much about these people?” Tessa thought it was a good idea to pounce upon the opportunity while she could. “You are different, just as I am. What did they do to you?”

“Saved me,” Rene said, sitting on the bed. “As for the other question, that will take a longer explanation. When we have time, I promise to tell you everything.”

“Fine.” Tessa sat down next to her. “What happened between them?”

“Anubis didn’t speak much of it. He has never grown attached to any female.”

“Including me,” Tessa muttered, remembering the way his face had lit up the moment he laid eyes on the tall vixen.

“Not true.”

“Don’t defend him. I have eyes.” Tessa sprang up. “I don’t even know why I’m getting all dramatic over this. We made no promises to each other. He saved me and I gave him, well, nothing I guess. Yes, I’ll be dependent on him for a while. Once I figure something out I’ll leave him to his *Ma’at*.” **Tessa knew she was being unfair and acting like a brat. What had she expected from Anubis? Did she think just because he wasn’t human he was different? He was a man regardless. Roarden’s handsome face surfaced. It was happening again. Falling for a man who couldn’t commit to her. This time she would be smarter.**

“You really care for him, don’t you?” Rene whispered as she watched her.

“What difference does it make, Rene? I am not enough for him. I could never be Ma’at, or any of the thousands of other women he probably lusts after.”

“Has he asked you to change?”

“Well, no.” Tessa faltered. “But I can’t do this again. I can’t turn a blind eye to what’s right in front of me. Right now as we speak he’s probably given her a third orgasm.” Her heart squeezed at the thought.

“He is a man of honor, Tessa. You don’t give him his due. Give him a—”

“Chance?” Tessa barked. “Been there done that.”

Rene sighed. "All right, friend, you have your mind made up. I can only pray to Osiris that you see your way clear. Meanwhile, I shouldn't have to tell you to stay safe. Don't do anything stupid."

Tessa looked at Rene and smiled. "I won't. Dying once was more than enough for me. I just didn't want him to go alone." Tessa felt her voice break. She was an idiot, pining after a man who panted after other women. Even knowing that, she still wanted no harm to come to him. She still didn't want him to be alone. Apparently she was still an idiot when it came to men.

"Let's join the others," Rene suggested.

As they made their way back to the meeting room, Anubis and Ma'at entered just a second behind them. Her once-perfect hair was now slightly mussed and her cheeks flushed. Anubis was giving her a peculiar smile and Tessa's heart fell onto the floor. She looked away as tears stung her eyes. She felt a gentle push against her mind, but Tessa slammed down her barriers. It didn't take long to learn to do that.

Anubis consulted the map once more and reached out a hand to her. Tessa stared at it, her mind in disarray, her feelings bottlenecked in her throat, threatening to erupt. Had he used this same hand to caress the golden flesh of Ma'at? A vision of them making love flashed in her mind and Tessa winced.

"Are you feeling well?" Anubis looked down at her and Tessa could hear the false concern in his voice.

"Fine," She retorted.

How odd, Tessa thought to herself. She was going to face the man who murdered her, with the man who was strangling her heart.

## Chapter Seventeen

Anubis looked at Tessa again before he reached for her. She hesitated and there was no mistaking the cold anger roiling around her. So she was jealous. Anubis could barely keep the smile from his face. "Is there something you would like to speak to me about?" He found it hard to keep the amusement from his tone. She looked at him with her exquisite brown eyes and cut them away just as quickly, letting out a sharp breath of air. "You must focus, Tessa. Right now we are both putting ourselves in a dangerous position. We have no room for error, it could cost us." He could see the slight slump in Tessa's shoulder as she took a deep breath.

"I don't want to discuss it right now." She indicated that she and Anubis were not alone.

“Ah. I see. Well, this conversation will be my first priority when we return.”

Tessa looked up at him, and he hoped she could see the sincerity of his words. Really, she had no reason to be jealous of Ma’at. She had been a friend and a bedmate, but she had never been his *mate*. **She hadn’t meant anything close to what he felt for Tessa. Obviously Tessa felt something for him or she wouldn’t have insisted on including herself on such a dangerous endeavor. He clasped her hand tighter and took them to the place the locator had determined.**

As soon as they arrived, there was an aura of malaise in the area. Anubis took the necklace out of his pocket. “Wear this.” Tessa gasped in surprised as he fastened it around her neck. “Don’t take it off,” he ordered. Tessa appeared slightly irritated, but it was tempered by the gift he’d just given her.

“I don’t know what to say,” she breathed, rolling the charm between her fingers; a golden feather.

“It was necessary,” Anubis answered as he looked around the area. When he glanced back at Tessa, the cold anger was back. He would never figure her out.

As he surveyed the place he realized that this would be the sort of spot the traveler would dwell in. It was heavy in vegetation, and the smell of fresh earth was strong. Long vines curled and choked other vegetation, declaring dominance. It wasn’t hard to notice that the insects were either gone or very still. Not one bird chirped in the immediate vicinity.

“Be careful,” he said, his voice low. “I can sense him, but it is faint. Our dark energy cloaks each other.” Tessa bobbed her head in acknowledgement as she looked around.

Anubis had every sense tuned in to his surroundings. He concentrated on the base essence of dark power, destruction. He felt the tiniest vibration of power other than his own and began to double-check the source to make sure it wasn’t feedback from him, or possibly even Tessa, since her conversion had tapped into his abilities. The vibrations became stronger and Anubis realized that the one they sought was getting closer. “Tessa, come.” He gestured for her to stand by his side. Another wave of irritation crossed her features, but she obeyed — this time.

She had barely reached his side before the ground at his feet suddenly spurted like a geyser. He put up a hasty shield so the dirt and debris wouldn’t come into contact with him and Tessa. As soon as the dirt settled, he looked upon the smirking hybrid. There was no mistaking the thrum of power that radiated from him. So much like his own. The long, thick braids had been pulled back, showing a disturbingly serpentine face. His eyes flashed from human to green diamonds in the span of a second. Anubis had seen arrogance such as this, on Apep. The Dark One had been justifiably arrogant. Anubis wondered if that was the case now.

“It seems we meet again. All of us.” The hybrid opened his arms as if in welcome as he looked at Tessa in surprise. “Well, you are resilient for a human.” He sniffed the air and his head cocked slowly to the side. “At least you were,” he amended.

“Who are you?” Anubis asked, trying to gain more time to ascertain the level of his opponent’s power.

“I am Teremun. Direct descendent of the one you have banished. But that will change.” His eyes flashed again.

“You will not succeed.”



“Ah. I know you, Dark One. Your power tastes a lot like that of my sire. Only he is much more powerful than you could ever hope to be.”

“We will see about that,” Tessa spat out. Anubis raised a hand, indicating her silence. The last thing he wanted was for her to become a focal point for the creature.

“Teremun, none of us have caused you harm.”

“Is that so? I remember being drained and—”

“You have been killing the humans. We are their protectors.”

“We? You mean the others like yourself. Like me.”

“We are not like you, Teremun. We protect the humans, you harm them.”

“They are insects. Yet they are useful, and tasty,” he added as his tongue darted out.

“It stops now, Teremun.”

As Anubis began to contemplate the best form of attack, the hybrid moved so quickly into the shadows of the trees and blended in with them that even his preternatural eyes had a hard time discerning him.

“Don’t. Move,” he warned Tessa. The creature moved again. It was hard to track him. Anubis had never seen anything move so fast. He was nothing but a blur, blending in and moving before Anubis could center on him. He’d had enough. Anubis flung his arms out and the huge trees immediately shed their leaves. Some began to bend, the very tops brushing the floor of the forest as he drained the life from the once flourishing vegetation. Sunshine flooded the area, making it hard to find a shadow anywhere. Teremun was now visible against the base of a very thick tree.

“Impressive,” he murmured before he phased out of view. “But not enough.” His voice surrounded them and Anubis began to shut out everything but his immediate surrounding trying to pinpoint him. Tessa gave a small cry as unseen hands flung her against a nearby tree. The thud from her body hitting the monstrous trunk echoed in his ears. She slid down the tree as blood trickled out of her mouth.

Anubis roared as large pellets of golf ball-sized ice rained down. He was careful not to hit Tessa as he concentrated on the essence of the dark power. He was rewarded when Teremun shimmered into view. He was on all fours, trying to shield his head from the onslaught. Anubis quickly phased to his side and stomped down on the small of his back, sending Teremun at least three feet into the dirt. He raised his foot to stomp again, only Teremun was no longer there. In the hybrid’s place was a large serpent and it began to twine its way around Anubis’s legs.

The snake began to squeeze and Anubis could feel the power of the beast as it began to test the durability of his bones. Anubis reached down with his hands flat against the coils and sent the cold chill of death into the creature. Gray spots began to dot the green snake and its hold began to loosen, but not before the head curled around. The eyes flashed human this time and it opened its gaping jaws. Anubis tried to phase out of its coils, but apparently that was one of Teremun’s powers, for he stayed put as the creature sank its teeth into his chest.

The pain traveled through his body, burning him, and for a moment he thought Teremun was pumping

venom into him. But as Anubis grew weaker, he realized the creature was siphoning vast amounts of energy *out of him*. **Whatever he did, he had to do it quickly. Anubis's eyes darkened as he called upon the storms. Thunder rumbled in the background as the wind whipped into a frenzy. The creature was coiled more than halfway up his body, imprisoning him as it sucked energy from him. He ignored it, and instead called upon the destruction of lightning, hoping he had enough power to sustain it.**

The first bolt hit the creature in its massive head. Instantly the incisors jerked out of his chest, ripping Anubis's flesh. The wound was too deep to instantly heal, and his chest lay open, revealing the bone inside. Anubis ignored the pain; he had to subdue the creature.

He sent another bolt of lightning, singeing the creature so badly that it hissed at a deafening octave. The coils loosened as Anubis grew weaker. He had to contain the creature. He could not risk another traveler falling to this thing. He was dispensable, the others were not.

You are not. Tessa's voice echoed in head. ***What can I do? Her voice held a note of panic and Anubis allowed himself to be soothed for just a second by the sound of her voice.***

Go home.

I will not leave you. I can't.

Anubis began to bombard lightning down upon the creature until it freed him. He fell to the ground, his chest healing, but not nearly fast enough. He had lost too much energy. The snake slithered a few feet away and shifted into a komodo dragon, its dangerous saliva already oozing out the sides of its mouth. It began to head towards Tessa. ***You can leave. The necklace around your neck gives you the power to do so.***

Call the others, Anubis. Make them come and help you!

This is my responsibility, Tessa. I have to do my part.

Anubis shut down the pathway that linked their minds. He was in too much pain now. He didn't need to transfer it to Tessa. With great difficulty Anubis stood, gathering as much energy as he could from the earth. He ran to the creature, grabbing it by the tail before it could bite Tessa. She was still slumped against the tree and Anubis feared that perhaps she had broken her back.

He slammed the creature from tree to tree by its tail. It kept trying to reach back and bite him, but Anubis moved too quickly. Blood began to pour from the myriad of deep gashes in its side. Anubis slammed the creature to the ground, purposely smashing Teremun's head sharply against a small boulder that rose up from the ground.

He fell to his knees as he summoned forth a funnel. It started small in front of him and built in size. It traveled at a dizzying speed towards Teremun, who had shifted back to his human shape and already risen. It would seem every time the hybrid shifted, he regained his energy. Teremun thrust his arms forward, preventing the funnel from imprisoning him. Anubis realized Teremun was still too strong, for he had the added strength of Anubis's power. Energy needed to be drained from Teremun to hold him once more.

With his chest bleeding, Anubis stood with great difficulty. Breathing was even more laborious. It was too hard ***not to kill the thing. He had never faced an opponent that he couldn't kill outright,***

**except Apep. That made it difficult to fight. With a growl, Anubis ignored his weakening body and the pain that traveled through it. He began to make his way towards Teremun, sending a second, then a third funnel towards him. Teremun now had a hand trying to stave off each funnel, but the third one was much more difficult to control. Anubis could see his odd eyes flicking wildly as the hybrid tried to keep it at bay.**

Then something on the ground caught his eye. Tessa was crawling towards him. She crawled as if both her legs were broken. ***No! He shouted at her, but she continued. Teremun would drain her, and become even stronger. He tried to phase to her side, but midway between phasing his body collapsed. He fell just yards short of them. She reached out a hand and clasped it around Teremun's ankle. Tessa, go away!*** he begged her. She closed her eyes, and Anubis could see her knuckles turn pale under the strain of grasping the hybrid's ankle so tightly. ***Please let go . She ignored him and held on.***

Anubis concentrated on the energy from the earth and ripped it away. He had never been so cruel to the life-giving planet, but right now it needed to be done. Energy entered his cells, somewhat invigorating him, but not nearly to his full capacity of strength. It would have to do. Again he stood, letting the funnels dissipate as it took too much energy to keep them harnessed. As soon as the funnels disappeared, Teremun sneered and kicked his leg free. Tessa's fingers uncurled and she rolled away, landing on her back with her unblinking eyes to the sky. Anubis's heart lurched at the sight of her lying there motionless. Raged filled him. He stomped over to Teremun, his tightly wound fist immediately cutting across Teremun's jaw.

Teremun's head snapped to the side from the impact. As he turned to face Anubis, he was already positioning his jaw back into place. Anubis hit him again, but this time Teremun was quicker, catching his fist in one hand and squeezing. Anubis could feel bones breaking but he paid them no heed as he head butted the hybrid, making him release his hand and stumble back. Quickly Anubis advanced on him, hitting and never letting up. It did not escape Anubis's attention that Teremun was not nearly as strong as he used to be. ***Tessa .***

The blows came faster as Anubis remembered the sound of her body hitting the tree. The way Teremun had kicked her away like an unwanted pet. His madness was now bordering on out of control as he placed a kick in the center of Teremun's chest. The hybrid reeled back. The sharp branch of a tree went clean through his shoulder. Teremun hissed as he reached back, breaking off the branch before he pulled it from his shoulder. Anubis took the opportunity to phase forward, once again bringing the funnel with him to imprison the creature. As Anubis slammed into him, shock went through him as he kept Teremun in a confined embrace, draining him of energy.

Despite the pain, despite knowing what was happening to his body, he held on. As soon as he deemed Teremun weak enough he let go, the funnel enveloping him, trapping him. He stepped back, watching as every so often he got a glimpse of the diamond-shaped eyes as they looked at him from inside the funnel. The funnel would keep Teremun for a long time. Anubis looked down in shock at the branch that was embedded in his side. It had been coated with Teremun's blood. But it wasn't blood. What flowed through Teremun's veins was in actuality venom. Anubis pulled the branch out as he called the others to finish the plan.

"Anubis," Tessa was at his side now. She had no idea how she healed, and didn't care. "You're hurt. Let me take care of you." She whispered as he collapsed to his knees. But Anubis somehow backed away from her. He couldn't afford to touch her with the venom running through him. Still new to her powers, she could accidentally siphon it from him and poison herself. She was safe and that was all that mattered. He phased out just before he collapsed.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Where did he go?” Tessa clawed at the ground where Anubis had been just a moment before. “No, no, no, no,” she chanted to herself as she looked around, hoping he hadn’t made it far. “Stubborn ass, where are you?” she yelled at her surroundings.

“Tessa, what is the matter?” Rene’s voice cut in as she put her arms around Tessa, forcing her to stand.

“He’s gone. I have to find him.” Tessa gripped Rene’s forearm. “Take me to him. You can do that, can’t you?”

“I don’t know where he is.” Rene closed her eyes a second, then shook her head. “He won’t let me locate him.”

“There is no telling where he is.” Thoth came from behind them and gave Tessa a gentle squeeze at her shoulder. “When he is ready, he will return.”

That was it? Tessa looked at them all. Thoth, Rene, Ralabos, Hathor and Ma’at went about their work. Ralabos conjured up a small ball of flame, his hands going around it without actually touching it. The ball got larger and larger. She looked at Rene, who held hands with Ma’at, their eyes closed as they chanted. Thoth had a thick volume in his hand and he began to read aloud from it in a strange tongue. Anubis had already been forgotten. Anger welled up fast as she looked at them. Did it not matter to them that he was not here?

This was his life, Tessa realized. They were so used to him being the *Dark One* that no one really worried about him. They counted on him and yet seemed to discount him the moment he was no longer of use. Her eyes fell to Teremun, who had now sunk down low in the funnel. The fact that it was still going meant that wherever he was, Anubis was still helping. He was depleting his energy to save everyone but himself.

A large boom rent the air, followed by a tearing sound. Tessa looked up to see a dark hole hanging in midair. It looked as if someone had painted a black spot and left it there. Even though it was pitch black, there seemed to be a swirling motion inside of it. Dark purple ribbons made it easier to see and Tessa realized she was looking at some sort of tunnel. She looked at the others. The ball of fire was gone from Ralabos’s hands, and Tessa knew he was responsible for the rip in the atmosphere. “Hurry, Ma’at, get him inside,” Hathor encouraged. Thoth continued to read as Hathor, Rene and Ralabos took up the chant.

Ma'at closed her eyes. A wind that seemed to only belong to Ma'at blew around her, making her long strands of hair seem like snakes slithering in the wind. Tessa had had enough of snakes. Slowly the funnel traveled towards the swirling black and purple tunnel. Tessa's heart skipped when she saw the funnel begin to hiccup. It was weakening. Was Anubis dying somewhere? "We have to find him!" she yelled to the others. They ignored her as they went about their task. "Don't you see? Anubis is severely hurt; he can't keep the funnel going. Without him, Teremun will be free!"

Hathor's chanting faltered. She looked at Tessa as understanding dawned. She broke away from the others and came to Tessa. "He has told you that you share a portion of his powers, yes?" Impatient to find Anubis Tessa nodded. "We need you to strengthen this funnel. It has to hold until we can get him completely inside." They both looked at the funnel and it stuttered again. Teremun stood up as he realized his confines were weakening. His eyes flicked green and stayed that way. He was preparing, Tessa realized, to fight his way out.

"I don't know how." Tessa tried to keep calm. She was torn. Her hands went to the necklace Anubis had given her. You can leave. The necklace around your neck gives you the power to do so. She could try to connect to Anubis and find him, or she could stay and help. If Teremun broke free, Anubis would have fought for nothing. On the other hand, Anubis was somewhere fatally wounded and in need of help. She didn't want to lose him. She thought of what Anubis would do; giving, unselfish Anubis. He had spent his life protecting others. The price he paid for that was to be forever alone.

"Please, Tessa," Hathor begged. "I know what goes on inside your heart. Please. I feel for him as well."

Tessa's eyes bore into Hathor's. "All of you have a very funny way of showing it. I will help, because I know it is what Anubis would want me to do. He will not have suffered in vain. Tell me what to do."

"I know that you are angry with us. Use that anger and focus the energy on the hybrid."

Tessa took a deep breath. Slowly the funnel moved towards the tear. Hathor took her place beside the others and began to chant again. ***So this is what Thoth meant when he said they had to get Teremun inside before Apep could get through. It was a slow process. She closed her eyes and thought of her anger at the others, at Anubis for leaving her and not letting her help him. Then she opened them and saw the funnel began to pick up speed. Ma'at smiled, but did not open her eyes. The funnel's progress faltered less and Teremun hissed at Tessa. She ignored him. He mattered little to her; she wanted to get this over with so she could find Anubis.***

A series of hisses seemed to come from everywhere. Tessa looked at the funnel and realized where the sounds were coming from. The one they called Apep. A sound like thunder cracked the air in a very familiar synchronization. Tessa realized with horror what it was. It was the familiar cadence of footsteps. Dear gods, how big was Apep?

"You must hurry!" Hathor encouraged her. "He comes."

No problem. No pressure. As her anxiety built the tunnel began to falter as it had before. She channeled everything she had into the makeshift prison. However, the speed in which it traveled towards the tear in the atmosphere was agonizingly slow. She could see Ma'at's intense concentration.

Ralabos broke away from the group. His hands reached towards the mouth of the tear and a white stream of energy flowed from his hands. For a second Tessa panicked — his energy would only feed the monster! But as she looked closer she could see the air waver from the heat. He was putting a heat shield in place to hinder Apep's emergence.

Tessa ground her teeth as she tried to help. Her anger was dissipating, replaced by fear. Fear was not an effective energy motivator. She tried another tactic. She thought of Anubis, the way he touched her. The way his fingers caused a slow burn over her entire body as he caressed her. Her mind flashed to Anubis behind her, pumping into and bringing her to unheard of heights of pleasure. The tunnel regained its sturdiness and began to move faster towards the mouth. Something black lashed out of the hole, and the smell of burning meat permeated the air. It took a minute for Tessa to realize it had been a forked tongue. Several tongues followed, but as soon as they touched the shield, they shied away.

What was that thing? Some sort of manlike serpent? Tessa shuddered. She forced her mind back to Anubis. She wanted to see her Anubis. She loved him. For the first time, Tessa was finally okay with admitting she had fallen for the Dark One. She loved him more than anything else. The love swelled inside of her chest, so strong she thought she would burst. The energy she brought forth sent the funnel so fast towards the tear, Ralabos barely had time to retract it to let their prisoner through. A hairsbreadth later, Thoht closed the rip in the veil. He snapped the book shut in relief. The others laughed in nervous relief. Ma'at bowed her head in acknowledgement of Tessa's help.

Tessa didn't have time for that. She didn't know how to use the charm, but she would try. She reached with her mind, searching for that familiar pathway that was unique to Anubis. Panic set in as she received no signal. Then a thought occurred to her. What was the saying? Birds of a feather flock together. She and Anubis were now of the same breed. Was she not a Dark One as well, even if only partially? Did she not share some of his abilities? Tessa centered herself; if she couldn't find him with her mind perhaps she could connect to him through their shared power. Tessa wasn't prepared for the way her body jolted and seemed to pass through viscous atmosphere. The whole experience lasted maybe a few seconds, but Tessa felt a little ill from her travel.

It only took a moment for her to realize where she was. It was where she'd gotten to know her Dark One. She was in the land of the dead, in the bedroom they had shared. She saw Anubis, his body sprawled haphazardly across the unkempt bed. She ran to him, a cry in her throat. His chest was still torn open and he barely breathed. As she examined him, she saw a hole in his side that oozed an oily black liquid.

Tears streamed down Tessa's face. He had told her she had no control over her powers. That she could drain energy without meaning to. Tessa was hesitant about what to do. Then she did the only thing she could think of. She summoned her friend.

Rene appeared by her side. The moment her eyes laid on Anubis, a gasp escaped her throat.

"I don't know what you can do, Rene, but I know you are no hybrid like me. You are one of them. Tell me, what do I do to heal him?" Tessa could hear the roughness of her voice. She was trying not to break down. She needed to be strong for Anubis.

"You are a hybrid and you share his power. Share your energy."

"I don't know how. What is wrong with you people, asking me to do things I've never done before?" Frustration dripped from her words.

"Look at him, Tessa. If he were the one who drained the other hybrid's power, he would have healed himself."

"But he did," Tessa protested.

“But who drained the bulk of it?”

Tessa paused. It had been her. She had been determined not to let that thing kill Anubis. Even if it cost her life. She had grabbed Teremun about the ankle and visualized taking energy from him. The power had surged through her, healing her broken back. It had also weakened Teremun enough for Anubis to finish the job. “I can do this,” Tessa said to herself.

“Yes, you can,” Rene encouraged her. “You have energy to spare.” Then Rene left.

Her quick departure annoyed Tessa. What was with these *travelers* anyway? **How could they be so self-absorbed?**

Tessa focused as she laid her hand on his abdomen. His skin was burning hot. Tessa almost jerked her hand away. She imagined the energy flowing from her into Anubis. Nothing happened. Tessa concentrated harder and still she felt none of the energy leave her body. Anubis stopped breathing altogether. **No! Tessa screamed in her mind. He couldn’t die. She had finally found love and she wasn’t about to let death take it away from her. It was the second time death had interrupted her life. Live, dammit! As her love and fear for Anubis swirled inside her, Tessa could feel tingles along her spine. They traveled to her shoulder and down her arm, through her fingers. The tingles turned into the feeling of an army of fire ants following the same path. Is this what it felt like to Anubis when he ‘fed’ her? Did it hurt him this way?**

Tessa ignored the pain and watched as his muscles began to knit themselves together. The temperature of his body decreased. Seconds passed and both punctures in his chest closed. Tessa could now feel her body becoming tired, but she continued to pass Anubis energy. She examined the injury to his side. The black oil-like substance spurted forth in waves, soiling the bed linen. The wound began to close. Tessa breathed a sigh of relief as she slumped to the floor, her hand still on Anubis as she rested her sweaty forehead against the mattress. She needed to rest for just a moment. Now that she was sure he would live, Tessa let her eyes flutter closed in exhaustion. She welcomed the void of darkness.

## Chapter Nineteen

The coolness of the forest floor was surprising given it appeared to be the middle of the day. Regal trees reached graceful branches towards her. Some of the branches were filled with sweet-smelling blossoms. The white petals rained down upon her as she searched. The petals were a stark contrast to the liquid black dress she wore. It was bound at the shoulders, elbows and wrists with wafer-thin ties. The dress clung to her every curve, only offering respite at the thigh where it was cut high, revealing her long, shapely legs. A gold belt was loosely hung about her hips, the tasseled ends colored in gold and black.

She looked for him, curiosity marring her otherwise flawless beauty. Brown eyes searched with inhuman sharpness the surroundings, until she caught the movement.

A flash of black against the lush greenery, so fast that had she not been gifted with her abilities, would not have seen it. She tracked the movement as she slowed, silencing her approach. She crept closer still, knowing at any moment she could be scented. Tessa pushed her wild locks from her face as she chose instead to crawl on hands and knees through the tall grass. But it had been a mistake. For the jackal now stood directly in front of her, baring its white teeth at her. Too late she tried to back away and run. It disappeared right before her eyes, only to reappear behind her in the form of a man. Her man.

“Caught you, sweetling,” he murmured softly in her ear, his large hands already at her hips.

“You cheated,” she breathed, flicking her long tresses to one side so he could nip at her neck.

“Is it my fault you smell so good?” Anubis nipped at her neck and she felt the pleasure zip through her veins. One hand sought a path under the high slit in her dress and immediately felt the wetness between her thighs. “And you taste just as good.” His long fingers began a sinful rhythm between her folds, which made her rock helplessly against his hand.

“I’ve no time for teasing,” she begged even as she shuddered at the touch.

“It seems we will have to continue this later,” he whispered as he retrieved his hand from between her thighs. “He’s caught up with us.”

Tessa looked up to see a young boy making his way towards them. He held something captive in his hands, given the way he was holding them, with a wide smile on his face. Tessa looked back at Anubis and grinned; he had almost caught his parents ...

\* \* \* \*

Tessa sat up straight, her heart pounding, her body aching with need. She tried to organize her thoughts, but at the moment it seemed an impossible task. The remnants of her dream haunted her. *He had almost caught his parents.* That’s what it was, just a dream, and she forced her heart to slow down. As she did she took a look around and recognized the room she was in. The bed linens had been changed and so had her clothing. The bed itself was empty of Anubis. Fear struck her heart. How could she have fallen asleep? She should have stayed awake and watched over him. Guilt ate at her as she bolted out of the bed and struggled with the unfamiliar long white gown he had dressed her in.

Anubis?she reached out tentatively.

I am here.His deep timbre caused instant joy within her. *Join me.*

Where are you?

Figure it out.

Tessa smiled to herself as she made her way barefoot through the castle. Where would he be? The faint



strains of music wafted to her ears and she knew where he was. Looking down, she saw the necklace with the golden feather was nestled between her breasts. She smiled and in a moment she was in the same room as Anubis.

“Well done.” She watched him walk towards her like a giant panther.

“How are you?” she greeted him as he pulled her into his arms.

“Thanks to you, I am well.”

Tessa took a deep breath and sent out a silent prayer. He smelled good. One arm encircled her waist while the other took her other hand and he began to dance slowly with her. Tessa, surprised, looked up into his dark eyes.

“Is there a rule that says Dark Ones cannot enjoy music?” The faintest of smiles was on his face. Tessa just leaned her cheek against his chest and enjoyed the way their bodies melded together. It took but a moment to recognize the song.

I found a dream that I could speak to

A dream that I can call my own

I found a thrill to press my cheek to

A thrill that I have never known

“I love this song!” Tessa gushed, surprised that Anubis knew it.

“She was one of my favorite singers,” Anubis confessed.

“You love Etta James too!”

“It is only now that I know of what she truly sings. Before they were just beautiful words strung together with haunting music. A dream that I never thought I would have for myself.” He looked down at her.

“You have made this song more meaningful to me, Tessa.”

Tessa felt a tear slide down her cheek as she listened to the words. How many nights had she listened to *At Last* and wished she could be held as she was being held now. Anubis embraced her with all the warmth any woman could want from a man. She loved him with every fiber of her being, but did he love her the same way?

He cut through her thoughts. “Ask me.”

“Ask what?” Tessa hedged.

“Ask me what you are thinking.”

Did she dare ask him? Did she dare put her heart on the line once again? Yes, everything felt right and obviously she would give her life for him, but would she give her heart to him? Finally Tessa decided there was no peace in cowardice. She would never know if she didn't ask and she would always wonder.

“How do you feel about me, Anubis?” Her words were breathy and unsure. When he didn't answer right away, her heart beat erratically against her chest.

“I will tell you what I know, instead of how I feel.” His voice sounded deeper coming from his chest. She felt his hand slide under her chin, forcing her to look up at him. “I know there is no existence worthy of living without you. I know you are the color in my otherwise bleak life, Tessa. I know that as long as you are with me, I will laugh, I will learn and I will love. Even if you are not with me I will love you as long as time goes on to witness. It is the only thing besides my love for you that will last forever. I do not *feel* that I love you, Tessa. I *know* it. The question is, Dr. Tessa Michaels, do you love me in return?”

How dare he say such beautiful words to her and choke her up and then expect her to be able to talk. She lightly pounded a fist against his chest, as she was caught between laughter and tears. “Of course I love you.” Her voice cracked, and she was unable to speak as her emotions temporarily arrested her vocal chords. Anubis laughed and Tessa felt the slight push as he entered her mind. She knew he could see the words she wanted to say.

He was her savior, her lover, her best friend. In such a short time, she had never known anyone she felt so close to. She did not care that he was a Dark One, and it was not because she was now part-Dark One. She loved him anyway. Tessa wanted to make him happy.

“You make me happy by being here, Tessa.” He gathered her into a big bear hug. The song had died out, but looped again. Tessa lifted her face and without preamble he took her lips. Tessa sighed as she pressed herself closer to his warm body.

\* \* \* \*

She tasted like honey wine. The feel of her body so close to him threw his desire into a fever. He was painfully hard and he wanted nothing more than to be inside her. He phased them out of the land of the dead and into the house that he hardly ever used. It had never been a home to him. Now it would be, with Tessa. Anubis had them lying side-by-side against the silk and satin black pillows. Black mosquito netting hung elegantly about the wrought-iron bed. He had designed this room with a mate in mind. The bedroom had but three walls, the fourth one didn't exist. The air from the nearby lake blew in, giving the bedroom a fresh and natural scent of outdoors. Since he could control the weather around his home, it just made sense. Vines grew into the room, surrounding the doorways. Butterflies rested on the blossoms of some of the vines. Even a few birds had made their home in the bedroom, using the carefully placed nests Anubis had set throughout the room. It had the wild feeling of outdoors, while maintaining a dollop of civility.

Tessa looked wide-eyed about the room. “I. Love. This.”

It was just the reaction he was hoping for. He leaned over then, until she was underneath him. He spread her legs as he kept eye contact with her. Her hands reached up and traveled along his back, sending shudders through him. Only she could do that to him. "You are the only woman I wish to make love to forever," he whispered as he bent to kiss her. She held up a hand to his chest, stopping him. Surprised, he furrowed his brow in question.

"Ma'at" was all she said.

"Ma'at?" he parroted, confused.

"I want to know who she is to you and wh-what you two did."

As she stumbled over the words, Anubis now understood. "Oh, love, you don't think I slept with her, do you?" When Tessa said nothing, Anubis pulled himself back so he rested on his knees while still between her legs. "I didn't sleep with her, Tessa. Ma'at was once worshipped as the goddess of truth and harmony. She kept the earth balanced. I ask her to transfer some of my abilities to this." He tapped the charm around her neck. "I convinced her it was only fair that you have some method of recourse to protect yourself should I fail. That is all."

"That's why this helps me pop in and out of places like you?"

"Yes, sweetling."

"Okay, that would explain the flushed cheeks and mussed hair." Tessa grinned but only for a moment. "Did you love her?"

"I love her because she is a dear friend. Once a very long time ago she was a bedmate. Like I once did, she searches for her lifemate. But I felt nothing for her in the capacity I feel for you. There is only you, Tessa. There will always be only you."

She reached up and pulled him down and Anubis was only too happy to taste her lips again. He felt her hand reach inside his pants and Anubis made their clothing disappear. Her fingers wrapped around him tightly and stroked him. He kissed her more deeply as she ignited his lust. She pulled him closer to the junction of her thighs until he could feel the wet heat between them. Tessa brought the head of his shaft to her opening and without further prompting he slid inside of her. They both sighed at the feeling.

"I don't want it slow, Anubis, we can do that later. I want you, now." Her demanding words kicked him into action. He pistoned into her as her walls invited him in further still. She wrapped her legs around him as his thrust became more and more powerful. The bed shook from the force of his thrusts, and Anubis was glad he'd had the foresight to bolt the bed to the floor. Tessa's cries of passion sang in his ears as she arched her back, sinking him further still inside of her.

The wind noticeably kicked up and whirled in the room, causing the birds to twitter in nervousness. "You're scaring them," she managed to grunt out.

"That's not me, love, that's you," he informed her, never giving up his relentless thrusts inside of her.

He could feel the surprise in her mind. In due time she would learn that she shared quite a few of his abilities. But right now ... He merged with her mind, feeling what she felt as he made love to her. It only heightened his pleasure. He pulled out of her, knowing what she wanted. Quickly she got on her hands and knees on the bed and waited impatiently until he entered her again. He marveled at the roundness of

her bottom and dug his fingers into the firm, supple globes, pulling her closer against him. She moaned and he flexed his hips forward as she wiggled her hips, trying to accommodate his length.

Slowly he pumped into her and picked up pace as her body adjusted to him in this position. Lightning pierced the sky and she looked back at him. Her long hair fluttered freely in the wind, her eyes two dark funnels as she gazed at him with desire-drugged eyes. He knew his power shone in his eyes as well. They locked gazes as he leaned over her and caressed her breasts. She rose up, her back now flush to his chest. She turned her head enough for him to kiss her. One arm locked across her stomach, the other tweaked her nipple as he continued to pump into her. Her breathing became hitched and he knew she was close to finding her pleasure.

She broke the kiss as she chose instead to look into his dark gaze as she came. The most beautiful expression froze onto her face as her body shuddered violently from her orgasm. A second later his hot seed spilled inside of her, and it was all he could do not to collapse from the sheer force of it. "I love you, Anubis," she said softly as she reached up and took his hand in hers. No one had ever looked at him like that, no one had ever told him he was loved in this way.

"I love you as well, Tessa." He could barely get the words out. Together they collapsed upon the bed. The wind died down and the lightning had ceased.

"We can't do that every time we make love," Anubis stated.

"What?"

"Have you not noticed we bring a storm to Cairo every time we make love?"

"Oh, yeah, that," Tessa said thoughtfully. "So I can do that too, huh?"

"Apparently so. I will teach you to control it."

"What? It seems as if *you* barely have it under control."

Anubis laughed. "Well, we shall have to learn to control it together. I've never had a siren move me to such complete abandon before."

"Perhaps we should relegate our lovemaking to your other abode," Tessa suggested.

"I agree." It was a good idea, at least until they could control the manifestation of their passion. "You wouldn't mind being in such a place, Tessa?" Anubis worried for just a second about Tessa being in the land of the dead.

"I don't mind it as long as you're there. Besides, I would like to see what you do there."

"Well I assure you there is a lot of work waiting for me. Teremun has caused many deaths. There are a multitude of souls to judge."

"Can I come?" Tessa looked at him hopefully.

"It can be quite boring at times," Anubis warned. When it appeared that Tessa was undaunted, he rose from the bed. "There are certain protocols during judgments." He summoned a gown to him that he had made long ago when he began his search for a mate. It was as black as ink and tied at the shoulders,

elbows and wrists. He had added the gold-corded belt in case his mate would want a splash of color.

“Osiris demands we maintain a formal stance in our duties, so if you are to accompany me I would prefer that you wear this.” He held up the dress for her to see. She paled as she stared at it.

“What is the matter?” Alarm went through Anubis. “I can have another fashioned if you do not like this one.”

“No, it’s perfect,” she breathed, getting up from the bed to join him. She approached the dress as if it were some magical item. “It’s a dream come true, literally.” She fingered the dress and looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

“Correction, love, you are a dream come true.” Finally, after thousands of years of existence, he had more than a bedmate. He had a lifemate. Anubis had light in his life.

\* \* \* \*

Ma’at waited until everyone had cleared the area before she began the work of restoring balance to the small clearing. She closed her eyes and felt the destruction that had ensued because of the battle. Patches of earth were scorched from the lightning. The large tree Anubis had drained the life out of hung sadly to the ground. She fed life back into the area. In no time, the birds came back and the insects whizzed by. And Ma’at . . . well, admittedly, she had nothing to do.

As much as she would have liked to restore all the wrongs humans were doing to the earth, Osiris only let them interfere so much, so Ma’at chose her projects carefully. It seemed the humans were determined to kill the planet on which they lived. It was such a beautiful place that she couldn’t understand why they didn’t take better care of it. As she was about to leave, her senses told her something was definitely wrong. She knelt down, her hands flat against the ground as she took in the information around her. Blood. Human blood was spilling upon the ground at an alarming rate.

She tried to locate the mind of the human, but whoever it was appeared to be unconscious. Ma’at concentrated even harder, trying to narrow down the location. She phased out and in, searching until finally she saw the body. Ma’at rushed to the body and saw the male, curled up on his side, blood pooled under his naked body.

Ma’at could smell the faint scent of gunpowder. Gently, she turned him over as his eyes fluttered open. Beautiful blue-green eyes stared at her and Ma’at was at a loss for words.

“Please help me,” the man implored before his eyes softly closed.

He barely had a flicker of life left inside of him. A lump formed in Ma’at’s throat as realization clicked. She had found her lifemate, and she might be too late to save his life.

THE END

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toni L Meilleur resides in Michigan with her two children. She makes her living as a Personal Trainer. Toni also enjoys theatre and has played her dream role June in the musical 'Chicago.' She enjoys remodeling her house as well as making over old furniture. Toni loves to hear from her readers, feel free to email her at [am48174@aol.com](mailto:am48174@aol.com).



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