

ΣΥΝΤΑΚΤΙΚΟΣ ΔΙΑΚΟΝΟΣ...

# Egyptian Realms

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*Olivia Lorenz*  
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*Mae Powers*

**Midnight Showcase**

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## **CONTENTS**

[Published by](#)  
[Egyptian Realms](#)  
[The Soul Jar](#)  
[Never Say Die](#)  
[Entombed](#)  
[The Soul Jar](#)

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*by Olivia Lorenz*

Midnight Showcase Fiction Presents

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by Olivia Lorenz

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## **Egyptian Realms**

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### **The Soul Jar, Olivia Lorenz**

Lucy goes to Egypt to mend her broken heart. Her salvation comes from an unlikely source—Khnum, god of creation. Khnum needs Lucy's help to fashion a new soul-jar for Osiris, king of the Underworld, but Seth, Lord of Darkness, is determined to stop them from their task.

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### **Never Say Die, Anna Fallo**

Imagine year 2150, spiritually enlightened, demons common as mud. Violet and Tyler wake up dead, apparently trapped in a tomb...but are they?

\* \* \* \*

### **Entombed, Mae Powers**

While searching for a rare type of marshmallow plant, Callie Owens comes across an ancient underground tomb, complete with a cursed mummy, who puts a delightful hex on her heart and body and entombing her within his immoral crypt.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Egyptian Realms  
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## The Soul Jar

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Egyptian Realms 2: The Soul-Jar

Outfoxed (In the Spellfire Collections)

Melange Digest: Courting The Mountain God

Trail of Feathers: Novel 2009

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## **The Soul Jar**

by

Olivia Lorenz

The gods were in an uproar. Rumour ran the length of the Nile, from the Delta cities of Egypt to the Aswan Dam. Even those deities still dwelling in the remote regions beyond the Fourth Cataract heard of the calamity, and all hastened to Luxor to take part in the council.

Bes, the squat, ugly god of protection and childbirth, hitched a ride on Sobek's felucca. He knew even as he clambered aboard that it was unlikely that they'd make it to the Temple of Karnak in time to sit at the council. As usual, any decision would be made by the highest members of the pantheon, and the rest of them would just abide by their decision. But Bes still wanted to go to Luxor, even if he'd get there late. It had been centuries since the gods had convened like this, and he hoped to catch up with some old friends.

He settled himself on a cushion close to the helm, where he could keep a watchful eye on Sobek. Now there was a mean-looking devil! Tall and rangy, he had a long, saturnine face that could transform into a crocodile's head whenever worshippers were nearby. In the glory days of Egypt, he'd ruled over the annual inundation of the river, representing both its positive and negative aspects. In the modern world, the flooding of the Nile was controlled by dams and sluices.

Bes had heard that these days, Sobek earned his living by organising river cruises for tourists.

It was a bit of a comedown for a god, but it had happened to them all. Ancient deities worshipped for millennia had been rejected in favour of monotheistic religions. Bes had seen it before, when the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten had tried to impose his crazy idea of a single solar cult upon his subjects. That hadn't lasted very long: the people had preferred the comfort of having many gods, from whom they could pick their favourites. But then had come Christianity, and, after that, Islam, and over time, the old gods had been forgotten. Temples and shrines lay empty, the only offering being the gradual creep of sand. The descendants of high priests tore down the temples and carted away the stone to build their houses.

As the worshippers and rites dwindled and died, so too did the power of the old gods. Bes shuddered to remember those dark times. Gods could not die unless at Heaven's command, and so instead they'd withered, become shadows of their former selves. They'd watched the monotheistic religions flourish and divide, until finally, some people began to return to the old ways. Archaeologists came to examine the temples and tombs. Nobles and even an emperor came from afar to pay their respects. And then had come the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun—heir to that fool Akhenaten, of all people—and the modern world had gone crazy about ancient Egypt.

Of course, worship these days wasn't so much from following the proper rites and making the correct sacrifices. It

was more slapdash than that. Any attention, be it academic or New Age, counted as a kind of worship—but the gods had moved with the times and were slowly regaining their power. The major deities of the pantheon, such as Re, Osiris, Hathor, Isis, and Horus, still seemed to be the most popular gods, just as they were back in the New Kingdom.

It was the more minor deities like Sobek who missed out, Bes thought. It was hardly fair, but then, fate was a strange thing. He stopped thinking so much and stretched out his rotund body on the cushion. It was a pleasant day in early spring, and the sun was blissfully warm on his skin. Bes smiled.

"What's so funny?" growled Sobek from the helm of the boat.

"I was just remembering the good old days," Bes said. "What fun we had back then! That business with Horus and Seth and the lettuce... It still makes me laugh to think of it."

Sobek snorted. "You shouldn't laugh. Seth was tricked."

"It was fair enough after what he did to Horus," Bes argued.

"It's in the past. Let's not talk about it." Sobek turned away and stared at the wash the felucca made as it cut through the water.

Bes rolled over on the cushion to look at the crocodile god. Sobek was a miserable devil, but if there was one thing guaranteed to get him talking, albeit in complaint, it was a discussion of the good old days. For him to be so silent was out of character. Bes watched Sobek pick at a splinter of wood on the helm and wondered what was wrong.

He was about to ask, when suddenly Sobek jerked on the helm and the felucca veered sideways. He squawked in protest as he tumbled from the cushion. "What are you doing?"

Sobek nodded towards the right bank. "There's Khnum. Thought he might want a ride, too."

"Khnum? I haven't seen him in twelve centuries!"

Bes jumped back onto the cushion and peered over the side of the boat as Sobek tacked it closer to the riverbank. He waved enthusiastically at Khnum, the ram-headed god of fertility and creation. In the old days, they'd worked closely together, with Bes passing on information about which couples had conceived so that Khnum could fashion in clay the forms of the babies. Only when he'd lovingly sculpted each child would he hand it over to the greater gods, who would breathe life into the clay figures.

For millennia, Khnum's potter's wheel had kept turning, populating Egypt with pharaohs, slaves, nobles, scribes and workers. Then, when the crisis of faith happened and the people turned to monotheism, Khnum and other creator gods had realised that mankind could reproduce without divine assistance—or, if divine assistance was needed, humans simply called on their single God.

Bes thought it was a shame. It was his opinion that humans created without Khnum's help were ordinary looking, without a spark of true beauty. There were exceptions, of course, but in general, he preferred the times when Khnum would painstakingly create each new individual, using all of his considerable talent. Now Bes looked forwards to a good

gossip with his former colleague. He grinned as Khnum waded out into the river and hauled himself onto the deck.

"Thanks," Khnum said with a nod to Sobek, who just grunted in reply.

Bes eyed his old friend. When he wasn't sporting the curly-horned ram's head, Khnum was rather a handsome fellow, with straight, regular features, a full mouth and wide dark eyes that occasionally held a faraway expression. Today, they were wary and resigned, his state of mind emphasised by the way he hunched his body as he sat on the deck between Bes and Sobek.

"So," Bes asked, "what have you been doing with yourself all these years?"

Khnum shrugged. "You know. This and that."

"No, I don't know. Tell me what you found to do in these modern times. I hear Hathor is making a lot of money—and more importantly, she's collecting worship—with her beauty products and sex toys business. And, of course, Re went into the whole solar energy thing—predictable, but gaining in popularity. And Bastet, what a clever girl she was..."

Sobek gave an exaggerated sigh, interrupting Bes' monologue. "Didn't you ask Khnum a question?"

Bes sat up straight. "I did. And he didn't answer it." He clapped his hands at Khnum. "Come, come, lad! Let's hear it. What have you been up to? I imagine you're a famous potter or craftsman now. Our sacred Nile clay hasn't changed in two millennia, so you must still be making wonderful ceramics, even if you can't fashion mankind from clay any more."

Khnum shook his head, lifting his powerful shoulders in a shrug. "I haven't done anything."

Bes stared at him, puzzled. "Nothing at all?"

"Nothing." Khnum smiled at him, but he looked dispirited. "I spent a lot of time out in the Western Desert, and then this past half-millennia, I've been beyond the cataracts in the kingdom of Nubia."

"Not much to do out there," Sobek remarked.

"No," Khnum agreed. "I was repairing some of the old pyramids and tombs out there. The ones the archaeologists will never find because of the sand cover. But we know where they are."

"Not much point in fixing something that no one will see."

Bes glanced at Sobek in irritation. "You know as well as I do that the *ba*-birds of those who rest in those tombs see them. More than that, they need them." He turned and gave Khnum a beaming smile. "I think it's admirable that you should spend your time rebuilding tombs. After all, if you can help birth mankind then you can help them to maintain their status in the afterlife, too..."

Sobek snorted, but Khnum smiled gratefully.

"So you both heard the summons, then?" he asked.

Bes raised his eyebrows. "Summons? No, I just heard a rumour that Osiris' soul-jar had been destroyed, and that Banebdjedet was loose with nowhere to take shelter. No idea how it happened. You'd think that Osiris would be careful with his soul. It's confusing enough that he split himself into two separate entities, but to keep part of himself in a jar...why,

it's almost like being human, isn't it? The spirit contained within a clay form."

Khnum laughed. "You make it sound so poetic. What about you, Sobek?"

The crocodile god corrected their course and squinted up at the sails. "I heard a rumour, too: that Seth caused the jar to break. Then I heard that the gods would convene at Karnak, and so I set sail at once to see if it was true."

"We still won't get there in time to hear the final decision," Bes said with a disappointed sigh. "Not at the speed we're travelling."

"We're sailing against the current," Sobek reminded him. "If you wanted to get there faster, you should have taken the chariot with Sekhmet."

Bes shuddered. "No, thank you! A lovely lady, but she's in with those war-mongers, and let me tell you, it's difficult enough being the god of protection as it is these days without inviting trouble by hanging around with a crowd like that."

Sobek grimaced, indicating Khnum.

Bes frowned, and then his brow cleared and he hurried to apologise. "I'm so sorry, Khnum. I completely forgot about that business with your wife."

He felt guilty as he saw a shadow pass over Khnum's face. Obviously, the creator god was still sensitive about the messy divorce that had taken place back in the Ptolemaic period of Egypt's history. Bes could have told his friend that it would all end in tears: the marriage of Menhit, a stunning, savage Nubian war goddess, and the thoughtful, artistic Khnum had little chance of working. None of the gods had been surprised

when Menhit ran off with Onuris, a war god who hung out with Sekhmet and the other dangerous deities who liked causing trouble. Khnum had been left with a young son, Hike, whom he'd fashioned himself on his potter's wheel.

Thinking of the lad prompted Bes to ask, "And how's Hike?"

Khnum smiled, his expression alive for the first time that day. "He's great. You remember he was promoted to a minor magic and medicine deity? He decided to continue in that field. He's a surgeon."

"How delightful! And the gratitude of his patients is worship enough for him, I imagine. It must be the same amount that I get, although Hike is earning it in the modern way, and I'm just lucky."

Khnum looked at him. "Where childbirth and babies are concerned, I guess all women remain superstitious."

"Not just women, but men, too," Bes said fondly. "Did I tell you I had fifteen offerings from men last month? Mostly locals, of course, but these days, there are plenty of foreigners who come here to ask for a child or to ask my blessing on their newborns..."

"I've never understood why those foreigners should want to come here," Sobek said abruptly. "Egypt is only a narrow strip of black earth surrounded by red desert. This is a place of death, not life."

"You're such a misery!"

"Look at it," Sobek continued, gesturing at either side of the riverbanks. "Cliffs to the left and collapsing temples to the



right. Scorching sun overhead. There's nothing to recommend it."

"Apart from a fascinating history and a vast pantheon of gods," Bes said, sitting up and jabbing a finger at Sobek. "And you're one of those gods. Hathor's tits, you ferry tourists up and down our sacred Nile practically every day!"

"Maybe I'm bored with it." Sobek's expression was dark with disappointment. "This is my river. I know I share it with Hapi, but it was mine first."

Bes rolled his eyes. "I thought it was Khnum's first."

The creator god raised his hands. "Don't look at me. I can barely keep track of the different spheres of our influence. I started out as the god of the inundation a long time ago, but I prefer getting my hands dirty in a more creative way. I'm happy with my potter's wheel and a lump of Nile clay."

"You might be happy, but I'm not," Sobek snapped. "The Nile is supposed to flood on my command. The people are supposed to bring me gifts to encourage good harvest. It's all right for you, Bes. Your sphere of influence is on something mysterious and divinely important. No man would ever dismiss childbirth to a planning committee the way they did the Nile, especially if it was his child growing in the belly of his woman."

"The modern world does have ways of ensuring conception," Bes told him. "Men like to think they can control many things in nature, but they cannot. Just because they build dams to control the Nile flood, or they make babies in test-tubes, it doesn't mean we're not wanted or needed any more."

"Wait." Sobek stilled the helm and stood with his head cocked to one side. "Do you hear that?"

Bes listened, hearing the chatter of dozens of divine voices.

"They're annoyed that I didn't reach Karnak in time for the council," Khnum said quietly. "Re will make an announcement in a moment."

"You were summoned?" Bes asked, frowning.

Khnum nodded. "Yes, I told you..."

"Shh!" Sobek held up a hand for silence, and they all looked up towards the face of the sun high above them.

Re was the head of the gods for the sole reason that his rays saw everything that happened on the earth, at least during daylight hours. Bes had always found him to be rather pompous and unapproachable, but he tried to look attentive as the sun god made his announcement.

*Gods of Egypt*, boomed Re in his dry tones, *hear the decree of the High Council of the Upper Pantheon! Know this, o denizens of Kemet: that on this day, Osiris, the Lord of the Underworld, did have broken his most precious possession—the soul-jar of his spirit Banebdjedet, who now does roam without substance or home through the ruins of Karnak...*

Bes yawned. "By Min's balls, I wish he'd get on with it."

Khnum put a hand over his mouth to stop from laughing out loud.

*Also on this day*, continued Re, *we did summon the High Council and also several amongst our number whom we thought could help in this matter. May it be noted that Seth, Lord of Darkness, did not respond to our summons..*

Sobek turned the helm, and the rudder made a small splash.

*A decision was reached without some of our council being present, Re droned, and this is what was decided. That Banebdjedet should remain in Karnak for his own safety, and for the safety of Osiris, for the soul and the god should not be separated. I myself will safeguard Banebdjedet during the day; at night, the ba-birds of our most noble pharaohs shall keep watch alongside Khonsu.*

"Stuck in Karnak!" Bes exclaimed. "Well, at least he won't get bored there. All those tourists, and, of course, the *son et lumiere*. That'll drive any self-respecting *ba* mad within a few days."

*These measures are temporary.* Re's stentorian voice drowned out the rest of Bes' comment. *We are commissioning a new soul-jar, the finest and most beautiful that can be made; and even though our potter did not deign to show himself, we are certain that Khnum can create a worthy home for Banebdjedet within a few days.*

Bes glanced at Khnum. "You okay? You don't look too happy. This is the commission of the millennia. You won't have had a project like this since you made Osiris' original soul-jar."

"I know," he said, dejection rather than excitement in every line of his body.

Sobek leaned on the helm. "So what's the problem?"

Khnum sighed and raked his hands through his hair. "You want to know why I went into the desert for so long and rebuilt tombs rather than do anything creative? It wasn't

because of Menhit and the divorce. It's not because I'm lacking inspiration, either. I simply don't have the motivation. That's my problem—no motivation."

Sobek raised his eyebrows. "The most senior members of the pantheon told you to make a new soul-jar in a few days. Isn't that motivation enough?"

"It doesn't work like that." Khnum gazed at them both, his fists bunched in frustration. "I can't create something without a spark. Even for the simplest jar, there needs to be something divine. Inspiration is one thing; the act of creation needs to be nurtured if the finished piece is to be a thing of beauty. It can't be forced. It just... happens."

"Like falling in love," Bes said softly.

Khnum nodded. "Yes. Like falling in love."

Sobek shook his head and returned his attention to their course. "Heaven save me from you artistic types," he muttered. "I don't understand you at all."

She was here at last—Egypt, the land of the pharaohs, realm of Rameses and Cleopatra...and the source of deep red Nile mud. Lucy Tomlinson suppressed a wry grin at the last thought. The other people on this ten-day holiday all seemed to be here as part of some long-held fascination with Egypt, whereas for her, it was a convenient escape and, hopefully, a place that would inspire her.

She'd joined the tour last minute after browsing through several web sites in search of an all-inclusive, get-away-from-it-all deal. Egypt had never figured in her holiday plans before, but when she'd seen the itinerary, something had stirred inside her, and so she'd booked it there and then. With

only a week before her flight to Cairo, Lucy had bought a few books on Egypt, and admired the simple yet striking pottery of the earliest periods of its history. As a ceramics artist, she was always looking for new ways to work with that most basic and malleable material of all—clay. Based in the Lake District, her small gallery and workshop attracted hundreds of visitors every year, and each season, she tried to offer something new and unusual as well as the old favourites that always seemed to sell.

She'd hit on the idea of making a range of 'around Britain' items from the clays of each region, and when that had been a success, Lucy had decided to work with specially imported clays from around the world. It was her philosophy not to imitate the pottery-work of the country whose clay she was using, but to adapt it to her own style. After all, she might be using clay from Japan, but it was moulded by English fingers with water from British lakes, and so she aimed for the merging of two cultures in each creation.

Recently, although she never had a problem finding inspiration, it seemed that her muse had grown flabby. She'd put it down to the stress of her collapsing relationship with her long-term partner Dave and had embarked on creating pieces that became more intricate and complex. But when they were finished and stood on display in her gallery, Lucy found them strangely unsatisfying. It was as if something basic and elemental was missing.

Looking at the pictures of ancient Egyptian pottery, she thought she'd found the answer. She'd been so busy concentrating on details that she'd forgotten the most simple

thing of all—how to throw a pot and feel it take shape under her hands. It had been too long since she'd made a pot for the purpose of it being a container rather than an empty shell to be admired on a shelf.

The glossy burnished ware of early Egypt was simple yet timeless in its design, made for utility and not beauty. She decided to take inspiration from their shape and colour. In Egypt, she would purchase some clay and find a local potter who could help her re-learn the skills that she now took for granted.

When she'd told her friends of her plans, they'd been encouraging in all but one aspect—men. While it was okay if she wanted to flirt with any unattached fellow tourists, they'd warned her off Egyptian men, pointing out that with her pink-and-white colouring, reddish-blond hair and blue eyes, not to mention her curvaceous figure, guys would be flocking after her. "I heard ten camels is the going rate," one friend joked. "But you shouldn't settle for anything less than twelve."

Lucy had rolled her eyes. "Ten camels for a young twenty-two year old babe, maybe, but I'm thirty-five next birthday. I'd be lucky to get four camels."

"You're still young," another friend said. "All those sheiks want is a son. Give him a child, and you can ask for as many camels as you like!"

Lucy had laughed, hiding the pain that those careless words brought. Only her closest friend knew the real reason why she and Dave had split up. It wasn't because he'd run off with some bimbo he'd met at the gym. It was because he'd

got his bimbo pregnant, and Dave wanted to be a dad more than he wanted to be with Lucy, who was, as he'd come to describe her during the last few painful months of their relationship, "as sterile as the Sahara."

Perhaps that was why she'd chosen Egypt as her getaway trip. Surrounded by two seas and the vast red desert, she'd seen it as symbolic of herself: trapped by too much emotion and her own infertility, yet still with the capacity to enjoy life. The first few days of the tour had been spent in Cairo, exploring the city, visiting its museums, and making excursions out to the pyramids and the Sphinx on the Giza plateau. Optional trips took in the burial sites of Dahshur and Saqqara, by which time Lucy was sure she never wanted to see another pyramid, stepped or otherwise, ever again.

Then had followed a lazy cruise down the Nile to Amarna, site of the ancient city built by the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten. Lucy had decided not to go on the optional trip to see the ruined city. Instead she'd sat on the boat and watched the river for an hour, and then she disembarked and wandered along the bank until she was away from the concrete and wood moorings. There, with her feet on bare earth, she'd crouched down and prodded her fingers into the rich, dark soil.

The lecturer attached to the tour had explained on the first night's talk that the ancient Egyptians called their country *Kemet*—'the black land', named from the colour of the soil after the inundation of the Nile. All around it lay the red land, the desert, ruled over by the god Seth, Lord of Chaos and Darkness. Lucy had wanted to ask if the polarisation of their

kingdom into black and red, good and evil, was the reason why the earliest pottery of Egypt was also coloured red and black. She'd started to raise her hand but then had thought better of it.

As she knelt on the ground and rubbed the earth of Egypt through her fingers, she concentrated on the feel and scent of it. Already she could imagine how the clay would feel, wet and slippery between her hands as she worked at it. Each type of clay has its own distinct texture and smell, and even though the river was polluted and the detritus of cruise boats lapped at the banks, Lucy could still inhale the deep, sensual scent of Nile clay.

She'd gone back aboard the boat with grubby fingers and a smooth, oval-shaped pebble. The distinctive blacktopped Badarian ware had been burnished with pebbles like that one, and Lucy wanted to try the technique for herself. She'd looked forward to their arrival in Luxor, ancient Thebes, where they'd have a stopover of a few days and where she hoped to find a potter with an old-fashioned kiln.

And now here she was, straw hat on head and a notebook tucked into her bag, dressed modestly in loose green trousers and a white vest with a cream shirt over the top. She'd slathered on some sun lotion and now, her mind full of pottery and the possibility of creating an articulated clay crocodile, she went down to the hotel lobby to meet the rest of the group. Mr. and Mrs. Stephens waved to her, and Lucy noticed their relieved expressions. A fifty-something couple from Manchester, who both spoke with loud, thick accents, they'd taken a shine to Lucy on the first day of the holiday.



She'd joined them for dinner, but after that, they expected her company every night and frequently invited her to accompany them on the optional excursions.

It was still difficult at times to get used to being alone again, especially on a guided tour like this where she was the only single amongst a dozen couples. At first, she'd thought that Mr. and Mrs. Stephens only invited her to eat with them out of pity or from the group mentality that viewed all loners as gold-digging chancers or sad losers. Later, she realised it was because they were afraid of their exotic holiday, which had been an anniversary gift from their children. Mr. and Mrs. Stephens had never been abroad before, and so they clung to Lucy as something familiar.

Now Mrs. Stephens took Lucy's arm as they walked to the minibus, starting on one of her monologues about the heat, the flies, how they weren't ungrateful really, but this was a strange place, and Lucy nodded and made the right noises at the right time. Her patience unwavering, she listened to Mrs. Stephens all the way out to Karnak, the vast, magnificent ruins of the temple dedicated to the god Amun.

Surrounded by soaring pillars, cyclopean blocks of masonry, drifted sand and numerous other tour groups, Lucy listened to the practised spiel of their guide while she let her gaze travel about her. She took out her notebook and began to make quick sketches of shapes and objects that intrigued her: the majestic papyriform pillars of the hypostyle hall; the swirl of sand around a lump of fallen rock; a crumbling section of wall with only a few hieroglyphs still legible.

She heard the guide say that they'd meet back at the minibus in three hours. He'd be leading a more detailed tour around the temple, if anyone was interested. Lucy shook her head and indicated her notebook, smiling at Mr. and Mrs. Stephens as they joined the smaller group. Free at last, or at least for the next few hours, she strode quickly through the sign-posted main sections of the sacred complex. She wasn't so interested in hearing explanations of what this temple was and who had built it: all that mattered was the sheer beauty of the place. She hoped she could do justice to the sense of enormity and space, the dazzle of the sun warming the stone and the dry, sharp breeze that whispered past. To recreate the intangible in ceramic art was always a challenge, but it was one she loved.

Lucy followed the map on the sheet their guide had handed to them. Karnak had two sacred lakes, so she wandered down to the one enclosed within the precinct of Mut, the goddess-wife of Amun and mother of Khonsu, the moon god. In ancient times, the people of Thebes had worshipped this family unit: the mother and father strong and powerful in their own right, but joined together with their son, they were truly mighty, an example for all people.

A crowd of tourists buzzed around a shrine, blocking her path. Lucy forced herself to think of other things. Children would never be part of her future. While the doctors said there was always the chance she could conceive naturally—"Miracles do happen," one specialist said, "usually after IVF has failed, funnily enough"—that wasn't a strong enough reason for Dave to stay with her. Lucy gritted her teeth as

she felt the familiar dull weight of pain settle around her heart. She tried to shake it off. Here she was on a holiday of a lifetime, and all she could do was mope! Angrily, she wiped her eyes and took a deep breath, looking around to see where her footsteps had led her.

An avenue of ram-headed sphinxes lined the path to the Tenth Pylon, the immense gateway to the central precinct of Karnak. She went close to one of the stone creatures and touched its plinth, glancing around in case someone shouted at her. Then she climbed up onto the stone alongside it and caressed the sphinx's paw, leaning on it as she examined the noble shape of the ram's head. Their guide had told them that the ram was one of the animals sacred to Amun and had been considered a symbol of fertility by the ancient Egyptians.

Lucy stepped back and sketched the ram's profile. Solid, strong and patient, it had crouched there for centuries, undisturbed by the millions of gawping tourists. She almost envied it. Capping her pen, she patted its paw again before she clambered down onto the path and made her way back into the main precinct.

She was studying a series of reliefs in the temple of Khonsu when she heard the sound of a child crying. Automatically, she looked around at the small group of people who were inside the temple with her, but none of them seemed disturbed by the noise. They were too busy talking amongst themselves to even notice it. Lucy frowned, tucking her pen behind her ear and closing her notebook. She went into the next section of the temple, peering around the columns.

The crying continued. Lucy felt her heart squeeze tight. The poor mite, he sounded so afraid. She didn't stop to question why she thought the child was a boy; all she wanted was to find him and restore him to his parents before he got hurt. She'd have a few words to say to his mother, too—allowing a young boy to run off unsupervised in a huge place like this! Why, he could fall into a hole or climb a wall and slip off, not to mention disreputable people could snatch him...Lucy shuddered and followed the sound of the weeping, anxious to find the boy.

It took all her concentration to find him. As she moved through the precinct of Amun, the sound would die away, only to return louder than before a moment later. The number of people who seemed unconcerned by the sound surprised Lucy. It was as if they couldn't hear the distressed wails of the little boy. She couldn't see his parents, either—surely people should be searching for the lost child?

Finally, she tracked down the sound to the temple of Osiris Hek-Djet, a tiny building tucked away against the sanctuary wall behind the temple of Amun. By now, the boy's shrill cries had given way to slow, sad sobs. Lucy rushed into the temple, looking around desperately.

"Where are you?" she cried. "It's okay. I'm here to help you..."

And then she stopped, her mouth open. Instead of the small, huddled child she'd expected to find, she'd come face to face with a gorgeous Egyptian man—and he looked angry.

Khnum had been deep in discussion with Banebdjedet all morning. The soul of Osiris had been unable to tell him much

about what had happened the day before, when his home had been smashed. Banebdjedet hovered around him, insubstantial and cloudy, as Khnum paced back and forth in the little temple.

"Make me a new soul-jar," the *ba* cried. "Say you'll do it, Khnum!"

"I have to do it," he said. "It's too dangerous to leave you unprotected like this. If anyone were to attack you, or to capture you for their own purpose, Osiris would stop functioning. Can you imagine what would happen to the Underworld if the King of the Dead were... well, dead? The Egyptians of modern times might look to monotheism for their spiritual needs, but when they die, they still pass through the realm of Osiris. Without him to judge each soul, the Underworld will be in chaos!"

Banebdjedet curled around his shoulders like a pet cobra. "Chaos would appeal to my brother, Lord Seth. He's already killed Osiris once and was furious when Heaven ruled that Osiris should be king of the Underworld. Then there was that business with him and my son Horus—it was a long time ago, but he's never forgotten it. Seth has been planning his revenge for centuries, Khnum. I'm certain this is part of it. That's why you must make me a new soul-jar at once—one that's better than the old one, with more magic in its creation to protect me."

Khnum brushed off the *ba* with an anxious gesture. "You think Seth is behind this? That complicates matters. I agree, you need a new soul-jar immediately—but these things take time. The last one I made for you took me a whole year."

"But you are so much more skilful now!" Banebdjedet coaxed.

"That may be true, but last time, you and Osiris didn't separate until the soul-jar was ready. It's a pity you can't slip back into his body to wait this time, too."

Banebdjedet sighed, a gusty draught spilling around the temple. "We already discussed that. If I reanimated Osiris' body, he'd have to die again to enable me to separate from him. He's done it before, of course, but still, who wants to go through the trauma of dying a second time? Plus Isis isn't too happy with the idea. You know what she went through last time, collecting up those pieces of Osiris' dismembered corpse, and even then she couldn't find his penis..."

"Yes, yes, I remember," said Khnum. "All right, I'll do it. But I need time, and that's what worries me—that while I'm making the soul-jar, Seth will try to snatch you away."

"Re and Khonsu will keep watch," Banebdjedet said.

"Seth is a powerful god," Khnum said, rubbing a hand through his hair wearily. "We don't know how much stronger he's got in these modern times. The world seems to be plagued with wars and disasters—things the Lord of Chaos loves more than anything. I'll have to be careful in the creation of your new home..."

"You could always ask for help, if you find yourself lacking inspiration."

"It's not inspiration I lack, my lord *ba*, it's motivation."

Banebdjedet curled around a pillar. "Then perhaps competition would encourage you to find your motivation."

"Competition!" He snorted, turning away from the spirit; and then he heard footsteps, and a woman cried out, "Where are you? It's okay. I'm here to help you!"

Khnum's irritation at being so rudely disturbed faded as soon as he saw the woman who'd come running into the temple. Her hair was the colour of molten gold, with streaks of sunrise caught in it. Her eyes were the shade of the sky on a bright summer's day; her skin was like cream and rose petals. And her body...

He stared, entranced, imagining her modest modern clothes replaced by a simple bleached linen gown adorned with jewellery. Yes, the old garments would suit her well, would show off the generous curves of her breasts, hips and thighs. He wondered if her nipples were the same delicate pink as her lips, and if the fleece between her legs was the same shade as the fire-gold of her head; and then he realised she was speaking to him.

"Excuse me," she asked in English, "have you seen a young boy?"

He frowned, his erotic imaginings cut short by her question. "No," he said, replying in the same language. "Why? Have you lost your child? You should take better care of your son in a place as big as Karnak."

The woman flushed with annoyance, her skin pinkening prettily. "I would never let any child of mine wander unsupervised around a bunch of ruins! Not that I'll ever have children to worry about like that, but obviously someone has let their little boy out of their sight. I heard him crying."

"There's no one here but me," Khnum said, and then he felt Banebdjedet tickle past him as a gentle breeze. He heard the soul of Osiris giggle naughtily and suppressed a sigh. This was why he'd stayed out in the wilderness for so long—beyond the Nile cataracts he was safe from the matchmaking wiles of Isis and Hathor. He certainly hadn't expected Banebdjedet to get involved, considering the fragile state he was in without the protection of the soul-jar.

The woman came closer, looking around the small temple with a puzzled expression on her lovely face. "I don't understand," she said. "I heard him crying on the other side of the precinct, and I could have sworn the sound came from here."

"Maybe he was just playing a game," Khnum suggested, glowering into the air where a swirl of mist marked Banebdjedet's form.

"Maybe," the woman agreed, looking doubtful. "But he sounded so upset. I was worried that he'd fallen and hurt himself. Perhaps he's run back to his parents."

"Let's hope they give him a good hiding."

The woman looked startled. "You don't like children much."

"Me? I am Egyptian. We love our children. They are gifts from the gods. But I admit I enjoy making them more than caring for them."

It was only when he saw the woman blush in astonishment that he realised how his words might be interpreted. Khnum felt embarrassed, as much for himself as for the woman he'd just offended. Now she would think he was a crass, sex-obsessed fool. He had to make amends.



"I have a son," he said, hoping to distract her. "He is a doctor."

She gave him another strange look. "Don't you mean he's studying to be a doctor? You don't look to be more than in your late thirties, and, in England, it takes several years to do a medical degree..."

Khnum smote himself inwardly again. He'd been away from society, especially human society, for too many years. He'd forgotten how to behave as a god amongst mortals. No wonder he was making so many basic mistakes. He smiled and took out his wallet, searching through the notes for the small picture he kept of Hike. The woman came closer, as he'd wanted. He inhaled her scent, a heady, delicate fragrance overlaid with a sweet floral perfume, and he admired the fall of her red-gold hair as it glittered over her shoulders and breasts.

"This is my son, Hike," he said, showing her the picture.

"Goodness. He takes after you—he's very handsome." She leaned closer, the side of her breast brushing his arm accidentally. "He does look grown-up."

Khnum felt a shock of awareness go through him. He made some quick calculations based on human reckoning and tried to keep his voice level as he replied, "Yes. He is twenty-two. Just starting his career as a doctor."

She nodded, glancing up at him. Her gaze was direct, unlike that of the women, mortal and immortal, he'd known before. "You must have been young when you had him. You and your wife must be proud."

"I don't have a wife. We divorced many years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That must have been difficult."

There was compassion in her voice, an understanding that made him realise that she'd been hurt, too. He'd heard that in some parts of the modern world, it was common for couples to separate and divorce, sometimes several times in one lifetime. Why should it bother him that this young woman had suffered such a fate? He shrugged, annoyed with himself for caring.

"Divorce is unusual amongst my people," he said. "We marry young, the match usually arranged by relatives. But perhaps I was too young, blinded by the beauty of my wife. She was an outsider. My friends warned me not to marry her, but I was in love."

Khnum sighed, offering a wry smile. "She was wild. We didn't suit at all. I thought having a baby would calm her, but instead she seemed to resent Hike. In the end, she ran off with one of her own people. I guess her new man must make her happier than I ever could."

"You seem to have taken it rather well."

He swallowed a laugh. "Yes. It was a long time ago. You learn from your mistakes, do you not?"

"You're supposed to."

Khnum looked at her, intrigued. Not many mortals could hear the voices of the gods, even when they were called. While the gods inhabited human form, as he was doing now, they could interact with mortals. But for a non-corporeal god like Banebdjedet to have made contact with this woman...She was obviously someone fated to play a part in Banebdjedet's

future, and as she'd spoken to him, too, then perhaps destiny was at last smiling upon him again.

He put away the picture of his son and held out his hand in formal greeting. "My name is Khnum."

The woman took his hand, smiling. "I'm Lucy. Lucy Tomlinson."

As soon as she put her hand in his, he felt another flash of awareness. He held onto her fingers, turning her hand palm upwards so he could examine the shape of her hand. "Lucy, you have the hands of an artist," he said in wonder. "You are a potter?"

She stared at him, amazed and impressed. "How did you know that?"

"I can tell." Reluctantly, he let go of her hand. "You see, I am a potter, too."

Lucy gazed at him. It seemed that fate was smiling on her at last. Her fingers still tingling from his touch, she said, "You're a potter? What a coincidence!"

He smiled. "There is no such thing as coincidence, Lucy. It is a message from the gods."

"Really?" She shot him a twinkling look. "And what do you suppose the gods are trying to tell us?"

Khnum seemed a little nonplussed, and she realised at that moment that she'd actually been flirting with him. She felt herself blush as she tried not to giggle. So much for all those warnings from her friends! But then, Khnum wasn't the type of guy they'd been imagining—he wasn't fat, fiftyish and moustachioed, for a start. In fact, he was quite the opposite.

Taller than her by a head, Khnum looked to be only a few years her senior. The only sign of his age were a few fine lines around his eyes when he smiled and a certain wary distance in his gaze when he wasn't looking at her. He had a handsome, comfortable face that suggested he was easy with himself and didn't stand much for airs and graces. His hair was jet-black, long and thick with a slight curl to the ends, worn lazily swept back from his forehead.

His black t-shirt showed off the wide shoulders and broad chest of an athlete rather than a potter. His skin was bronzed a healthy glow, which, combined with the muscles, suggested that he'd been engaged in outdoor work. He wore dark jeans that fitted snugly back and front, and on his feet were a pair of scuffed boots.

Lucy looked her fill of him, automatically comparing him with Dave. She'd always thought that Dave had been quite a catch, but now she decided he was a pale, uninspiring thing. Any guy would be next to Khnum: she didn't think she'd seen a hunk like this just walking around before. Yes, it was definitely her lucky day!

She forced herself to quell her rioting thoughts. She was here to relax and re-learn her potting skills... although she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to re-learn the skills of lovemaking with Khnum. She was sure her technique could do with an overhaul after years stuck in a rut with Dave. Khnum might be a traditional Egyptian man, but Lucy was sure he'd know how to please a woman. Those long fingers, that sensual mouth...

She blinked back to reality when he said something to her. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

He grinned, his teeth very white against the bronze of his skin. "I said, the gods must have engineered our meeting for a reason. Perhaps we should attempt to uncover that reason in a place more suitable for conversation than a ruinous temple?"

He was asking her out! Lucy wanted to play it cool, but it proved impossible. There was no point in denying her attraction for him. But that didn't mean she was going to throw herself at him, either. And anyway, perhaps he was just being polite. After all, she'd come running into the temple, babbling about a sobbing child, and there'd been no child in sight. He might think she was sun-dazzled. Her optimism deflated somewhat, but she still nodded enthusiastically.

"I'm staying at the New Winter Palace hotel," she said. "It's next door to the Old Winter Palace, funnily enough. The bar in there is very nice, if you were interested in having a drink. I'd love to hear about your ceramic work." She tacked on that last bit just so he'd know she wasn't a desperate woman trying to engineer a holiday romance.

Khnum nodded seriously. "Of course. I would be happy to discuss pottery with you. I can tell from your hands that you put a lot of emotion into the act of creation. I used to be the same, a long time ago."

Lucy looked at him, intrigued. "What happened?"

He gave a half-shrug, as if he wanted to evade the question, but then he started to speak. Before he got more

than a few words out, she glanced around in annoyance and then in surprise as she heard someone calling her name.

Khnum frowned. "Someone is looking for you?"

She glanced at her watch and gasped in horror. "Oh my God, I'm late for the minibus! We were supposed to meet back there twenty minutes ago!"

"It's all right. You were admiring the wonders of the temple," Khnum said, taking her arm and escorting her out into the precinct. He nodded towards a man pacing around the back of the temple of Amun. "Is that your guide?"

"Yes, it is. Thank you." Lucy hurried forward a few steps, and then she turned back to look at Khnum. She didn't want to appear too pushy, but she hoped she'd see him again. "The New Winter Palace," she said. "In the lobby at eight-thirty tonight?"

He smiled. "I'll be there."

Lucy had to bite her lip to stop from grinning too widely. She waved to him and then chased after the guide. By the time she'd caught up with him and made her apologies, Khnum had gone.

Fortunately, the guide wasn't annoyed at her tardiness. He agreed that it was very easy to be carried away by the splendours of Karnak, and he confided that he often lost track of time there. The rest of the group also proved understanding: they'd used the extra time to take a few more photographs or to buy souvenirs. The driver was sitting by the side of the road, smoking a cigarette, and showed no inclination to move just yet. Lucy took her seat, grateful for the air-conditioning after the brisk walk back to the minibus.

As they waited for their driver, Mrs. Stephens showed her a bracelet made of real scarab beetles, their hard carapaces shiny with rainbow colours. She admired it dutifully but was glad to hand it back.

Then Mr. Stephens held out a small clay cup painted yellow and black. His usually cheerful face was creased with slight anxiety as he asked for her professional opinion. "Got it from a local who spoke a bit of English," he said, lowering his voice to a stage whisper. "Said it was Nineteenth Dynasty, he did. But I don't know. Thought it was pretty, like. These squiggles are nice, and the yellow... it'd look right nice on the mantelpiece."

Lucy examined the cup. Her first thought was that it was a fake. So many people were taken in by fake antiquities. Her opinions on the trade were ambivalent. She believed that ancient artefacts should stay in their country of origin, but if a tourist wanted to buy a copy of an object then they should be able to do so in the knowledge that it was a copy and not the original article. Egypt had strict laws prohibiting the illegal sale of antiquities, so anybody looking to buy an illegal artefact ran the risk of heavy fines or imprisonment.

But people like Mr. Stephens were the ones most targeted by dealers in fake antiquities: ignorant of what they were buying, most were just looking for a small souvenir and thought they'd got a bargain. Lucy tested the sound of the cup by flicking her thumbnail against it, and then she turned it upside down to look at the foot, where she'd be able to see any inclusions in the clay. She was satisfied it was a fake, but

it wasn't a run-of-the-mill one. Shifting back in the seat, she cradled the cup in one hand and pointed out a small section.

"What you've got is actually a kind of hybrid cup," she explained. "It does have some original pottery in it—if you look here you can see the sherd. I don't know if it's Nineteenth Dynasty or not, you'd have to ask an Egyptologist about that, but I can tell you that this little sherd is ancient. The rest of it is more nineteenth century than Nineteenth Dynasty, though."

Mrs. Stephens looked disappointed. "See, Ken, I told you it was a fake!"

"It is, and it isn't," Lucy said diplomatically. "I think it was made in the early twentieth century when European travellers flocked to Egypt. A lot of them bought ancient artefacts. Of course, they didn't have all the laws on illegal trade back then. You never know, this might even be a cup that was made to sell to Lord Carnarvon. He was a passionate collector of all kinds of artefacts. But Howard Carter would have put him right on what it was: an original sherd with a very good modern copy built around it."

Mr. Stephens seemed pleased with this. "Is that so? Then I don't mind in the slightest. That's a bargain! Two bits of history for one. And I won't get in trouble at customs with this?"

Lucy shook her head. "No, you'll be fine. Technically, it's a fake, so you won't have to declare it."

"You've put my mind at rest, lass. Thank you." Mr. Stephens wrapped the cup in its piece of newspaper and placed it carefully in his wife's bag. As he looked up again, he



said, "Lucy, do you know that man? Looks like he's waving at you."

She turned to the window to see Khnum standing on the roadside, smiling at her. When he saw her look his way, he lifted his hand and waved again.

Lucy's smile threatened to consume her face. She waved back. Mrs. Stephens said, "That's a nice-looking chap. I can see why you were late."

Lucy laughed. "It's not like that."

"I'm sure it's not. But still, he's very handsome..."

Lucy felt as if she were a schoolgirl again. She got her laughter under control just as the driver finally climbed aboard the minibus. To ragged cheers from the group, he started the engine, and they headed to the town.

Back at the hotel, Lucy had a quick shower. She sat on the balcony, waiting for her hair to dry and looked through her sketches and notes, making additional comments now that she'd had time to think about what she'd seen. As she added a few curves to one picture, she heard a child's laughter.

She looked up. There was no one in her room, and yet she could have sworn the sound came from indoors. Lucy closed her notebook and set it down on the table. She peered over the side of the balcony to look down at the pool area that her hotel shared with its more prestigious neighbour. Most of the people staying here were on tours, like herself, and so the majority were couples travelling without children. But there were one or two families that she'd seen. She scanned the pool area for the source of the laughter and relaxed when she saw a little girl splashing water at her father in the shallow

end. She ignored the fact that the laughter had sounded more like a little boy than a young girl. What did she know about children anyway?

Later, she changed into a buttercup yellow sundress and went down for dinner. As she walked into the dining room, she felt a cool brush of air tingle against her bare arms. It wasn't enough to make her shiver, but it made her pause. Seconds later, she heard the laughter again—playful and teasing. Lucy frowned. It sounded like the boy she'd heard crying in the temple. Even though he hadn't spoken, there was something familiar about the timbre of his voice, a note present in both the sound of his sobs and his laughter.

She pushed aside the thought and went to join her usual dinner companions. The meal was delicious and the company enjoyable, but as time edged on, she started to check her watch every few minutes.

Her restlessness was noted. "Are you tired, lass?" Mr. Stephens asked.

Lucy winced, feeling guilty. "No," she said. "It's just that I've arranged to meet someone later."

Mrs. Stephens gave her a conspiratorial smile. "Must be that good-looking man from Karnak."

"Is that so?" Mr. Stephens looked her up and down. "I see. Well, you're a young lass and all; you shouldn't have to sit with us old fogies every night. You need to have some fun and live a little. You're not accountable to us, so off you go and enjoy yourself. But just remember to be careful. Be safe, or we'll worry about you."

Lucy smiled at them both affectionately. "Thanks. You have a good evening."

"You too, dear," Mrs. Stephens called after her.

She waved to them as she left the dining room, and then she went to the bathroom to smooth down her hair and check her make up. Not that she was wearing much—just a brush of eye shadow and a slick of lip-gloss. Under the harsh lights of the bathroom, she thought she looked older than her years, and she almost panicked. Khnum was such a sexy man he probably had women flinging themselves at him—foreign tourists as well as local girls. Perhaps he wouldn't even turn up tonight. After all, she hadn't been able to hold onto a guy only half as attractive as Khnum...Fiercely she told herself to get a grip. Pushing the negative thoughts to the back of her mind, Lucy gave her reflection a final glance before she strode out into the lobby. She held her head up confidently, her step only faltering when she saw Khnum standing by the entrance with his hands in his pockets.

She was pleased to note that he'd dressed up, too. Now he was wearing a dark blue casual suit with an open-necked white shirt. Lucy thought she preferred what he was wearing earlier in the day although the suit emphasised the width of his shoulders and his length of leg.

Khnum straightened up as soon as he spotted her, and a smile brightened his features. He came to meet her. "Hello."

"Hi. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"You didn't." He gestured around at the lobby. "I was early. I haven't been inside this place before."

"How about the Old Winter Palace?"

"I know of it, but again, I've not been inside it," he said. "I am looking forward to seeing the famous Royal Bar. Shall we go?"

They strolled through the connecting corridors to the old hotel and went into the bar, a clean, quiet, discreetly elegant place, its late nineteenth century grandeur tempered only slightly by the passage of time. Lucy and Khnum ordered and sat for a while making polite conversation about Karnak, the weather and other mundane topics until the drinks arrived. Khnum relaxed and sat back, smiling at her.

"So you are a potter," he said. "Tell me about your work."

Usually when faced with that question, Lucy spoke briefly and succinctly about the gallery, the success it enjoyed, and the type of pieces she made. Dave had never encouraged her to really talk about her work and had got grumpy whenever she'd spoken to fellow artists or interested collectors. But now, just the knowledge that she was talking to another potter put her immediately at ease, and the words flowed from her as easily as the Nile moved through Egypt.

She described how she'd started making pottery as a school project and her delight at how that first creation had turned out. She told him about her years at art college and how the three-dimensional mural she'd helped to make now hung in the student union bar. When he asked about British clays, she told him in loving detail about their quality, their feel and the kinds of work that best suited each type. Then she told him about her gallery, hunting through her handbag for the business cards and the glossy leaflets she always kept at hand.

Khnum read the leaflet slowly, looking at the pictures: a shot of the gallery, a few general photographs of the Lake District, and inside, a series of images showcasing what she'd felt was her best work.

"This is good," he said, touching a finger to one picture. "And this one. The glaze here is interesting. What did you use?"

She moved closer, her enthusiasm growing. It was good to be able to speak like this with someone who understood her—and not just understood her, but also the work she was trying to do. Khnum looked from the leaflet to her face, asking pertinent questions whenever she ran out of breath or answering the questions she fired back at him about his own career. Then she heard that sound again: a child's laughter. Lucy's relaxed chatter died in her throat. She glanced around for the little boy, even though she knew it was impossible. This was a bar. A young child wouldn't be allowed in a bar, at least not by responsible parents. But she looked anyway, trying to keep her actions surreptitious.

Khnum noticed. "What is it, Lucy?"

"Oh, nothing," she said, turning back to him with a forced smile. "It's okay. You were saying?"

He gave her a look as if to tell her that he knew she was avoiding the question, and then he began to talk about the properties of the different types of Nile clay.

Lucy knew she should be taking notes on this, even if only mentally, but she couldn't concentrate. Not just because of Khnum, who was sitting close enough to prove a distraction to any red-blooded woman, but because she could hear the

child's laughter again. This time it was as if he were running behind her chair from one side to the other, waiting for her to turn around and catch him up into her arms. It was driving her crazy. She glanced over her shoulder but could see nothing amiss. No child; in fact, there was nobody there at all. She heard Khnum's voice trail off as he realised her attention was elsewhere.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice rich with concern.

"Fine," she said, her lips trembling. "Actually, no, I'm not fine. I keep hearing a child—a little boy..."

She thought he'd laugh at her, but instead he put his hands over hers. His touch was comforting. "Is this the same child you heard crying in the temple?"

"I—I think so." Lucy blinked back tears as emotion threatened to get the better of her. "I know it's silly, but... I can't have children, you see, so to hear a little boy laughing as if he wants my attention... Maybe I got a touch of the sun today. I don't usually hear children's voices. It's just... I'm sorry, it sounds so stupid."

"It doesn't."

Khnum seemed annoyed by something, and Lucy was afraid that it was her who'd caused his irritation. She tried to withdraw her hands, but he wouldn't let go. He looked over her shoulder just as she heard the bubbling laughter again, and then he snapped out a word she didn't understand. From the way he said it, she guessed it was some sort of command. Immediately, the laughter ceased. She felt a gentle pressure against her back and shoulders, as if someone was hugging

her from behind, and there was a soft dampness on her neck, like a tear-stained cheek, and then it was gone.

In the still silence that followed, she looked at Khnum and asked, "Was that a ghost?"

He offered her a half-smile and stroked the back of her hand. "No. Not in the sense that you would call it a ghost. It's a *ba*. Do you know what that is?"

Lucy nodded. She'd heard the term used in the introductory lectures. "A *ba* is a kind of spirit," she said, repeating what she'd remembered. "The soul of a person that survives on the earth after death."

"Yes." Khnum held her gaze, his expression serious. "For a person to make a successful transition to the afterlife, they must ensure that certain things are in place before they die. These include a tomb with their name written somewhere, either in the tomb itself or on grave goods; their physical body, usually mummified; their shadow; their *ka*, or the spirit of sustenance, and the *ba*, the spirit of mobility—what you would call a soul."

She slid one hand free of his grasp and reached for her glass. After she'd had a sip of white wine, she said, "I thought the *ba* was usually a kind of bird, not an invisible child."

Khnum let go of her other hand with a sigh. "Usually it is, but this is no ordinary *ba*. It is the soul of Osiris, who divided himself into two. His physical body oversees the Underworld, while his *ba* receives worship on the earth, as it is still very much a living entity. In fact, the *ba* has its own name—Banebdjedet."

Lucy looked at him, then started to laugh. "You're joking, right?"

"I'm perfectly serious."

"You believe in the old gods?" she asked, and then she realised that yes, he did. Hadn't he mentioned them in Karnak when they'd talked about coincidence? A message from the gods, he'd said. She'd thought it just affectation back then, but now she thought he must have meant it.

He hesitated before he answered her question, and she saw uncertainty on his face. Quickly she reassured him. "I'm okay with it if that's what you believe. I'm a sort of lapsed C of E—Church of England—myself, so I can't really criticise other people's religions."

Khnum looked as if he was about to laugh, but then he gave a sharp nod and said, "Then yes, I do believe in the old gods. Not least because Banebdjedet has taken a liking to you. We Egyptians take things like this very seriously. You have been chosen, Lucy. The gods have decided we are a worthy match."

She felt a little breathless all of a sudden. "What do you mean?"

He smiled, and she felt her knees go weak at the idea that he might be talking about something intimate and loving. She managed to squash her disappointment when he said, "I mean in terms of pottery."

"Pottery," she echoed.

"I have been given a special commission on royal command, and until I met you today, I was struggling with my motivation."



Khnum leaned forwards and took her hands again, caressing them from wrists to fingertips. "But now I feel full of energy and the desire to create an object of beauty. You will work with me, Lucy—show me how you create your pottery in England, and we can combine our styles, our knowledge. Together, we will make the perfect soul-jar."

Khnum arranged to meet Lucy at the front of the hotel the following morning. He arrived early, pacing up and down on the pavement, oblivious to the traffic and the swarms of tourists. It was not yet nine o'clock, and already the temperature was climbing. This close to the river, the heat would be tempered, but near a kiln, it would be unbearable.

He worried about causing discomfort to Lucy. Her pale northern skin had tanned a little since she'd been in Egypt, but she'd freely admitted she didn't like too much sun. Khnum often worked outside, gathering energy and inspiration from the elements and the landscape around him. It was one of the reasons why he'd spent so many centuries on the forgotten tombs of the southern and western deserts.

His workshops were always temporary, built in the sands. He'd have to find something more substantial if Lucy was going to help him with the soul-jar. Khnum realised he wanted to impress her. Not just because she was a potter of considerable skill—no, competitiveness did not come into this. He wanted her to enjoy working side by side with him. He wanted to give her the chance at equality that she hadn't experienced with her ex-boyfriend.

He wondered if that's what had drawn him to her so strongly: the fact that they'd both experienced unequal

relationships and stunted expectations. Last night, he'd told her more about his marriage with Menhit, how he'd thought they could grow closer, how the differences that had brought them together ended in driving them apart. Without a scrap of self-pity, he'd described how she'd disappeared one day without trace, leaving him with their young son and how he'd discovered her whereabouts from one of her friends.

Menhit could never be content with the quiet life, he'd told Lucy, aware of the gentle sympathy in her eyes. She was bored, spending time with a potter. She craved excitement; she wanted to be free, to roam about with a gang of like-minded people. Her settling down with him was nothing more than an experiment, an aberration against her nature. He did not blame her. How could he, when he was also at fault for failing to see her true personality?

In return, and as more drinks arrived in the Royal Bar of the Old Winter Palace, Lucy had told him in staccato sentences about her relationship with Dave. After a few light-hearted flings at art college, he'd been her first serious boyfriend. They'd met in a bar. He was an accountant. They were together for ten years. He said he didn't want to get married unless they had children. As the time passed without any sign of a pregnancy, Lucy began to worry. Not that she so desperately wanted to be married, she told Khnum with a small, detached laugh, but she did want a child.

Her ceramics work, which Dave had sneered at as a hobby, became successful. Anxious to escape the stress of city living, and thinking the countryside might help her to relax and conceive, they moved to the Lake District. Ironically, her work

became even more popular. She was busier than ever. Dave blamed her success for their lack of a child. Khnum had felt Lucy's sorrow as she described the fertility tests both she and Dave underwent. When the results showed that the problem lay with her, Dave had become angry. Then had come the painstaking, expensive process of IVF, but the first attempt failed. She had wanted to try again, but that was when Dave had dropped his bombshell—he'd met someone else, someone younger, who didn't have such a demanding career. A woman who put him first. A fertile woman who was expecting his baby.

"You could still have a child," Khnum had told her last night. "It can happen."

"What, a miracle?" Lucy had turned her face to him, and he'd felt pain at the weariness in her eyes. "I want to believe in miracles, Khnum, but..."

Their conversation had moved on by common consent. The rest of the evening was spent in deeper discussions of pottery, about Egypt, about England. Relationships were not mentioned again. Just before midnight, they'd gone outside to watch the moonlight over the Nile. It was a sight that always made Khnum feel restful, and he hoped that Lucy enjoyed it, too. He certainly hadn't meant to kiss her.

She'd stiffened for a moment before returning his embrace. In the darkness, he couldn't see the expression in her eyes. Her lips were soft, and she tasted of the mellowed sharpness of wine. It was a potent combination, as was the feel of her body clasped to his, warm and alive, contrasted with the cool breeze blowing around them.

Khnum hadn't thought of kissing a woman, mortal or immortal, for a long time, but Lucy was different. The gods had brought them together for a purpose. He couldn't imagine that it was to assuage his loneliness—a feeling he hadn't even considered as applying to him until he'd met Lucy—but he didn't want to think they had been brought together just because of the soul-jar.

He would have to wait and see what Heaven intended for them.

He'd escorted her back to the hotel and kissed her again, short and sweet, a respectful goodnight. Anything more would be too much, he sensed. He had to remember she was still raw from her break-up. She hadn't had the luxury of centuries to get over it.

Khnum had returned to the riverbank and boarded Sobek's felucca. The crocodile god had said he'd be spending a week in Luxor, catching up with the other gods who'd stayed around after the council meeting. He'd made it clear that Khnum was welcome to stay on his boat for as long as he liked. Khnum appreciated the gesture; he and Sobek had never been close friends, but since they both had a duty to the Nile and the inundation, they'd always got on as casual acquaintances. He'd stretched out on the deck, staring up at the deep blue of the night sky, sprinkled through with stars. His heart ached at Lucy's story. He was sure she would be a loving mother. Perhaps she would consent to see Hike. His son was a god of both magic and medicine. If anyone could produce a miracle, it was Hike.

Khnum wanted to set up his potter's wheel and create Lucy's child himself, the way he'd peopled Egypt millennia ago. His hands itched to mould the clay into shape, to form the perfect baby for this passionate, kind-hearted woman. The desire to help her was so strong he sat up and started to consider which type of Nile clay would be best suited to creating Lucy's baby.

Then Sobek had come aboard, and Khnum had been forced to forget his idea for the moment. The crocodile god had been in a chatty mood, fresh from one of the bars where he'd spent the evening with Bes, Bastet, and Hathor. He'd asked Khnum about his day and listened attentively when Khnum told him about Lucy.

"And the soul-jar?" Sobek had said. "You will make it here in Luxor?"

"With Lucy's help."

"A human and a god. Do you think such a partnership is wise?" Sobek's eyes glittered in the moonlight as he looked at him.

Khnum shrugged. "It feels right."

And it still felt right now, the morning after. He had no doubts that together, he and Lucy could create the perfect home for Banebdjedet. He just hoped that he hadn't scared her away with the kiss. He stopped pacing and glanced at the entrance to the hotel in time to see her come through the doors. She was wearing a pair of faded boot cut jeans and a white vest, over which she wore a white gauzy shirt knotted at the waist. Her shining red-gold hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she wore a hat to protect her from the sun.

Any worries he had about scaring her off disappeared when she smiled at him. Khnum felt as if he were the only man—or god—on earth when she looked at him like that. Was this how it had felt with Menhit? He couldn't remember. That had been more like an all-consuming hunger; this was much different. Yes, he wanted to lie with her and bring her pleasure, but he also wanted to draw out the best in her as a woman...as *his* woman.

"Good morning," he said, going up to her. He intended to press a gentle kiss to her cheek, but she turned her head, and so he kissed her mouth. It was just a small kiss, but he felt its effect light through him.

Lucy smiled at him, her colour heightened. "Sorry. Couldn't resist."

"No need to apologise." Khnum drew her arm through his, and they began to walk slowly. He glanced down at her. "Are you sure you don't mind spending the day with me? If you'd made other plans..."

She flashed him an amused look. "It's my free day. I always intended to look for a potter today. So meeting you was just perfect."

Khnum blinked. Perfect? He smiled, a warm glow of contentment nestling inside him. Yes, he would make the day perfect for her.

They walked to Shari al-Lokanda, the town's bustling restaurant and bazaar area, just south of the temple of Luxor. He picked up supplies for lunch, standing aside to let Lucy haggle with the storekeepers as if she'd been born to it. Soon they had bags full of fresh produce and had passed from the

food stalls to those selling souvenirs. Many advertised the same garish tat as their neighbours, but a few sold simple red pieces of pottery. Khnum watched as Lucy examined the items with care, and he stepped in to translate when she had questions.

"Tell them I'll come back," she said, setting down a delicate jar.

Khnum did so, noticing that the stallholders were gazing at him in awe. He ran a hand through his hair, self-conscious, wondering if he still wore his human head. It was rare for mortals to notice that there was a god in their midst, but perhaps these men, with their affinity for pottery, had recognised him nonetheless.

He gave them a brief smile and then followed Lucy into the crowds. He caught up with her at a stall selling the most exquisite jewellery, the pieces draped around jars of purest alabaster. Khnum looked first at Lucy as she held up a necklace of green beads, and then he glanced at the stallholder.

He let out an involuntary curse in the ancient tongue. "Isis! By all the gods, lady, what are you doing here?"

Isis, wife of Osiris and one of the most senior and powerful deities of the pantheon, smiled at him sweetly. She wore a black veil covering her shining hair, and a shapeless dress concealed her body, but as she leaned forward he could see the glint of gold from her heavy, ornate earrings. Even disguised as a human woman, her beauty set her apart from the people around her.

"Good day to you, too, Khnum," she said, her voice musical and low. "I'm here because I have a vested interest in what you and this mortal woman will be doing today. My husband—both halves of him—is anxious that you do this job quickly. My concern is that you do it right."

"Of course, I'll do it right," Khnum grumbled. "Lucy is as skilled as I am. She has a passion for creation. With our combined effort in both the design and execution of the soul-jar, I am certain Banebdjedet and Osiris will be delighted with the result."

"Banebdjedet would be delighted with anything this mortal woman created," Isis said, gesturing elegantly to the *ba* that had draped itself around the top of Lucy's sunhat. "He seems very taken with her. I've never seen him act like that before! Fortunately I am not the jealous type, and I am content so long as Osiris is content. Banebdjedet is a law unto himself, though."

Khnum snorted. "He certainly is." He reached up and brushed the *ba* from Lucy's hat and then caught her puzzled glance. "A wasp," he explained, switching from ancient Egyptian to English, and he heard Banebdjedet huff in annoyance.

She nodded and then stroked the alabaster. "This is lovely."

Isis spoke before he had a chance to reply. "Indeed it is," she said, also in English. "You will find many fine examples of alabaster in Luxor. The stone is quarried nearby. In ancient times, it was worked so thinly as to be as translucent as wet cloth. Papyrus-thin, sometimes! Such work is almost



impossible to replicate today. Machines cannot emulate the skill of men in the creation of works of art and crafts."

Lucy smiled at her warmly. "I agree with you."

Isis raised her eyebrows, affecting surprise. "You are an artist, like Khnum?"

"You know each other?"

Khnum heard the note of uncertainty in Lucy's voice. He quashed the thought that she might be jealous. While it appealed to his male pride, he didn't want her to worry about other women. He couldn't imagine another woman for him now.

After pondering how to explain their relationship, he made a hasty introduction. "Lucy, this is my cousin, Isis. Cousin, this is Lucy Tomlinson, a potter from England."

"Isis?" Lucy asked. "Like the goddess?"

Isis gave a silvery peal of laughter. "Darling girl, I *am* the goddess!"

Khnum shot Isis a warning look that she ignored completely. Fortunately, Lucy seemed charmed by the declaration, laughing along with the other woman. They began discussing the different items of jewellery on sale while he shifted from one foot to the other. He wasn't usually impatient, but he wanted to begin work on the soul-jar—and he wanted to be alone with Lucy.

"Malachite would be pretty with your colouring," Isis said, holding up a beaded collar in the ancient style, "but you would have to be careful with the exact shade of the green."

Before Lucy could take the collar from her, Isis cast it down and picked out something else. "Now this," she said,

"this is something very special. Lapis lazuli and gold. Look at the symbols here, Lucy."

Curious, Khnum also looked at the necklace. He caught his breath, recognising it as no clever copy but an original, made not by the hands of man but by the gods themselves. For Isis to be drawing Lucy's attention to it in this way meant that she was truly favoured.

He glanced at Isis, who returned his gaze innocently, and then he fingered the necklace as if testing its workmanship.

"What are these things?" asked Lucy, pointing at the small gold objects spaced evenly around the necklace.

"Flies," he said. "To the ancients, they represent tenacity. Think of how many times you swat away a fly, and yet it returns time and again. Annoying, yes, but they are also stubborn insects. They can't be kept down or pushed away. They keep coming back."

She looked closer at the detail, examining one of the golden flies. "It's amazing that something we find disgusting or irritating is respected like this."

Lucy turned the necklace so the centrepiece lay in her palm. It was a pillar that tapered in the middle and flared out at top and bottom, with four horizontal lines set parallel to one another cutting across the top half of the pillar. The outline and parallels were made of gold, and the inlay was lapis lazuli to match the beads, alternating with the golden flies.

"And what does this represent?"

Khnum looked at Isis, waiting for her to answer.

"It's a *djed* pillar," she said quietly. "Also known as the backbone of Osiris—or indeed of mankind. For the soul to take flesh, it needs a backbone, the mainstay of the human body. It is an ancient symbol of stability, worshipped in its own right. There is even a *djed* festival."

"*Djed*," Lucy murmured. "Is that the same *djed* as in Banebdjedet?"

Khnum and Isis exchanged glances. "Yes," they said, both at once.

Isis closed Lucy's fingers around the necklace. "Keep it as my gift to you."

"Oh, no—I couldn't," Lucy protested. "Let me pay you..."

"I insist." Isis folded her arms, her bearing at once regal and commanding. "A friend of Khnum's is a friend of mine. Besides, the symbols on this necklace speak to you, Lucy Tomlinson, do they not? Tenacity and stability; the anchor of the soul. Allow me to give you this necklace. You deserve it."

"But it must cost a fortune!"

"Take it," Isis said. "If you must, consider it payment for the task you will soon undertake with Khnum. My hopes for Banebdjedet's safety lie with you. I have no doubt you will create the perfect soul-jar together."

Lucy stared at her, confusion warring with slow realisation on her face.

Khnum glared at Isis. "Thank you, cousin. We should be going now." He took Lucy's arm and was leading her away when Isis called after them.

"Wait!"

He turned, suspicious. "What?"

Isis held up a shining bronze key. "Don't you want the key to your workshop, cousin?" she asked with a sly smile. "I tidied it for you, as you requested. I'm sure you'll find it ready for your use."

Khnum stepped closer and snatched the key. In ancient Egyptian he snapped, "Interfering minx!"

"Indeed." Isis grinned. "Your workshop is on the West Bank. Good luck. Our destiny lies in your hands—and in the touch of your woman."

Lucy looked around the workshop with approval and delight. It was just what she'd hoped for—little more than a wooden hut with a baked clay floor bearing the imprints of all the potters who'd worked there. A trestle table stood in the centre of the room, laden with different types of clay covered with damp cloth. Bowls of water waited nearby, and close to the window stood the potter's wheel.

She went and sat down at it, resting her foot on the pedal. She had a wheel like this at home, but due to time constraints she tended to use the electrically powered wheel instead. Khnum's wheel looked antiquated, little more than rope and wood with a thin layer of stone forming the work-surface, but she couldn't wait to get started.

Reluctantly, she got to her feet and explored the rest of the workshop. She was aware of Khnum watching her, and so she commented on a couple of things as she moved around. A few finished ceramics stood on a shelf along one wall, and so she looked at them briefly. On the other side of the room was a couch covered in a quilt with a couple of cushions. Lucy imagined that Khnum sometimes spent the night here, the

way that she'd sometimes stayed up into the early hours of the morning to regulate the temperature of the kiln. She thought it would be fun to spend the night in a place like this: making pottery until late afternoon, placing it in the kiln, and then waiting together with Khnum, talking, kissing...

She jerked her attention back to the present. So what that he'd kissed her last night! She was a grown woman, not a silly adolescent to go mooning after a holiday romance. If only it could be as simple as that—just a fling. But Lucy knew she felt more for him than that.

It was strange how well they suited. She'd puzzled over it after she'd gone to bed last night, unable to sleep as she relived the feel of his arms around her, of his mouth on hers. Then, just as she was drifting off, she'd felt something sit beside her on the bed and felt a small hand clutch at hers.

"Banebdjedet," she'd murmured, too tired to open her eyes. Instead, she squeezed the ghostly hand and heard the familiar sparkle of laughter.

In the morning, the pillow next to hers bore an indentation of a child-size head. She hadn't been alarmed. Khnum had assured her that the *ba* meant her no harm, and she believed him. When she was a child, she'd had an invisible friend. To Lucy, Banebdjedet was the same sort of thing. She was beginning to get used to his presence.

He'd tagged along with her to breakfast and then back to her room. She'd had strange dreams about ancient gods walking amongst mortals, and she wondered if he'd had anything to do with that. She knew he'd sat on her sunhat, squealing with excitement when she ran lightly down the

steps to meet Khnum. Now he was drifting around the workshop in silence, as if waiting for her to begin on the soul-jar.

She smiled at Khnum. "Can I see the kiln?"

The kiln was situated outside, forming part of the back wall of the hut. Made of brick and clay, it already gave off a radiant heat. As she stepped through the back door to get a closer look, she saw a short, paunchy man stripped to the waist, sweat pouring from him as he fed the fire. Over the roar of the flames, he heard her approach. He turned and grinned at her, and Lucy saw that, although he was ugly, he had an endearing, sweet smile.

"I'm Bes," he said, offering a damp, pudgy hand for her to shake.

Lucy introduced herself, her mind whirling. Isis, Bes—they were the names of Egyptian gods she'd heard about in the lectures; and Banebdjedet was a god, too—Osiris' soul. She should have asked their guide about Khnum. Surely he must also be a god. Not many ordinary men looked as good as him. But what did it all mean? And if they were really gods, why had they chosen her? She was nothing special.

"Ah, but you are," Bes said softly, and Lucy jumped, realising that he'd read her mind.

"That's rude," she said.

Bes nodded. "It is. Forgive me. But you are special, Lucy Tomlinson. You are special because you're human, because you've suffered reversal, and yet you still believe. You have hope, and you have the gift of creation. And you can bring to the soul-jar one of the most precious gifts of all."

She frowned. "I can? What's that?"

"You will know." Bes bent down to pick up the last of the wood, tossing it into the fire before he closed the door to the kiln. He faced Lucy. "We have confidence in you. The soul-jar will be perfect."

Then he looked over her shoulder. She felt Khnum's presence behind her and half turned to glance up at him. She heard Bes say something in a strange language and saw Khnum's handsome features darken. He nodded, said something in reply, and then his expression cleared as he looked towards her.

"The kiln is ready," he said. "Let us begin."

Lucy turned to bid goodbye to Bes, but the little man had vanished. With a last look at the kiln, she followed Khnum back into the workshop. The next half hour was spent in discussing the merits of the different types of Nile clay. Lucy handled each example, kneading it between her fingers, sniffing it, testing its elasticity. She listened as Khnum detailed its properties, glazed and unglazed, fired and unfired. Although it was his commission, he'd told her that he wanted her to select the clay.

"The body of a vessel is often more important than the cargo it carries," he said. "Without the right clay, that which is placed inside the vessel may spoil. Choose carefully, Lucy."

After much thought, she selected a clay that came from the Delta. Khnum made no comment on her choice apart from a nod, and she knew she'd chosen well. She took off her shirt so her cuffs wouldn't get dirty and saw how Khnum's gaze

went to the shape of her breasts beneath the tight vest. She smiled, flattered by his attention.

They sat together at the end of the table, dipping their hands into the bowls of water as they experimented with making miniature pinched-form vessels to determine the shape of the soul-jar.

"Should it be decorated?" she asked, smoothing off a finished piece.

Khnum thought about it. "The last one I made had a cream slip with a single row of hieroglyphs in dark brown paint and a glaze."

Lucy tried to imagine it. "I think this one should be burnished, like the earliest pots of your country. I have a pebble I picked up at Amarna. I'd like to try it, if you think it's appropriate."

He looked at her, his gaze warm and dark. "It's very appropriate."

They compared their miniature vessels and then picked two to make up into small test pieces on the wheel. She watched as Khnum worked, her attention wholly on the pot taking shape beneath his hands. Then it was her turn, and after a false start, she caught the rhythm of the wheel and was away, concentration absolute as she felt the slippery-smoothness of the clay, the curves and indentations forming from the touch of her fingers. With the test pieces placed side by side, Lucy anticipated a debate about which shape to choose. She was happy with her vessel, a stable-footed, round-bellied jar with a closed mouth. It would be easier to



stopper this type of jar and would safely secure anything placed inside it.

Khnum's vessel was taller and more elegant, not unlike the canopic jars she'd seen in the museums. Long-sided with wide shoulders, it had a wider mouth than her design. Lucy could imagine it made of alabaster, but doubted that clay could do its shape justice. It was up to him, though—this was his commission, after all.

She watched him measure the two test pots, his expression deep with thought. His hands were shoved in his back pocket, the pose pulling his t-shirt tight across his broad chest. Lucy couldn't help letting her gaze linger on the stretch of the fabric, imagining the muscles beneath.

"Yours is best," he said suddenly.

She stared at him. "You think so?"

"Yes. It's more womanly. Look at the curves on it." He stroked a gentle finger over the belly of the test pot. "It's sensual, earthy... pregnant with promise."

Lucy dropped her gaze as heat filled her, a mixture of desire and shame. Why did he have to mention pregnancy? But still, she was pleased he'd chosen her design. Although it was simple, it had come from her heart, her instincts guiding her hands.

"We will both take turns making it," he said, fetching a fresh lump of their chosen clay. "You go first."

Lucy scraped down the wheel and watched as he settled the clay in the very centre. With gentle pressure, she set the wheel in motion. For a moment, she did nothing more than gaze at it, envisioning in her mind how the finished jar would

look. Only when she could see it clearly did she reach out to dip her fingers in the water; only then did she increase the speed of the wheel. The first touch made her gasp in involuntary reaction. She wanted this to be perfect, and already it felt perfect beneath her hands as she eased the lump of clay into a pillar. Drawing it up between her palms, she felt its smooth elasticity, its latent strength. As it peaked, she pushed down with her thumbs to create a hole in the centre, opening the clay into a wide-mouthed jar. She let it collapse, instinctively feeling the weak points in the wall of the fabric, noting the corrections she'd have to make when it came to producing the soul-jar.

As she returned the clay to its lumpy state, Khnum touched her shoulder. She glanced up at him, not wanting to leave the thrill of creation, but then she relinquished her seat and watched as he worked.

His method was different from hers. Where she'd created a pillar and worked down, he moulded the clay into a wide-hipped shape and built up. An unusual technique but it suited him. She liked the way he handled the clay, keeping it moist but not too wet. His hands moved over the fledgling jar with delicacy and care.

Lucy wondered if he'd touch her the same way.

Khnum formed a rough copy of her design before he collapsed it. The wheel still spinning, he shifted on the seat and said, "Come. Sit with me. Let us make it together, now we both have the measure of this clay."

She perched beside him, knowing that their positions weren't ideal. He gave an amused snort and moved so that

she sat between his muscular thighs. She could feel the heat and strength of his chest pressing against her back as he leaned forwards to place his hands over hers. An image flashed into her head—Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze in *Ghost*—and she fought the urge to giggle. She'd always taken her work seriously, even the fun pieces, and so she'd always rolled her eyes when people asked her opinions of that famous love-scene. But now she realised that the act of creation shared by two people had qualities unique to the work of a single person. As their hands moved in unison to shape the clay, it was impossible to tell which of them was the guiding force. Sometimes, feeling the gentle pressure of his hands over hers, she thought it was Khnum. At other times, as she let her fingertips caress the body of the jar to bring out a rounder shape, she knew that she led the way.

The first attempt they collapsed by unspoken agreement. The second felt curiously weighted in its base. Lucy had no desire to make an unstable jar. On the third try, they got it right. By then, they had no need for words. Their minds and hands worked together as one, their concentration focused on their creation. And then it was done.

Khnum lifted his foot from the pedal, and the wheel came slowly to a halt. They rested their hands together on either side of the soul-jar and looked at it. Simple, full-bellied, a glorious deep sunset shade of red, it had been made with care, with thought...and with love.

Lucy felt her heart overflow as she gazed at the soul-jar. Always when she made a piece, it felt as if a little of her went into it—but making this had intensified the feeling. For all its

simplicity, it was one of the most absorbing, intriguing vessels she'd worked on. She felt proud to have been part of its creation.

With great ceremony, they carried the soul-jar outside and placed it on a reed mat beside the kiln. Lucy expected that it would take at least a day to dry, but Khnum shook his head.

"A matter of hours," he said.

"It's hot here, but not that hot," Lucy said with a laugh.

He smiled. "This is no ordinary jar. The usual rules do not apply."

She looked at him. "What shall we do while we wait?"

"What indeed."

She kissed him. Hard, deep, feverish: and then she drew back and whispered, "I don't make a habit of this, but..."

Khnum smiled, his dark eyes alight with desire. "Overcome with the Muse?"

"Overcome by creation. By you." She trembled as he stroked a hand down her back. "But maybe it's a bad idea. I mean, we've only just met, and..."

"And we've just shared an experience that many people will never know," he murmured. "One of perfect creation. So I think it's a very good idea for us to share another kind of experience—as long as this is truly what you want."

Lucy gazed up at him. "Yes."

Holding her hand, he led her back inside the workshop. When she took a deep breath, she could smell the rich scent of the clay, the heat of the sand and the wood-smoke of the kiln and the spicy, masculine scent of Khnum's skin.

She shivered at the delicious thrill of anticipation curling her insides. She felt the warmth of his hand move across her belly, stroking back and forth the way he'd touched the jar, his fingers tickling. Lucy took a breath as heat raged through her. Under the strength of his gaze, her pulse sped up, her nipples pushing at the fabric of her vest, peaking hard as if craving his attention, his touch.

"Lucy... my perfect woman," Khnum whispered, moving his hand to brush the underside of her breasts.

She leaned back in the curve of his arm, her breathing quickening, her breasts rising and falling rapidly as he got closer. She tipped back her head, letting him kiss her neck, his lips soft and knowing as he moved lower. Khnum let his tongue trace down into her cleavage; then, as she murmured her pleasure, he buried his face between her breasts.

She gasped, and then giggled. "Khnum!"

He slid his hand higher and cupped her breast, his thumb rubbing across her nipple. "Yes, my love?"

She was so astonished by the endearment that she couldn't speak. Her heart leapt with excitement. She tugged at his hair until he lifted his head to gaze at her, and she read the truth in his eyes: yes, he did love her, the same way she loved him—fierce and passionate.

He kissed her hungrily, his thumb still moving over her nipple so that she twisted against him in helpless reaction. Her legs splayed, allowing him to shove a muscled thigh between them, and she jerked her hips, rubbing herself against him. Khnum dropped his free hand from her shoulder, sliding it flat over her vest and jeans, his fingers burrowing to

tease at her clit. The friction of the denim catching and stimulating her was intense; the pressure of his fingers just enough to render her incoherent, her body flooding with lust.

He pushed up her top and yanked down her bra then covered her breasts with both hands. Her nipples hardened, eager against his palms, and she moaned softly when he dragged his hands down slowly, his fingers spread so that he captured her nipples between his index and middle fingers.

Khnum smiled down at her, his expression dark with arousal. Her heart raced, the pulse beating at her throat and beneath his hand; and then he scissored his fingers tight about her nipples. Lucy shivered, streaks of fiery pleasure rushing through her. She clutched at his shoulders as he bent his head and licked the tip of one breast, his fingers still closed about her.

It was exquisite, a perfect tease of ecstasy that made her body weak and fluid. With each curl, each lash of his tongue across the peak of her aching nipple, she fell deeper into physical enslavement; and then his fingers parted, and she felt the edge of his teeth. Mindless with pleasure, Lucy nearly cried out when Khnum took his mouth from her, only to whimper as he began to lick at her other breast.

"I want you," she said, her voice husky.

"I know, my beautiful Lucy. I want you, too. This was fated. I have waited so long for you..."

They collapsed onto the couch, wrestling with each other's clothes. Khnum unlaced her sandals, his fingers quick and deft; and then she was kicking them free and wriggling out of her jeans. He edged a hand beneath her lacy knickers,

groaning at how hot and wet she was. Lucy thrust up against him as he fingered her clit.

"Hurry—oh, yes," she panted, clawing at his clothes until he stripped them off. "Please—quickly..."

"Slowly," Khnum admonished. He pulled off her knickers and sought out the centre of her with his tongue. She lifted her legs and slid them over his shoulders, bucking up from the couch as he explored her sex, darting his tongue inside and then slowly licking the outer folds, up to circle her clit and then down to plunge inside her.

Lucy sobbed with excitement, her breath catching with each flick and stab of his tongue. Her hips moved faster, her thighs rubbed by the slightest brush of stubble on his jaw; then he shifted her, angled her hips so he could lick her clit again, circling and sucking. She rocked forwards, gasping as her orgasm built, jerking faster and faster against his mouth.

"Khnum, oh please, oh..." she cried, her world tilting and her awareness shutting down to sensation; and then he turned her onto her front.

Lucy lifted up onto the cushions, frantic for release, desperate for him to fill her. She clawed at the armrest of the couch as Khnum guided his cock between her thighs, burying himself in her wet heat.

She clamped her thighs tight, squirming her hips back and forth as she tried to recapture the rush to climax. She turned her head, gasping into the cushions, feeling his weight above her. His deep, powerful thrusts drove her to distraction as much as did the rough drag of the quilt against her nipples. Khnum slid a hand beneath her, his fingers pressing against

her clit, rubbing and teasing until she yelled, lifting her head, her body tense, tenser, her breath held—

"Oh, my love, yes," Khnum whispered as she felt the first ripple of orgasm. Her muscles flexed about him, and she lost control, crying her pleasure aloud, her body bucking wildly.

Excited, he went deeper, harder; finally exploding within her, gasping her name as he slid down on top of her.

They lay tangled for a long moment, damp and sticky; and then Lucy groaned and rolled over beneath him.

"I never knew it could be like that," she said, her voice faint with wonder.

Khnum looked down at her. "You didn't? Then your ex-partner Dave was not a real man at all. I have much to show you about pleasure, Lucy—if you'll let me share such intimacy with you."

She didn't hesitate. "Yes, Khnum, yes. I want to share everything with you."

The soul-jar was dry within a few hours, as Khnum had predicted. Lucy picked it up from its bed of sand, turning it gently in her hands to look at the faint mark of the reed mat on its base. She took it inside and set it on the table, cleared now of the water and clay samples.

Khnum sat opposite her, and they admired the jar in silence. Lucy found her Amarna pebble and started to burnish the clay with swift, decisive strokes. She usually found burnishing a tedious task, but this time it was curiously restful. The thought of aligning all the clay molecules so the surface was rich and glossy pleased her. Already she could imagine how the jar would look once it was fired.



When she'd burnished half of the pot, she handed it to Khnum. He finished the other half, bending over the jar to achieve the same shiny effect she'd started. Lucy watched him work, her hands clasped in her lap. The languor of their lovemaking stayed with her, and her breasts and between her thighs ached with unexpected pleasure. This day was one she'd never forget, and yet she sensed that there was something missing.

She cocked her head. It took her a moment to place it, and then she realised that Banebdjedet had gone. She put a hand to her mouth to stop a smile, pleased that the *ba* had given her and Khnum some privacy for the last few hours. Finally, the soul-jar was ready for the firing. Once again, they went outside together. Lucy held the jar while Khnum opened the kiln door and tested the temperature. Burnished ware had to be fired at a lower temperature than usual to maintain its glossy finish, and its surface needed protection from the heat of the kiln lest fine cracks appear to mar its appearance.

Khnum wrapped a shield of bound papyrus stems around the outside of the pot and then slid it inside the kiln. They both stood for a moment, looking at it before the door closed again.

"Now we wait."

"How long?"

Khnum looked at her. "We will know when it's ready."

They went back inside, and belatedly ate the food they'd bought that morning in the bazaar. Lucy put on the necklace of lapis lazuli and gold, piling her hair up onto the crown of her head to model the effect of the necklace against her

throat. Leaving on her necklace, Khnum undressed her again, leading her back to the couch where they made love a second time. His kisses tasted of dark grapes, a scent more potent than wine.

Later they talked, cuddled up together on the couch with the quilt pulled over them and the fading rays of sunshine deepening as it spread across the land in the day's farewell.

"Now the sun god Re undertakes a dangerous journey," Khnum murmured, smoothing down Lucy's hair. "He descends into the Underworld in his solar bark and travels along the river of Night. All manner of creatures and evils lie in wait for him. Sometimes none will spring out at him, and his way will be clear; at other times he will be beset from all sides. And yet, he must make it through this dark domain because he has a message of hope to mankind. With each sunrise, life begins anew. Darkness is banished. The light—and life on earth—flourishes in Re's embrace."

Lucy sighed. "It's a wonderful story."

"It's the truth." Khnum pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Think of it applied to your own life, too. Haven't you travelled through darkness, only to emerge in the light? Haven't you experienced triumph where there was once suffering?"

She nodded and squeezed his hand. "Thanks to you."

"Not I," he said emphatically. "You made the changes. For all that we are locked into our destinies, the gods allow deviations from time to time, if only we are brave enough to heed our hearts and follow those new paths. This you have done."

"But I leave Luxor the day after tomorrow."

"You don't have to go." Khnum sat up, the quilt slipping down to bare him to the waist. "I don't want you to leave, Lucy Tomlinson. Stay with me."

She didn't know how to answer him. It would be so easy to say yes, but she had a life back home, a business that would only wait for so long. How could she give that up... and yet how could she leave Khnum?

Torn, she could only shake her head, pulling him closer.

They lay together in soft, warm silence as the sun dipped below the horizon, and Re began his journey. The sky darkened, the hazy blue turning black. Dusk and then night settled in the hut, and soon the only sounds to be heard was the breathing of the kiln outside and the beating of their hearts.

Lucy drifted on the edge of sleep, aware of Khnum curled around her protectively. She felt rather than knew the exact moment when the soul-jar was ready. Her body jerked as if she'd been asleep, but her voice was alert.

"Is it time?"

He'd felt it, too. Kicking off the quilt, he said, "Yes. It is time."

Khnum pulled on his jeans and went over to the shelves. He returned with a couple of candlesticks, which he set on the table. Lucy watched him as he lit the candles, and then she got dressed and followed him out to the kiln.

The heat had died down. Only a gentle glow met her when the kiln door was opened. It was as if it had been cooling for a whole day, and yet she knew it had been a matter of a few

hours. If she needed any more convincing that she was surrounded by ancient magic, it was the behaviour of the kiln.

Khnum reached inside and withdrew the soul-jar. He carried it, still in its protective wrapper, into the workshop and placed it between the candles. Lucy thought she could hear him murmuring in that strange tongue as he carefully removed the woven papyrus.

And there it was: the soul-jar, its burnished surface gleaming in the candlelight, all rounded curves and grounded stability.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"It's perfect."

There was a note of sadness in his voice, but when she glanced up at him, Khnum shook his head. He smiled at her, slipping an arm around her waist to draw her closer.

"Be proud of what we have achieved," he said.

Lucy's eyes welled with tears. "I am."

They stood there for a moment longer, and then Khnum doused the candles. "We should sleep now," he said. "When dawn breaks, I will take you back to your hotel. There are many things for you to think about tomorrow. Thought is always clearer after a restful sleep. Come."

They settled down on the couch again. Khnum arranged the quilt over their bodies and wrapped one arm around her waist, spooning into her from behind. She felt safe in his embrace. His hand was warm over the swell of her belly.

Lucy gazed through the darkness at the shape of the soul-jar, fingering her necklace, and eventually, she fell asleep.

The attack, when it came, was unexpected. Lucy didn't know what it was that woke her, but the sense that something was wrong broke into her dreams. She gasped, struggling against Khnum's arm as she tried to sit up. He hushed her, holding her still against his body.

She started to speak, but he whispered, "Remain quiet," and so she did. They lay there in a tense silence. Her gaze darted around the workshop, and she jumped each time she heard the wood creak or the breeze rustle through the roof.

Just as she relaxed, the back door crashed open.

Lucy jumped up, throwing off the quilt as she raced to the table. "The soul-jar!" she cried. "We have to protect it!"

"Lucy! No!" Khnum grabbed her hand, pulling her back, but she broke free.

Halfway to the table, she stopped dead, her gaze fixed on the patch of silvered moonlight that shone through the open door. Spoiling its perfection was a black shadow: a wide, hulking shadow with a hideous head. A shadow with deep, hoarse breathing, that snuffled in surprise as it saw her.

Slowly she looked up. Lucy forced herself not to react when she saw the hideous being standing in the doorway. He had the body of a man but the head of a monster—some kind of jackal or other dog-like animal, with tall pointed ears and vicious eyes, but a long, down-turned snout like an anteater. It resembled no creature on earth she could name, but she recognised him all the same.

"Seth, Lord of Darkness, god of Chaos," she said.

The monster stepped into the workshop, his gaze going past her to Khnum. He snuffled in pleasure and then turned his attention back to her.

"So, it is true. The potter-god accepted help from a mortal female to make Osiris' new soul-jar. How very quaint! And he has not just chosen you for your skills in ceramic-making, I see."

Lucy blushed, glad that the semi-darkness prevented Seth from seeing her expression. She took a step closer to the table. "What do you want?"

Seth's ears flicked back in astonishment. "Why, I want the soul-jar, of course. You are of no interest to me, mortal, so please don't flatter yourself. Your beloved Khnum could be something of a challenge, but he knows better than to fight me."

"It was you who broke the original jar, wasn't it," Khnum said from the darkness. "You, who've been so absent from our world for so long. I knew it wouldn't last. You were just biding your time, waiting for the ideal opportunity..."

"I learned the value of patience a long time ago." Seth shifted his gaze from Lucy to Khnum. "Banished to the red desert for millennia, do you think that could restrain me? Look at the wars and suffering this continent has produced over the centuries! I am in my element here. My power is on the ascendant, while yours, my dear Khnum—yours, and that of all the gods—is waning."

"You're wrong," said Khnum, coming across the floor to stand beside Lucy. "The gods have adapted."

"Adaptation is for lesser beings!" Seth snarled. "I pride myself in remaining unchanged for all this time. Only the strongest of gods could have the willpower to stay the same."

"But if you don't change, how can you grow?" Lucy asked.

Seth stared at her. "Grow? What need have I to grow? Stupid human! This type of blabbering is why I broke the soul-jar in the first place—to set Banebdjedet free, to make him vulnerable—and thus to reduce the mortal world to confusion when the King of the Dead could no longer pass judgement..."

"You wanted to capture him and separate him permanently from Osiris' body," Khnum said. "It wasn't enough that you destroyed your brother once already. You had to try a second time."

"And I will succeed!"

Seth pounced forward at the soul-jar, but Lucy grabbed it first. She wrapped her arms around it, hugging it tight to her chest. She reeled backward, trying to protect the jar as Seth roared and darted around the table toward her.

"Stay back, Seth!" Khnum shouted, standing between them.

"The soul-jar. Give me the soul-jar, and I will let you live."

"No!" Lucy cried. "You will not take it!"

Seth hissed and flung himself at Khnum. They struggled together, but Seth was stronger, and he threw Khnum aside.

Lucy backed up against the wall, hiding her fear as Seth advanced on her. The moonlight reflected in his glittering eyes and gleamed from his fangs when he opened his mouth in a growl.

Then he stopped, his black gaze fixed on the necklace that shone from Lucy's throat. His pause of astonishment gave way to whispered anger. "Woman! Where did you get that trinket?"

Fearful that it was a trap, Lucy took a tighter hold of the soul-jar. "In the market," she replied. "The goddess Isis gave it to me."

"Isis! That meddling bitch!" Seth looked furious, his snout raised as he snuffled at her. "That necklace was fashioned by the hands of Nut, the sky goddess—my mother—the mother of us all. Why are you wearing it, mortal? What could possibly deem you worthy of such a treasure?"

Lucy shook her head. From the darkness, she heard Khnum groan as he tried to get to his feet. She called his name, daring to glance away from Seth for only a second.

"You love him?" Seth asked, as if reading her mind. "How touching, a human loving a god. In that case, give me the soul-jar, Lucy Tomlinson—or I will kill him."

"You can't kill a god," she said.

Seth's eyes glowed. "Oh yes, I can."

"Lucy!" Khnum shouted. "Be careful—save yourself!"

"How noble." Seth raised a hand and directed a beam of darkness at Khnum.

"No!"

Lucy pushed herself away from the wall, shoving the body of the soul-jar hard into Seth's stomach. He doubled over with a cry of shock, and she used that moment to dart past him. But he recovered quickly, turning to grab at her. She



was almost out of his reach, but then she felt something cold and dark slam into her back, and she tumbled forward.

She cried out as she fell, trying to twist her body to save the soul-jar. She heard Khnum's despairing shout and Seth's laughter as she lost her grip on it. Horrified, Lucy watched the soul-jar fall toward the path of silver moonlight. Her arms took the brunt of her own collapse, but she could do nothing to prevent the soul-jar from shattering into hundreds of pieces.

Lucy hid her face against the floor. She didn't want to see the broken soul-jar. "Banebdjedet!" she called. "Banebdjedet, where are you?"

Seth's laughter stopped as he realised what she was saying. Lucy felt herself hauled to her feet, and then Seth shook her. "Where is my brother's soul? It should have been in that jar!"

"He is no longer here," said a familiar voice, and from the shattered pieces of the soul-jar arose a column of white light that rivalled the brilliance of the moon.

Seth let go of Lucy, and she stumbled into the safety of Khnum's embrace. He held her tight, whispering words of love as the beam of light expanded to illuminate the entire workshop.

"Isis!" she whispered, recognising the woman inside the light.

The goddess turned toward her. "Yes, my dear. I have come to send my brother Seth back to the fiery desert from whence he escaped. It pains me to do so, but alas, we siblings were not created equally. Back when our mother Nut

bore us, we had no Khnum to fashion us on the wheel of life, and so we lacked the equal measures of love, hate, hope, anger, faith and all the other emotions he poured into humankind. Instead, we made do with what we had. Osiris was born good—too good to live—and Seth was born evil."

"Evil and chaos must exist to balance the world," Seth said.

"Indeed it must," Isis replied calmly, "but when the balance of power shifts too much in one direction then action must be taken to return the status quo. When you broke the first soul-jar, you declared war on the rest of the pantheon. We had to find a way to trick you—and to protect Banebdjedet."

Seth growled. "Then where is he? Where is that snivelling little *ba*?"

Isis smiled sweetly. "Wouldn't you like to know?" She stepped forward, the light moving with her until she stood close to Seth. Her expression changed, became serious and disappointed.

"Brother, for your greed and jealousy against Osiris, I have been charged by the council of the gods to banish you to the Siwah oasis for the period of five centuries. Chaos will do well enough on its own without you."

"You can't send me away! Isis—don't do this! You'll regret it..."

Lucy blinked, too astonished to make a sound, as the monstrous deity faded away before her eyes, until, with a final ripple of air, he was gone.

The light surrounding Isis dimmed a little, as if the act of exiling her brother had robbed her of some of her power, but her smile remained bright. She hurried toward Lucy and took her hands, pressing her fingers.

"I'm sorry your beautiful soul-jar was destroyed, but it was the only way we could hope to lure Seth here."

"So it was a trap all along..."

Isis shook her head. "Not originally, no. We fully intended to install Banebdjedet in the soul-jar the instant it came out of the kiln, but then we received information from Sobek and Bes that Seth was on the move. We knew he'd come for the *ba*. It was too good an opportunity to miss. I'm just sorry that it came at the cost of your wonderful pottery."

Lucy glanced up at Khnum, unsure what to say. The moment seemed rather surreal. "That's all right," she said at last. "Glad I could help."

Isis touched her face. "What an adorable girl you are! Heaven chose well."

Before she could absorb this comment, Lucy asked, "What *did* happen to Banebdjedet? He was here earlier, but then he disappeared before we even put the soul-jar into the kiln. I was worried for him..."

Isis gave her tinkling little laugh, one hand to her mouth. "You'd best tell her, Khnum. You have a part in this, too."

"You do?" Lucy looked up at him again, and saw his proud expression. He slid both arms around her waist, splaying his hands over her belly in a protective and unmistakable gesture.

"Lucy Tomlinson," he announced, unable to keep the smile from his face, "you are with child. We are having a baby. A fine, healthy son."

She sagged back in his embrace; her mind whirling even as she knew it was true. She could feel the change inside her, the promise of new life.

"Banebdjedet?"

Khnum nodded. "He loves you. Not in the way that I love you but in the way a child loves its mother. You heard him when he wept; you responded to him when he laughed. You listened with your heart, not your head, and in so doing, you won the devotion of a god." He paused and gave her an embarrassed grin. "The devotion of two gods, actually."

"But how can I be a god's mother? I'm not a goddess!"

Isis laughed, laying her hand on Lucy's belly. "Not a goddess like me, no. But the woman who carries a powerful god in her womb and who will birth a flesh and blood Osiris... why, she will be beyond all mortal females. You may never have the might to move mountains and make the Nile run backwards, Lucy Tomlinson, but you shall have life everlasting, if you wish to remain amongst us. As Banebdjedet's mother, you have the gratitude and respect of the pantheon. We will be happy to welcome you to your rightful place."

"But," she protested again, weakly this time, "my life is in England..."

"That doesn't have to change," Khnum said, moving to stand beside her. "Although during those cold winters you

told me about, perhaps it would be better for us and for our child to return to Egypt."

Lucy gazed at him. "You wouldn't stop me working?"

He looked affronted. "No! In fact, I would be happy to add my skills to yours. As equals. As partners. We can do this, Lucy. I love you, and I want to be with you for all eternity."

She smiled, hope and happiness filling her like the sunrise. She held out her hand to him, and he took it. "Together," she said. "Together forever—you, me, and our child."

Isis clapped her hands. "Oh, I love a happy ending!"

"There's just one thing I need to know," Lucy said. "Do we have to call our son Banebdjedet? He'll be teased something rotten at school if we do."

Khnum laughed. "No, my love. We can give him any name that pleases us."

"As long as his second name is Banebdjedet," Isis interrupted. She giggled and flashed them a grin when they both turned to her in disbelief. "All right, then how about... Barney?"

Lucy spluttered, placing a hand over her belly as if she'd be able to feel her son growing inside her. "We'll think about it, okay? After all, we've got nine months to pick a name for him."

Khnum laid his hand over hers, his smile for her alone. "Nine months to get used to being a goddess," he said. "Nine months to enjoy our miracle."

Lucy smiled up at him, opening her arms for his embrace. "A miracle," she said. "I knew I was right to believe in miracles. They can happen. They really can."

Egyptian Realms  
*by Olivia Lorenz*

\* \* \* \*

The End

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Never Say Die

by

Anna Fallon

Imagine year 2150, spiritually enlightened, demons common as mud. Violet and Tyler wake up dead, apparently trapped in a tomb...but are they?

[www.annaf.net/](http://www.annaf.net/)

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## **Never Say Die**

by

Anna Fallon

### **Halloween night, 2150**

Ty's lips felt aflame with passion anytime he managed to press them to Violet's mouth. He loved her plump, raspberry-colored lips, but Violet allowed him very little kissing opportunity. His every emotion needed to be conveyed through this kiss. The moment proved to be one of those lucky times when Ty enjoyed a little more freedom. No woman affected him like this, not only did he want to kiss her endlessly; he wanted to fuck her mercilessly. She drove him crazy, took his temper and his sexual want to the edge of reason. Women always came to him easily, with the exception of Violet Symons. The one Ty wanted and needed the most. He'd never been past first base with Violet, unless second base meant her stinging slaps to his cheek. If only his ass cheeks rang with those slaps, he would be in heaven!

Burning with inhuman lust, as she allowed his lips to roam over hers, Ty hoped tonight to be the night she accepted him as her lover. He welcomed her response as her mouth opened, giving his tongue access. Knowing his chance might last only a few seconds, he tried to pass on his feelings. Hopefully the hint would not be subtle. Their last shared kiss did not do the trick. A whole six months ago and not so much



as a quick peck since. Violet played it cagey and demonstrated extreme resourcefulness to avoid his advances. The words 'give up' simply did not exist in Ty's dictionary, not when it concerned stealing an opportunity such as this.

Making the most of this newfound freedom, he touched her soft tongue with his. His cock immediately sprang up, ready for action. Remembering the time her hand gripped at his erection only served to inflame his desire. Chancing a little daring exploration, his fingers ventured to a hardened nipple. Ty longed to suck the elongated nub into oblivion. He knew Violet loved the touch because her pelvis thrust forward as he gently squeezed. *Maybe this time.* Hoping he would get to show the depth his passion to her repeatedly with his cock and by feasting on her dripping pussy. Perhaps this time, the woman he loved and respected more than anyone else in the world would let him show her how deeply he loved.

Trying to fuck anyone else now proved impossible. Once upon a time, he could. Just after he and Violet first met, he still saw other women. Before long, he *imagined* Violet was with him each time he had sex with another woman. He *longed* for Violet to be with him each time. Others only acted as poor substitutes. This left him disappointed afterwards, and no woman deserved to be treated like that. If he couldn't give one hundred percent to any woman, even if only for the night, he wouldn't give anything at all. And so began this torrid game of cat and mouse.

The kiss continued. Usually by now the slap landed, and they'd argue over nothing. She proved to be feisty to say the least. Violet had been emotionally hurt. Ty didn't know how,

and he never asked. *God! I don't have that much of a death wish!*

Perhaps, on this Halloween night, common sense would finally prevail and she would take him to her soul, here in this alley. *Wishful thinking*, his fingertips plucked at the captured nipple causing her luscious body to push against his. Her tongue gently massaged along his as a small moan escaped her throat. It took all of his concentration not to throw her down and make her take him.

He let the thought of her moist mouth on his swollen cock linger a little, but he knew he would come prematurely if he even imagined such contact in the slightest. *Home in the shower is okay, but here in the flesh? Definitely not cool.* Ever so lightly, Ty's hand left her breast and traveled lower, to brush her mound. Violet's leg came up to wrap around his. *Bingo!*

A neon glow penetrated his eyelids. He popped his eyes open. An eerie glow filled the alley way. *I've heard about getting the green light, but this is ridiculous!* A small, pointy horned demon, colored a deep shade of green, waved a crystal, and Ty felt a searing pain inside his head. *Fuck, of all the timing to be usurped by a demon!* Their lips parted now, he felt Violet's hot breath on his cheek.

"What the f...?" she started.

Feeling his consciousness drift off, he heard a distant, booming voice. Tyler struggled to really understand what the voice said, it just sounded so relaxing. His heartbeat slowed, and he let himself succumb to the darkness

Waking up from what felt like a deep sleep, she felt the constriction of something hard down either arm. Darkness blanketed her eyesight, and feeling around she found herself entrapped in something. Her mind searched for any type of recall. Nothing. Nothing except... *I'm dead? Wait a minute. I'm dead!* She was dead and had been that way for a long time.

Feeling around her again, she decided she must be in some type of coffin. *Freaky!* Pushing upwards, a slight change in light told her the lid lifted slightly. *Well, at least they never nailed me in! Now who am I?* She strained to lift the lid. Neferhetepes...the only word to pop into her head. *Sounds Egyptian.* She remained clueless as to what happened, but she retained enough common sense to know all was not as it seemed. For one thing, every thought and feeling she manifested felt foreign.

The lid would not be lifted, despite her efforts. Then she heard a noise, or thought she did so she closed her eyes and dropped her arms to her sides.

A long, groaning creak ensued, and light flooded her closed lids. Apparently, so her mind told her, this casket housed her for one hundred years. It would be another hundred before she wanted to hear that sound again. It grated on her ears like fingernails scratching down a chalkboard.

"Somebody's gotta oil this Goddamn thing!" a male voice sounded. He sounded familiar but again foggiess clouded her brain. She dared not move.

Something told her she belonged to the realms of the undead. *Hell, do I even believe in this shit?* In her mind, she still felt young. For the life of her, she just couldn't seem to remember much at all. Then she slowly opened her eyes, and whoever opened the lid seemed to have disappeared. Raising herself on one elbow, she peered over the side. Large stone columns rose up. The room, completely covered with earthen paintings and etchings looking decidedly like the legends of Ancient Egypt, glowed with long torches of fire.

As her eyes adjusted to the sudden change in light, Neferhetepes looked in horror at her hand. Her skin wrinkled over long, thin bones. The leathery texture and yellowish color looked every bit the one hundred years old. *Oh yes, this is the undead look alright.* Somehow, she couldn't see it becoming this season's new black. *Not even an extreme makeover can help. So, am I a Mummy or what?* Her mind tried to deal with the weird situation now presenting itself. Crying might be an answer; still, it wouldn't change anything.

Total recall still eluded her as her mind insisted her name to be Neferhetepes, and that Gulim put her here. The bright green form of a demon entered her mind's eye. *What a fucked up name, Gulim! Ugly little prick too.* Her fogginess cleared a little more. All kinds of dark green and warty going on with him. Neferhetepes remembered seeing him just before... *Ah yes and just after...oh dear.* Somewhere in the back of her mind, she recalled a hot kiss. She still struggled with her name. *Neferhetepes doesn't quite sit right somehow. It was Halloween, and that green light came...*

Little by little, her memories filtered back. Enough to give a hint of her life but not quite enough for her to be sure about anything, *Now who was I kissing before this Gulim turned up?*

Gulim obviously performed a spell, which admonished her to the realm of the zombie. Or whatever. Who knew why? Thoughts of her hometown returned as memories filtered back. This type of thing happened plenty in the neighborhood lately. What better time than Halloween to test out the demon training wheels? If quick enough, you could stop the amateur demons. Neferhetepes had been caught off guard during the intense kissing and petting session. The arrival of the demon did give her the distraction needed to get away from Nebtawi's lips. *Otherwise, I would have pounded the little green fucker into the ground. Nebtawi...hmm that name, now who the Hell would I know with a name like that?*

A rush of recollection filled her head. At last, she could remember her life, but the names still confused her.

The year 2150 brought spiritual enlightenment. Many people openly contacted their spirit guides and vibrated to the higher purpose, but every action has an opposite and equal reaction. An era of the Demon followed, and anyone with bad intentions could subscribe to Demon 101. The funny thing being, on Halloween night, you never knew who dressed in costume and who really might be a goblin, faerie or even a witch. The kids had to try so much harder to look lifelike.

*One hundred years? That would make it the year two thousand two hundred and fifty by rights? No way! So, why am I here?* She looked around a little and saw the gold, blues and reds of her body-shaped casket. *If it's one hundred years*

*from my time then why is everything here looking like the inside of an Ancient Egyptian temple?* Something strange seemed at play, that much she knew for sure.

"Gulim...whatever his name is, will be deserving of a flying snap kick when he crosses my path again." *I mean...he can't do anything worse to me.* Neferhetepes thought about the kiss she now remembered all too well, considering it supposedly happened one hundred years ago. All the energy her mind expended in controlling her urges and her body had the audacity to let her down. Newatabi...*oh, that name is so fake...*on the other hand, *never* let her down. With the rush of the sexual arousal came the feeling of complete safety she felt when around him. That is what annoyed her the most. She refused to get close to anybody; she could take care of herself.

As his tongue had ravished hers, Neferhetepes wanted to have sex there and then. With his hot hand exploring her breast and the brush over her throbbing pubis, no wonder Her memory recalled the pooling of intensity at her sex, just the thing she wanted to forget.

Nebtawi's kisses, so electrifying, she'd actually considered doing the horizontal tango with him, right there in the alley. *Where the hell is Nebtawi anyway? So much for looking out for me!* Still she knew her thought to be unfair. Her mind just would not stop questioning. All of this seemed so surreal, but it was a little elaborate for a Halloween joke.

Nebtawi... Always difficult to think of ways to avoid sex with that man. Always there for her, always drop dead gorgeous. He knew his way around the female form. The way

he tweaked her nipples just right put her into automatic sexual wanton. Soon her 'one hundred and one ways to avoid sex with Nebtawi list' would be over, and she might have to succumb. But then, she might never see him again.

Yes, Neferhetepes wanted him to touch her, lick her and drive his oversize cock inside her. She definitely was not frigid. Having, kind of, touched his hard on once, to see if maybe finding a small dick might help her resist, that choice proved a big mistake. The exact opposite pulsed momentarily in her hand. His well-endowed cock, rock solid, reacted to her touch immediately. Neferhetepes reluctantly, but quickly, removed her hand from his enticing erection and slapped his face...hard.

The slapping became a regular occurrence. The more aroused Neferhetepes felt, the harder the slap Nebtawi received. *He's gotten more face slaps from me than he's had hot dinners.* Fear kept her from loving him and being loved by him. Fear of emotional pain, of losing the thing that you loved most of all. The cost seemed much too high to pay.

Going for the old 'sit straight up in the coffin and scare everyone' effect, she attempted to rise quickly. She failed. Her bones, creaking and groaning, grated together in a most unbecoming manner.

"Freakin' Hell, anyone would think I was a hundred!" a sarcastic ring sounded in her words, a dry crackle scratched in her throat, "Arrrgh! For fuck's sake, can't a girl even laugh?"

Sitting upright now, her eyes scanned the room, "Talk about shabby chic!" She felt her teeth, all flat and normal.

"Just my luck, didn't even get turned into a vampire!" she grumped. Neferhetepes always thought if she *had* to be anything undead, a vampire would be cool.

"I hear you are your usual charming self, Neferhetepes," a familiar male voice said. Instant arousal warmed her body and that pissed her off.

Her eyes locked onto a large shadow. She knew who it belonged to and answered with hostility, partially from frustration and partially because, for some reason, his voice gave her the shits at that moment. Perhaps it might be the fact she'd almost admitted a need for him to look out for her, or maybe she found it infuriating she wanted to hump him so badly. *Neferhetepes...Neferhetepes, whatever my last name is, needs nobody.*

"Whatever I did, it can't have been bad enough to deserve you. Why are you here, Nebtawi?" She made sure her voice sounded thick with annoyance.

"If I fuckin' knew that, do you think I would really be here with your clapped-out bag of bones? You stink, too!" Nebtawi snapped as he took a step back from her coffin.

"No shit, Sherlock! You think I'm gonna be crushed rose petals after a century! Just piss off if you don't like it!" She shot her answer back at him and at last, something seemed normal. To think she'd been sucking on his sweet tasting pink lips before Gulim arrived and cast the spell on them.

"Kiss your mamma with that potty mouth? You tell me *how* to get out of here, and I'll be gone in a flash! I looked all around this place and it's shut tight. I heard a noise from in



there and opened the lid. You should be grateful I don't close it up again!" he snapped back.

She stretched her torso...and arms, every joint scratched together, bone against bone. Neferhetepes winced, extending her middle finger, giving him the bird. The drama dissipated in the slowness of the movement. He laughed back at her feeble effort.

Nebtawi always lost his anger as quickly as it came and usually followed it up with laughter. He saw the funny side of everything, which had to be the reason they'd stayed friends all this time. Neferhetepes loved the way he could cheer her up at her darkest moments. They knew nothing of each other's history, not really. Neferhetepes had no idea what darkened his dreams, and she never spoke of her inner torture.

Hell, she didn't even know what he did in his spare time. She never asked for fear of getting too close and Neferhetepes made it perfectly clear getting close was out of bounds. Every time she thought he was going to talk about his personal life she cut him short. He worked at the hospital, she knew that much. The only other thing she did know about him for sure, he always stood by her whether he agreed with her or not. Theirs proved a strange friendship. Even though close, they shared very little of their private lives with each other. Now why on earth could she remember all these details and so little of anything else?

Neferhetepes assumed he worked hard because sometimes she never saw him for a couple of days. The circles under his eyes, after these times, told her he hadn't gotten much sleep.

He always checked in with her before he went home to crash. His sweetness, at times, infuriated her because she didn't want anyone to look after her; she fended for herself.

No matter how tough she acted, Neferhetepes always helped others and tried not to judge anybody. She had a very good reason for needing to get into the spirit world. Somebody waited there for her. It was far too risky to try and make contact before then. A playful spirit could always intercept a message and change it completely. Neferhetepes opted for the old-fashioned method of helping others. Showing kindness and understanding came naturally to her. She volunteered at the homeless shelter every week, cooking and serving a hot lunch. You would think, in the face of all the so-called enlightenment, shelters like that would be a thing of the past. But no matter how many came to see the path, just as many fell from it. She held no interest in so-called fast-tracking, choosing simply to live her life, figuring she'd have enough 'contact' when she left this life.

Spiritual enlightenment required a person to be at a certain stage of her life. No matter what you tried to do to speed the process, it took time. It also took the first hand experience of life lessons. Even then, free will said there would be no guarantees. Some people just had to learn the hard way. Neferhetepes would not take a chance on messing things up.

After meeting Nebtawi on a blind date five years ago—well, five years from when she landed here—their relationship had been volatile. *Guess I have known him one hundred and five years now!* She eyed him carefully, shadows cloaked his

body. Neferhetepes felt the immediate attraction to him, way back then, but risk getting hurt again? Never!

Her husband walked out on her when she needed him most. Therefore, Neferhetepes chose a life of personal emotional exile. This proved easy until Nebtawi arrived, kicking and screaming, into her life. It totally sucked how he pushed all her buttons. All she wanted Nebtawi to do was give her a good, hard fuck, but she would not allow herself that pleasure. She worried about the emotional hook.

So, she turned into Super Bitch, which worked every time, normally. Only trouble being, Nebtawi stuck around. They'd developed the kind of friendship where the person annoyed the fuck out of you, but if bad stuff happened, you wanted him around. Nebtawi, that name does not seem to fit him for some reason, her mind argued. Still, her senses said that *was* his name. He broke the uncomfortable silence building between them.

"Yeah, rightio, keep your hair on, Neferhetepes. I'm not happy either. However, like it or lump it, we are stuck together. Apparently, the big boss upstairs must think we have something to learn from each other. So we'll have to make the most of it."

The mention of her hair brought her hand to feel the thick, straw-like locks. She shuddered to think what it might look like. Nebtawi stepped forward out of the shadows, and recognition stirred in her belly. His taut, muscled torso looked so perfect, as it always did. But now he positively glowed. Sexiness exuded from his pores. As much as she pretended to dislike his character, she did have to admit he looked hot. His

eye color deep, almost black. That's changed, used to be blue, she thought.

"What's with the whole 'I'm all that and a bag of potato crisps' look, anyhow? Why aren't you a shriveled up, pickled penis like me?" Her eyes traveled the length of his strong looking body, his lower part still hidden in darker shadow. Oh, what she wouldn't give to savor this man's body with her lips and tongue. To taste his saltiness, lick his cock, swallow his...she felt her heartbeat quicken slightly.

In a sudden moment of realization, her hand went to her chest. A heartbeat! She felt a heartbeat! She looked imploringly at Nebtawi for an explanation, "What the fuck? I thought I was dead?"

He grinned, showing his perfectly straight teeth, "I know. It's a freakin' spin out, isn't it. I have no idea why but, wait for the best part, you get back to your old self. Well, your old young self...your newer, younger old self!"

"Okay, Einstein, I get it." Neferhetepes giggled as Nebtawi showed an unusual lack of eloquence in speech. She watched in awe as her hands and arms began to recuperate. She physically felt the skin tighten on her face, the softness permeating her hair felt heavenly. Running her fingers through, Neferhetepes held a handful up in front of her. She noticed the jet-black color. She'd always had dark hair, but this? Now her hair shone with a depth and richness she'd never witnessed before, and the heavy mass hung well below shoulder level.

The whole process took about fifteen minutes. Neferhetepes felt very pleased with her transformation, her

legs, long and shapely, her skin boasted a golden glow and felt as soft as a newborn babe's. Neferhetepes gently ran her hand up her arm and over her shoulder.

"Holy Fucking Hera! Feels like I've been enhanced by a computer or something." Nebtawi nodded in agreement and just stared, making Neferhetepes uncomfortable. "Jesus. What are you looking at? Don't tell me, I've got a flipping zit. Knew it was too good to be true."

Nebtawi's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed and gasped, "It's your eyes. They are this amazing blue. I mean all of you looks amazing, but those eyes are pure sex on a stick." he swallowed noticeably again. His intense gaze made Neferhetepes stage intervention and stop the buzz of sexual attraction building between them. Her nipples peaked in hopeful anticipation, but she refused to yield.

"Keep it in your pants, Lover Boy. They can't be that good. You haven't come in a hundred years. You'd probably hump the leg of a chair if you liked the cut of it!" Neferhetepes observed, with a slightly nasty overtone. She wondered briefly if he was wearing anything at all. *Wish I could damn well see him properly!*

Nebtawi let out an exasperated sigh "Damn it, Neferhetepes. Can't you take a compliment nicely for once? You may look good, but your attitude sure ain't sexy. The leg of a chair would be preferable in my book; it'd be less wooden." He dropped eye contact. *Intervention successful...this time.* Neferhetepes felt a little bad that she reacted so defensively and deliberately hurt his feelings. She also felt a little thrilled at his admission that she looked good.

His words rang true. She could never take a compliment with grace. Neferhetepes always felt compliments came with an ulterior motive. Playing the bitch, a habit now, seemed the only thing that worked, using it for self-protection so she would never get hurt again. Her heart ached every time the thoughts of her loss crossed her mind. It remained far from resolved. Neferhetepes avoided having to deal. Still, everyone else shouldn't have to suffer, she supposed, especially Nebtawi. Feeling more than a little guilty, she attempted to make amends.

"Yeah well, you don't look so bad yourself."

Nebtawi chuffed his breath out through his teeth "Jesus, don't knock yourself out." he paced a little more. He obviously harbored building frustrations over their situation.

Anger formed inside her again. *What is the point of trying to be nice?* She glared at him. He turned his back to her like a spoilt child. Then her eyes fell to his butt. He stood in the path of one of the many narrow streams of light entering the temple from the high windows. No clothing! She drew breath sharply. *Now that is sex on a stick!* Her renewed body ached for him. Boy, would she like to spank those puppies!

The perfectly paired and rounded cheeks protruded out from the top of two muscled thighs. Neferhetepes licked her lips, and then realized she sat naked as well. *Shit!* Luckily, her hair fell low enough to cover her tits. Not that they were ever much over a plump handful. She considered he wouldn't have noticed them anyway. However, looking down now, they'd definitely increased in size. But his ass? He'd really hit the jackpot there. She imagined the slapping sound of her

hand landing on its firmness. *Holy frickin' God, why am I thinking this way*

The silence took on the same eeriness as when the demon attacked in the alley—the moment her lungs no longer functioned and her heart slowed to a stop. A memory began to seep back into her mind. Although unconscious, her mind had been aware of her life slipping away. Somewhere in the distance, she'd heard a booming voice, commanding.

"You will remain in the carcass state, for one century. When you wake, you will have a chance to redeem your life. Do you agree?" The voice spoke to her clearly. "If you fail redemption, you will be doomed to eternity in the bowels of the earth. Do you agree?"

Her mind had answered. *Drama Queen! Of course, I fucking agree! What am I gonna do, take a one-way express ticket straight to the bowels of the earth? I'll take the scenic route please?* Neferhetepes never lost her sense of humor. She'd assumed it had been the voice of God talking, so she agreed. Who wouldn't?

"So...is there anything here that remotely resembles clothing?" she asked trying to sound casual, Neferhetepes kept her eyes above his waistline. Luckily, the shadows loomed at the right spot when he turned and moved forward, which is why she never noticed anything in the first place. Eyes up, girl, eyes up, her mind willed.

Nebtawi grinned back at her and handed her a musty cloth. He held it from her just a little longer than he needed to. His near-black colored eyes revealed the depth of his desire for her. Flushing pink, she snatched it from his hand

and dropped her gaze first. He turned his back again. A low throaty chuckle erupted from him.

"Get fucked, and don't turn around till I'm done," she ordered, knowing he won that round. Neferhetepes lifted herself from the coffin. The scratchy Hessian-like cloth wrapped around her, sarong style. The icy cold slate floor caused her to wince as her feet touched the stone.

"Oh. Wishing me luck, are you? I'd love to get fucked. Love to put this massively enhanced dick into a pussy and ream away." He fished for a bite as he stood there, back still turned, dry thrusting at the air, wrapping the smaller strip around himself, loin-cloth style.

"Put that fucking thing away and try using your brain for once! Could sell your brain as new, on account of you never having used it!"

Nebtawi faced her now and took a step closer. Neferhetepes's pussy ached and throbbed for him to use his cock on her. *Arrgh! Get out of my head*

"How original! You'd think after one hundred years in suspended animation you would have thought up a new comeback or two." He turned to face her and pretended to beat his chest, "Me Tarzan, you Jane" he pointed from himself to her.

"You Idiot. Me Unlucky." her laugh echoed around the enclosure. Her eyes noticed his protrusion tenting the front of his loin-cloth. *Love a taste of that cock...Christ! Enough.* Neferhetepes changed the subject. "I want to know what the go is with this situation we're in. Do you have any idea what



this is all about? I mean this is an ancient Egyptian Temple, isn't it?"

"It sure looks like it. But how would we get from the United States to ancient Egypt, be dead a hundred years and yet end up back to the beginnings of civilization. More to the point why? All I can work out, from the voice, you heard the voice, right?" Nebtawi continued when she nodded her head.

"All I can work out is that we have to pass some sort of test to get our lives back, or we get stuck in a really bad place for a really, really long time." He looked serious as he continued, "You know, something seems strange about this whole thing. I can remember how we got here—that demon, Gulim I think, with a face like a duck's ass in convulsions. He's kinda familiar for some reason. I can remember my life before the demon. I can remember you, but our names seem weird. But still I have a void in my brain."

"You sound perfectly normal to me." Neferhetepes quipped. Nebtawi gave her a half serious-half amused look, which only increased his charm.

"Left myself wide open for that, didn't I?" he asked, giving a dazzling smile.

Neferhetepes suspected he might be a little scared. Truth be known, she felt the knot of nervous tension in her stomach as well. *Maybe this is what you have to do to get into to Heaven.* She really hoped Heaven did exist, the thought of never seeing...Instinctively, Neferhetepes allowed her fingers to entwine in Nebtawi's as she wiped out that line of thinking. He gripped back.

For a moment, their pulses beat as one, and a strange feeling washed over her. A feeling of total satisfaction, like when you finally fit together a jigsaw puzzle that's as hard as a bull's forehead. Then, realizing her moment of weakness, she dropped her hand from his.

"I just wish I knew why I have this strange feeling that my mind is playing tricks on me. I have the name George floating around in my head." she pondered out loud.

"George! That's it! You know George. He always stuffed things up and is as clumsy as hell. He must have taken a potion and signed a demon contract, the stupid little fuck." Nebtawi looked pleased with himself.

Neferhetepes remembered George now, clearly. He'd been hanging around the neighborhood since he'd been a hairy-assed schoolboy, maybe about eight years ago. His father ran out on the family of five children, his mom worked long hours for very little pay and George mostly supervised the younger siblings. She'd seen them at the Shelter's Sunday Roast a few times. George did what he had to, to bring food to the table. He acted tough and thought he was a big man. Like everyone down on their luck, she supposed, he must have dreamed of the ultimate thrill of Demon Power.

Trouble being, it was a quick fix and highly addictive. Once you started, only the strongest of will could come back. *Just another party drug really, but with more dire consequences.* The dark side promised folk down on their luck things like world domination, a chance to feel like they were somebody. It gave them nothing but a quick hit of intense power and

then a huge let down. They craved more and more, and the deeds they performed for it increased in seriousness.

"You know he came on to me one night."

"He did? It's a wonder you let him live." Tyler grinned at her.

Violet stuck out her tongue.

"Well he ain't made of wood," she laughed, "but he certainly got a refusal." Useless as a hat full of assholes though; the reverse Midas touch would describe George aptly. He seemed to have his heart in the right place. Probably just thought this was a good idea at the time.

No doubt finding an escape from his nightmare life was premium motivation. Still, Neferhetepes wanted to throttle him. He had no right stuffing around in other people's lives. If George tried to pull off a spell, she doubted they would have been here for a century. He got edgy waiting for a five-minute microwave meal at the shelter on the nights he'd called in cold, wet and hungry.

"When I see George again, Gulim or not, I'm going to make sure he goes down for good. He was a total pain in the ass as a human. I don't see why he should be any different as a demon."

Nebtawi laughed, "Yeah, I bet he's still the same cock-up he's always been. Big on words and low on effect. He couldn't even pull off a minor armed robbery. Remember that time he held up the drug store, and the little six year old girl kicked him in the shin for pointing the gun at her grandma?" he chuckled hard now.

Neferhetepes looked on, amused, as her memory of the incident flooded back, and she continued the story for him because laughter had the better of him. His deep, rolling laugh infected her, and she chuckled along with him.

"Yeah, and when he doubled over to rub his shin, the old girl walloped him with her handbag and knocked him out cold," Neferhetepes laughed loudly.

Gasping breaths in between guffaws, Nebtawi clutched at his ribcage, and tears rolled down his reddened cheeks. "Then the paramedics came and carted him off to hospital overnight....because...because the silly old duck had half a brick in her handbag.haaaa haaaahaaahaaa...."

It took a good ten minutes for them to recover from the laughing fit. Neferhetepes presumed the pressure of the situation found its release through the mirth. She finally spoke "Still, he is gonna get it when he shows his face around here. I really hate it when I feel I have lost control over anything."

Her voice took on an unusual vulnerability, which must have proved too much for Nebtawi. Grabbing her hand again, he swished her over, pressing his hot lips onto hers. Nebtawi always gave her the most passionate kisses she'd ever known. Those kisses threatened to break her resolve. Her legs felt like they had turned to jelly, and she sensed her resolve teetered on the brink of surrender.

Gulim snorted. He'd heard Violet and Tyler, now Neferhetepes and Nebtawi, "Damn fools," he roared. "No idea what they are in for. I'll put them into eternal damnation before they realize what is going on." His hand automatically

went to the place the handbag had hit him and rubbed in remembrance. He swooped across the room, drawing his heavy red and gold brocade cape with him. It clipped a wooden stand and sent the large decorative urn flying, the crash of pottery sounded. *Shit, there goes another one*

He watched and heard the pair in his crystal ball, a crude means of spying these days, but still effective. Anyhow, he'd only been a demon for two weeks and hadn't quite gotten the hang of telepathy or body inhabitation yet. The year 2150 would be his year. Finally, he could achieve what he'd coveted for so long, power. No longer would he be the poor kid who amounted to nothing, and not only that, he would be the boss for a change. Might get some respect then.

"The funny thing is, those two weaklings think they are one hundred years old," he chuckled. But that had been all smoke and mirrors and some basic mind control. Gulim knew he'd left out one ingredient, but so far, the spell incantation seemed to be working well, except for the mispronunciation of one word. Gulim had tried to straighten out the page of the spell book and smudged dirt over some of the words.

Now he realized the words *Ancient Egypt* should have been Ancient Eclipse. The pair went back to a temple of many thousands of years ago. Ah well, no harm, no foul. He found a couple of original Egyptian names and got on with it.

Leaving out the root of the magical native sugar bush was his only other mistake. Not adding it would make them view each other in a renewed light. They would see and feel every sexual aspect of each other enhanced.

Gulim figured it wouldn't hurt if they had a shag, give him more time to perfect his entrance. His materialization skills needed more work. Still getting off on the fact he had slipped under the demon contract radar, he laughed out loud, "I am so brilliant. I knew I would find a loophole in that contract."

The pair lay in the catatonic state for a week and Gulim re-programmed each sub-conscious, with crystal power and ancient herbs, to believe they'd been dead for a century. The only part he managed to get right was the body decay. That aspect performed to perfection, and their bodies really became the way they would be after one hundred years, properly embalmed. Least I got that, he thought proudly.

The contract clearly stated the final pair must know they had been in suspended animation for one hundred years. Gulim, who used to be called George, focused in on the word 'know'. In his reckonings, they didn't need to be that age. They just had to believe they were that age. Technically they would *know* it. He thought himself very clever.

Being a Soul Collector Demon proved hard work, so after a week he decided to try the fast track. He could hear his father now, "no tenacity, can't stick to anything!" Gulim's own greed and desire for eternal life led him from being a young, unsuccessful robber to potions and rituals for an easy way to power and longevity. Apparently, it took dedication and determination to become an effective demon. The best ones did the hard yards. You had to be committed to the program to really succeed in Demon-hood. That's what he'd heard anyway.

Of course, at the time he took the potion, George didn't know he needed to spend time collecting five hundred souls to achieve his dream. The old school demons said anything under a century of experience meant you couldn't be considered a 'real' demon. *Well, I'll show them.* Gulim never bothered with the small print, a policy he may have to change. Even the fucking demons had gone for revenue raising. Then he found the 'or'.

Clause 489: The said Demon (soul collector) must collect five hundred (500) souls for demise by any means necessary or find two (2) souls earmarked for the higher purpose and have them donate a minimum of five hundred (500) souls to the Underworld. In the process of their donation, they would be awarded the ecstasy of a life without emotional pain.

*Clause 500: The said donation by the two (2) must be made via natural disaster, accident or supposed act of terrorism.*

*Clause 500a: If the said two (2) should fail, the acting Demon would then face eternal damnation without a chance of parole, unless one of the said two redeems him.*

If, by chance, Nebtawi and Neferhetepes decided to sacrifice themselves instead of choosing a life of perfection back on Earth, Gulim would be defeated. The ritual he'd performed, to rule in the world of darkness and collect souls for damnation, would be broken. He himself would face eternity in pain and turmoil.

He had chosen this pair very carefully. He knew them personally on the Earth plane and hated the ribbings he'd

gotten from them on regular occasions. They had a wild streak and a strong attraction to each other.

Nebtawi had been quite a regular with the ladies before he made friends with her. Every woman who met him wanted to fuck him. He'd used sex as a way to feel loved after abandonment during his childhood, yet he was afraid to commit. Lately he'd abstained from sex altogether. *Hey, this soul reading shit is a blast.*

Neferhetepes—well, she became strong and fiercely independent, to a fault, after the loss of her baby. Plus her worm of a man left her. This became the exact combination Gulim needed.

Nebtawi couldn't commit his love but longed for the unconditional love most children received from their parents.

Neferhetepes feared closeness with anyone, after the loss of her child, but craved it all the same.

He would take them back to a time when she could have her baby again, and he could know a traditional family life, two loving parents, and the whole crock. It would be perfect, and Gulim could finally leave his shitty world behind.

Neferhetepes and Nebtawi both had losses in their lives they would give anything to change. Surely, they would never refuse this opportunity, no matter what sacrifice humankind had to make. After all, what harm would another tsunami or bombing do?

The planet had plenty of humans. The pair was already reserved to go to the higher plane because of the incredible losses they'd suffered and their undying will to serve others. If they decided to sacrifice human lives, the action would



send the soul of any person to the Underworld. The conversion of essentially good to evil held a big reward for the demon that succeeded. If he could convince them, even unknowingly, to gather souls for him this way he would be a powerful demon in no time. All he had to do was make them an offer they couldn't refuse.

"I will have eternal life. I will prevail." Gulim swished his cape again as he placed himself in the meditative position. Never being the most graceful human, he trod on the corner of it and tripped over, bumping his head on the floor, "fucking thing." These types of traits often carried through into Demon-hood. He prepared for the ceremony carefully.

Neferhetepes broke away from the hungered lips inflaming her body. Her hand landed squarely on his cheek, and the slap resounded off the thick walls. "What the fuck do you think you are doing?" she demanded.

"Taking up where we left off, ouch!" Nebtawi rubbed his cheek, which reddened into the outline of her fingers. "Bitch!"

The man would not be put off this time, and he scruffed her again. Holding her head between his hands, he softly kissed her mouth and tickled his tongue along the outline of her lips. Neferhetepes felt her jelly-like legs return, and her mind panicked. *I can't keep this up forever.*

"Neferhetepes, I don't know what it is that has caused so much hurt and fear in your life. Please, let me help you?" His dark eyes begged her to love him, to feel his love, and Neferhetepes felt tired.

She felt tired of fighting alone, tired of waking up alone, tired of being frightened. Tears formed as she looked back at

this dear, sweet friend who proved his devotion to her time and time again. No matter how badly she treated him, no matter how awful she was, he always came back. Nebtawi looked out for her all these years, remaining the only one she turned to when things became too hard to deal with.

Nebtawi must have sensed the crack in her emotional armor and seized the moment, "Neferhetepes, I love you. I've always loved you since that first night you stormed off and called me a wanker. Now, I don't know why you are so defensive, but I do know that defensive people are hurting inside." He held her closer, "One thing I do know for sure is that hurting people need unconditional love. Because I am hurting and I long for unconditional love."

Another sweet kiss drifted across her lips. Neferhetepes exhaled and in a shaking voice said, "What makes you think I'm capable of giving unconditional love?"

Nebtawi's eyes smiled back at her, "Because I've watched you with injured animals, sick children and homeless people. I have seen you stand up for the bullied and want to help the ones everyone else turns their back on. Neferhetepes, you know no other way to love. Even when someone seems bad, through and through, you still have empathy for what they must have faced to become that way. I swear you would rescue the Devil himself if you could."

She smiled. He had her pegged, all that time and energy she spent trying to act tough and uncaring, shot down in flames. Through her grin, she said, "I bet his parents were tough." Once more, they chortled together, quietly, his arms tightly around her.

"Oh. Neferhetepes, you are a loon."

This time she kissed him like there would be no tomorrow. Every ounce of hurt and pain flooded into that kiss as she gave herself over to him. Desire burned hotter than molten lava. She throbbed with every touch of his tongue onto hers. Her body relaxed against him, and his erection pressed into her abdomen.

"Oh God, I love you so much!" he breathed.

He kissed her neck, ears and face. Her leg came up and hooked around his legs, conveying her need. Raising her off the ground, he sat her on the edge of the marble block holding the colorful gold and blue casket. At least there would be no worries about underwear getting in the way. She winced a little at the coldness of the stone but spread her legs wide for him, ready to feel what she had denied herself for so long. His tip pressed to her slick furrow. Neferhetepes, with no doubts this time, pulled him to her.

He entered her easily; no need for any more preliminaries. The feel of his hot cock inside her gave her goose bumps all over, she felt her vagina clench around his shaft. He looked into her eyes with pure adulation as he stroked in long, patient movement. With each slow thrust inwards, he held himself inside her pulsing pussy for a few seconds.

This action held her at the brink of orgasm, almost enough to bring her off, but not quite. Not wanting to admit complete surrender, the lack of command bugged her and she needed to come really badly, Neferhetepes decided to call the shots.

"Lay on your back, Nebtawi!" she ordered. He smiled. Saying nothing, he removed his stiff penis from her and

looked at the floor. Neferhetepes jumped down and lay her rough sarong on the ground for him.

"Why, thank you M'lady" he chuckled, proceeding to lie on his back. His hardened prick piercing the air, Neferhetepes moved to lower herself onto him. As she slid onto his full length, a flash of pleasure erupted within her, to be so filled felt sublime. At the same time, a flash of memory returned. She grunted her pleasure.

"Ty...your name is Ty. Tyler Robert Whitney to be exact, I knew your name wasn't Nebtawi." She moved up and down on his cock, shuddering with pleasure. "I am going to fuck you Ty. I have wanted you for so long now. I am going to fuck you good!"

"Ty...Ty Whitney, of course. And you are...you are...Violet! Yes, that's it! Remember? I used to call you Violent instead," he thrust upwards to ram his cock fully into her.

"Violet! Yes, Violet Symons." She felt relief at the memory recall and urgency at the approaching orgasm. Her pace increased, and Violet planted her feet flat on the floor bouncing on the rock-hard erection he offered. Her clit pressed to his pubic bone on every stroke. Neferhetepes wanted to suck him as well, but there was no time for that right now. She felt her breasts bouncing and then the firm grip of his hands around them. Her head lay back, letting her jet-black hair cascade around her. Violet felt the orgasmic pressure building inside. Even the tips of her fingers tingled as Tyler pounded up into her.

Impaling herself onto him as hard as she could, the fullness of her pussy almost pushed her over the edge. His

fingers pinched and pulled at her rigid nipples. Her eye contact locked onto his, and the power of true love surged between them. Closer and closer, she moved to a long-awaited orgasm she knew would be earth-shattering. Violet groaned as Ty thrust. She had almost hit the point of no return.

"I love you, Violet," his voice rasped.

"I love you, Ty."

In that split second, Gulim appeared. Standing next to them, he exclaimed, "Oh fuck, this was supposed to be a practice run. Of all the times to get it right." Gulim took a step back, and his eyes widened. "Uh Ohhhh!"

Violet glared at him, absolutely livid. She stood up and before he could blink twice, she smashed her fist into his jaw. Gulim dropped to the stone floor, out as cold as a maggot. Violet swiped her hands against each other twice and said to his unconscious body, "Never get between me and my orgasm."

Then as if nothing happened, she jumped back onto Ty's prick and humped as hard as she could. Ty looked a little surprised and amused but began work on her nipples once again until the climax erupted from her. Her cry echoed around the dull gray brick. The orgasm went for minutes, not seconds. Years of built-up frustration and anger flowed from her body. Her eyes shut tightly as she let the feeling wash over her, and then she saw it. A glowing white light beyond her consciousness, the feeling of well-being and safety stronger than she'd ever felt before. Opening her eyes slowly,

she saw Ty with a sublime look of satisfaction and wonder on his face.

"Oh shit, did you come? I'm so sorry I wasn't paying attention. I had the strangest feeling just then." Violet had no recollection of his orgasm, but judging by what escaped from her pussy at the moment, he had come, in a big way.

"Are you kidding? You went off like a vibrator around me, and when you opened your eyes just now, a white light glowed from them for a second. You felt amazing."

"I'm not sure what happened, but I know it felt incredible." She looked over at Gulim still sprawled on the floor. "Oh dear. Do you think he'll be okay?"

Ty roared with laughter. "Jesus. You nutter. You just gave him a punch that would have laid out a rhinoceros, and now you are worried about him." Violet laughed as well. He hugged her to him.

"Well, the stupid idiot should pick his entrances a little more carefully."

"We'd better see what George has to say if we ever want out get out of this mess. Somehow, I don't think we should have remembered our names. And knowing George, he tried to take a shortcut or two," Ty reasoned.

Violet kissed him and moved sideways, easing off his now semi-soft dick, "You are always right, I hate that about you."

"I know" he grinned.

"Don't think this means I am going to be nice to you all the time."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"I will still bust your ass when I need to, and I'll probably be demanding and moody." She stood up.

"Looking forward to it!" he said matter-of-factly, standing as well. Violet wondered why it took her so long to admit her feelings for him, and then she remembered her loss that Tyler still didn't know about. She grabbed up her material square and covered up. Ty had his cloth cover on now also.

Gulim sat up, touching his jaw gingerly, blinking repeatedly. The pair watched him. He stood, wobbled a little and blinked his eyes to focus on them. Seeing Violet, he took a step back and grabbed the edges of his cape. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot, waiting for him to speak. He stood up straight and swooshed his cape around him in a royal-like gesture.

"Neferhetepes and Nebtawi, you are the prisoners of Gulim, Soul Collector Demon. I have your lives in my hands. You will bow to me." Gulim raised his hand and held it up.

"Knock it off...George, you fucking mental case." Violet spat the words at the lime green-skinned pseudo-demon, "and by the way our names are Violet Symons and Tyler Whitney."

"How did you know that?" George demanded, running his hand over his wart-encrusted chin, clearly shocked at her knowledge.

"I fucking remembered, you little toss-off. Now, what the fuck is going on here?" Her voice came loud and demanding. George took another step back and re-set himself, his pointed tail seemed to instinctively cover his genitalia. Violet took one

step toward him. Tyler touched her arm, and she halted as George bravely spoke again.

"You have a choice to make, the choice of your life. You can be banished to the pits of the Underworld and remain in pain and torture for eternity, or you can return to a better life, with every desire answered, if you donate five hundred souls."

He seemed to rush it all out at once as if hoping they wouldn't understand half of it.

Ty spoke now, "Five hundred souls? What the Hell is that about?"

"Well, people die everyday. It's no biggie. You just order a natural disaster or something, no problem. It doesn't have to be anyone you know personally. Plenty out there starving anyhow," George answered casually.

"You really are stupid, and crazy. *As if* we are going to do that?" Violet retorted.

"Don't be so sure. There is something you should see before you decide. This is how your lives could be." George waved his purple crystal, and a scene materialized in the corner. Not on the wall like a film, it actually appeared there.

Violet saw a fairground and a single little boy; he must have been five or so, a real little cutie. She heard Ty gasp and turned to see him on his knees, staring. The small boy wandered around, looking lost and terrified. His tiny voice carried through the crowd, but everyone walked around him.

"Mom? Mommy? Daddy? Where are you?" Tears rolled down his tiny face as the daylight began to fade. He



screamed now "Mommeeeeee! Mommmeeeeeee! Come get me! I'll be good, I promise. Mommy..."

Violet tried to run to him, but she seemed glued to the ground. Her heart broke all over again for her own loss. The tears dripped down her face.

Ty cried out to the young boy. "It's okay, it's alright. You'll be fine. Don't be scared."

Ty felt tears streaming down his cheeks but was powerless to stop them. If a freight train hit him, he doubted it would have more impact than the what played out before him now. His past. The young boy turned to him with identical-looking eyes. It was very disconcerting to stare into the terror of your own eyes. This little boy was Tyler Whitney, aged four years. His parents left him at the fairground, alone and scared. Tyler, the man, relived the horrid feeling in an instant. A flash of anger rose in him, but he heard the tiny voice.

The boy remained focused on him. "Where's Mommy and Daddy?" he asked.

Ty sobbed back to him "I don't know, I don't know where they are, I don't know where they went. I'm sorry."

The young boy looked all around him. Turning back to Tyler, he gasped his words out, "Was I naughty? I won't be bad anymore, I promise. Tell Mommy I won't be bad anymore. Make them come back and get me."

"I can't, I can't. I tried, but I can't find them." Ty's whole body relaxed into a defeated slump. Taking the child in his arms, he held on for dear life. His sorrow ached within. They'd seemed so happy. Why did they leave him behind? His gut felt torn. Together the young Ty and the older Ty cried out,

"Mommy, Mommy, where are you?" Tyler felt four years old again, and he couldn't think clearly.

"Tyler, darling, there you are. Tyler! I was so scared I'd lost you." A beautifully dressed and groomed brunette rushed to the little boy and threw her arms around him.

"Mommy! You found me!"

"Of course, I found you, silly. I would never let you go. I would search for you forever if I had to. I'll never lose you again," she said as her tears fell.

Adult Ty looked up and over at her, "Mommy?" Lifting the little boy off the ground, the woman walked to Ty and put her other arm around his shoulders. A wave of instant peace passed over him. "You came back?"

"Yes Tyler, darling, I am here. I looked everywhere for you."

A man in a suit came running over to them.

"You found him, thank God for that." He ruffled big Ty's hair and kissed the little boy on the cheek, "Boy, you sure had us worried."

"Sorry, Daddy, I'll be careful next time," little Ty chimed.

"It's not your fault, son, don't ever think that. Well, we can go home now. I swear your father would never have left this place if you hadn't turned up." His mother hugged him tightly.

Tyler recognised something in those words. Something he should have always known: his parents never stopped looking for him. Looking deeply into the eyes of his real mother, he knew that fact to be the truth. They just could not find him. The people he now called Mom and Dad, the ones who took him from the fairground that day, had passed away. But

maybe some research might help him find out why he never made it back to his family. Luckily he'd always known family love with his new family, but nothing could ease the torment that his true parents had left him behind.

"You never stopped looking for me." Tyler squeezed her hand.

"Come on, let's go home by the fire, we can play a board game and have cocoa." Daddy gave a smile.

His parents kissed him on the cheek and faded away, the smaller version of him held tightly their arms. Tyler wept again as they disappeared, but he knew something he'd never known before: they had not abandoned him. Ty turned to George. He could almost hate him, but instead it felt more like pity.

"You bastard," he tried to take a step toward George but found he couldn't move a muscle.

By that time, a baby bassinet appeared in the other corner, and Violet stepped toward it, her sympathy for Tyler momentarily forgotten. She could move again. Her heart pounded with the fury of a raging sea. Violet wanted to turn and run, but her body seemed compelled to go to the bassinet. She recognized it; actually she knew it all too well.

The white wicker baby's bed belonged to her, the calendar and clock on the dresser showed the date and time her whole world crashed around her...the day she found her precious little Brodie asleep. Asleep, only she couldn't wake him up, and he felt cold.

Her mind now screamed a warning, but she slowly walked to the small bed and stood beside it as she did that day. Even

with eyes clouded by tears, she could see her precious boy, her little man. Sobs racked her body as she stood silently trembling, feeling her pain all over again. The very pain she'd avoided all this time, out in the open, my reason for living, my baby. She loved this little boy with everything she had, everything she was. When her baby died, the world became a blackened place for her.

She'd harbored no desire to live on. Her husband let the paramedics take their son's little body away before she'd had a chance to say a proper goodbye. He lied to them, saying she did not want to see Brodie. Violet would have given anything to hold him one last time, just to say goodbye, to apologize. After her husband buried their son, he promptly took himself away as well. It seemed the only reason he'd stayed with her had been because they shared a baby together.

Looking down at Brodie, she wore the pain like a badge. Feeling like it tore her heart in two all over again, she touched her shaking hand to his chubby cheek and felt his warmth. Stroking him gently, her sobbing slowly subsided. Two little blue eyes opened—he was alive! He looked up at her peacefully, and the hint of a first smile played around his cherub lips. His tiny fingers curled around hers and held fast,

"My baby" she cooed, "my little man." Reaching in, she picked him up and hugged him close. "Brodie, my sweet Brodie. Oh, how Mommy missed you." Violet held him and looked into his eyes.

The white light shone in Brodie's eyes and connected with the white light in hers. She felt him speak to her of his love

and forgiveness. The weight of the world lifted from her shoulders in that instant. Understanding filtered through her mind.

*Mommy, it's okay, I miss you, too. But I am waiting for you, and the time wasn't right for me. I love you Mommy. It isn't your fault.*

Harmony passed between them, and she knew what must be done. Violet held Brodie close to her chest, his breath against her chin, a steely resolve came over her. Realizing that hiding from love would not help her develop spiritually, Violet hugged her baby. Kissing him several times and placing him back into his bed, she whispered goodbye as the bassinet faded.

Turning to Ty, she saw a look of such love and empathy, she knew he would give up anything for her, and there would be only one way she could get to be with her baby again. Tears flowed from Ty and, for a brief moment, Violet enjoyed the safety of Ty's arms.

He whispered. "I will do anything you need me to do".

George spoke quietly. "There you see. You can have it all back. Tyler, you can have the family you lost, and Violet, you can have your son back. Everything will be as it should be," he produced a stack of papers from under his cape, "all you have to do is sign here and nominate the way you wish to make the donation and everything will be sweet."

Violet stepped toward him. Anger consumed her. Never before had she faced this feeling, that she could tear another human being apart and watch the life drain out of him. Even when Mark, Brodie's father, left, she never hated him. She

understood the contempt he must have felt for her because she let his son die. Violet fought the feeling and strived to find understanding. She could not lower herself to those standards. She knew she would find forgiveness in her heart because hatred just wasn't her style. Still George didn't have to know that just yet.

George stepped back and looked a little nervous. Violet stopped in her tracks, speaking in a venomous tone which could be reserved for the most evil of creatures, "You cruel asshole."

Snatching the papers and pen from him, she handed them to Ty. George looked smug, as if he knew they couldn't resist.

Turning to Ty, she whispered into his ear, and he smiled slightly. Then she stood beside Tyler and grabbed his hand and directed her answer to George. "No."

"What? What do you mean, no?" George looked bewildered.

"I mean...no. We refuse to sign away five hundred souls, and we will gladly go hand-n-hand to Hell if we have to. I have dedicated my life to the betterment of people. I will not, for any reason, knowingly slaughter anyone."

"Now don't be hasty. Think about this. Your baby, you want him back. Don't you? Tyler? Your parents? Just the way you always wanted it."

Tyler spoke up as he set the pages on the ground. "You can't give me back what I never had, George. Don't you see all this demon stuff is bullshit? You can't win with evil. There is no right way. This is what I think of your contract." Ty lifted his loincloth and proceeded to piss on the papers, drenching

them in yellow by the time he finished. Violet could not suppress a giggle. He shook the drops off and dabbed his loin cloth to the eye of his dick. George's sorrowful look said he knew he fought a losing battle.

"Fuck *me*!" he said, defeated.

"And besides," Violet continued, "I know I will meet Brodie again. He was not meant for this life, not yet. I see that now. My life without meeting Tyler would be awful. I'd rather be in Hell. And if I assume correctly, that is exactly where you are headed or a place a whole lot like it!"

Ty stepped over and encircled her with his arms. A vortex of unconditional love surrounded them.

Gulim, George, faded away still cursing at his own stupidity.

Violet spoke first, "Thank you, Tyler. That was a mighty big sacrifice you just made for me."

Tyler shrugged and kissed her softly. "It would be a greater one to never have known you. How long do you think we've got?" he asked, mischief sparkling in his dark eyes.

"How long do you need?" she laughed, and his mouth rushed to cover hers.

He pulled out of the kiss, "I know one thing for sure—I ain't going to any fuckless place until I've tasted that tight pussy of yours."

"Is that a fact?"

"That *is* a fact," he stated. Just as he started to lower to his knees, a pure white light filled the tomb. "Oh no. What now? Keep your hands to yourself this time. This is bound to be someone more important than George." Tyler warned.

Violet laughed back. "I promise I won't do anything rash."

A woman appeared, glowing, long flowing platinum hair, wearing a stark white dress with elongated sleeves draped in a bell shape from her wrist, barefoot and slightly elevated from the ground. Her legs moved, but it seemed more fluid than a walk. The faint outline of huge transparent wings glittered behind her shoulders. Ty heard Violet suck in her breath and hold it a little longer than normal.

"An angel!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

Having heard countless reports of angel encounters, Ty took them with a grain of salt. This real life experience took his breath away.

The Angel exuded light and an all encompassing aura of love. It radiated from her and touched his soul. Apparently, Violet felt the same for she dropped to her knees and bowed her head. She thumped Ty's leg, and he quickly did the same. The Angel spoke in a clear and pure melodic tone.

"Rise, good people, Violet and Tyler. I have come to thank you for the selfless saving of lives by the sacrifice of your souls to the Underworld."

Violet stood but kept her head bowed. Ty did the same. He wasn't worried about offending the Angel. He just didn't want to make Violet grumpy.

"You may look at me. You are equal to me, Earth Angels."

"Us? Equal to you? I don't think so," Violet replied as she grabbed onto Ty's hand and held fast. Her touch gave him courage.

"Angels are not to be worshipped. Our Father who created us should be worshipped. We are here merely as helpers to



His children. I am Arianna," the angel smiled benevolently. "Yes, indeed you are equal to me, and you are both earmarked for the realm of the Angel upon your crossing. This is why your souls would be so advantageous to the Underworld. You both could have made powerful demons in their world. Unfortunately for them, and fortunately for us, they chose a buffoon to try and win you over. Thank the Heaven's you did not turn to the dark side."

"Don't tell me you are really my Father?" Tyler joked, a hopeless Star Wars fanatic.

The Angel chortled.

Violet thumped him in the side again, her gaze never leaving the angel. Tyler winced and rubbed his side.

"Sorry, just having a joke," he whispered out the side of his mouth. Violet ignored him but not without a squeeze of her hand on his.

"Where is George now?" Violet asked.

"He is in our holding room awaiting his fate. I intervened on your behalf and applied for a special exemption. I had a feeling you wouldn't let us down."

Ty snickered despite himself, "Applied for a special exemption? You mean all that stuff goes on up there? This is too much."

"Oh yes! Some things never change. We would be lost without our Policies and Guidelines Portfolio. So much goes on, our record keepers are extremely busy," Arianna smiled.

"So what happens to George now?" Violet pressed on.

"That is entirely up to you two. You are well within your rights to banish him to the Underworld forever."

Violet looked up at Ty, "I was so angry at him for playing with our emotions like that. But I did get the chance to hold Brodie and say goodbye, which I never had before, and you saw your Mom and Dad again..." She turned to Tyler.

"Sure, and now I know they never stopped looking for me. I'm not really sure what did happen, but I feel more at peace than before. I'll support your decision," Ty answered.

"I may be able to shed some light on this for you" Arianna said, "excuse the pun! I cannot interfere with your knowledge, but I can give you some clues if you choose to listen. We give out clues to people all the time, but many never listen, because they do not believe."

"I'm listening." Ty looked eagerly to her for answers. *What can she have to tell me?*

"Search back into your memory, to the time you were lost in the fairground. Pain has blocked some details for you. I can tell you this. Your parents have not crossed to my world. Consider the facts. Try to remember the woman who found you and what she said to her husband. Remember, you traveled a long way after that. The people who raised you couldn't have children, and they loved you so much, perhaps they never looked quite hard enough for your parents. Maybe they never told you everything because they were frightened of the void you would leave in their lives if you went away."

The angel looked kindly at him, "Just make sure you face this with love in your heart and not fear. Blame is not a solution. Finding answers is."

Turning back to Violet now, she said, "If you tell me to banish George, I will and think no less of you than I do now."

If you choose to save him, we have no guarantees that this experience will have taught him anything."

"Save him, please. I know it seems silly, but everyone deserves another chance. I think his fucked-up life is punishment enough." Violet quickly put her hand over her mouth as she realized she had cursed, "Oops. Sorry."

Tyler squeezed her hand in support now and barely restrained a laugh. His woman sure had a way with words. That was one of the many things he loved about her.

"Don't worry about it, your actions speak louder than your words. Back to life for George it is then. Now, you two have been here a week only. I trust you will keep up your work with the homeless and poor, Violet, and that you, Tyler, will continue to have next to no sleep as you heal the poor for no charge," Violet stared in shock at Tyler.

"You're a Doctor?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Ahhhh well, yes," he grinned back at her. She'd never asked, so he'd never volunteered the information. Suited him fine. At least he knew it wasn't his qualifications and income that impressed her.

"You work for nothing, after hours, helping the poor. You never told me."

"You never asked me," he replied simply.

"I'm sorry," her head bowed, "I have been so very self indulgent, haven't I?"

He slapped her lightly on the rump, "Oh terribly but don't worry, I'll take it out of your hide."

Violet laughed and jabbed him in the ribs for making the implication in front of Arianna, "Ty!"

The huge angel smiled back at them and continued to speak.

"I can put you back where you were, with full memory of this. The people close to you won't know you've been gone, and George will not interfere. He will also have full memory, and hopefully it will be enough to bring him back to the fold."

Ty remembered the kiss they'd been sharing and was stoked when Violet said, "Yes please." She looked down toward her enlarged breasts and touched her hair, "Will I still look like this?"

"I think I can arrange that in return for the sacrifices you two have shown. You can contact me, Violet, whenever you need to, through meditation. Good luck in your search Tyler, and be happy you two. I'll be watching over you both."

Tyler grinned at Violet and back to Arianna, "Thanks..."

The angel's wings came into view properly and dazzled his vision with sparkling brilliance. Closing his eyes tightly, he waited until he could no longer see the glow from behind his eyelids. He opened his eyes and they stood in the darkened alley.

"Alone at last. Come here, you!" Ty grabbed her hips and drew her to him, Violet did not resist. The kiss sated a hunger for closeness he'd held for a very long time. His tongue on a mission, hot and probing, explored her mouth. Showing no more hesitation or resistance, she sucked it gently as he softly worked back and forth in rhythm to the ebb and flow of Violet's tongue. Tickling the end of her tongue with his, he flicked slowly over hers. Their lips no longer touched. Violet flicked, rubbed and caressed Ty's tongue with her own, over

and over again. Ty's desire reached fever pitch as she cupped his bulging crotch in her hand and squeezed.

Ty almost blew his bolt there and then, but an urge much greater grabbed him.

He groaned and crushed her lips to his as she let his tongue slide deep into her mouth, and she sucked on it. A hand now inside her bra, fingers flicking a nipple, he pinched the hard nub. She pressed against him, once again raising her leg to wrap around his. This had become her sign of the readiness to fuck.

Then he remembered they stood in the alley.

"Ty, do you want to, right here?" Violet asked, breathlessly.

"I want to fuck you anywhere and everywhere, every hour, on the hour."

"Ah, what the fuck! The first time we did it in our own tomb. What could be freakier than that?" Violet laughed. She gripped his shirt and pulled him further in to the alley, looking around, "George is nowhere to be seen."

"I made you a promise I intend to keep, woman." Having said that, he sank to his knees, reached over to an old crate and dragged it over. He gently pressed Violet back against the wall, reefed her jeans and underwear down, and off, and raised one of her feet to the top of the crate. The crate sat high enough to raise her knee to her shoulder level. He opened her to the cool night air and felt her shudder excitedly at his intentions.

"Your pussy looks good. Now let's see how you feel." He allowed the tip of his finger to dip around her opening and

spread her juices up over her clit. Ty saw her push her back into the wall for support.

The feel of her clit, swollen with arousal, made his mouth water. He couldn't wait to get his tongue onto it and into her gripping tunnel. His fingers deftly ran over her, working quickly in small circles. Ty had every intention of making her come as quickly as possible, the first time. He held two fingers together over her swollen clit and worked his fingers furiously fast, but delicately, in a sideways, back and forth motion. The friction caused Violet to groan loudly and push her pelvis forward for more.

His other hand had two fingers hard up inside her, which gripped at his long digits.

"Fuck! Ty! That is incredible, oh! Don't stop, baby. I want to come for you." Ty continued with his work and encouraged her toward orgasm as she braced into the wall.

"Do it, Violet. Come for me, I want you to come, so I can lick your sweet juices and make you come again in my mouth."

"Oh shit, oh fuck, oh God!" Violet erupted effusively as her orgasm traveled the length of her body. Instead of working her clit harder as she came, Ty worked more softly and slower, causing the climax to generate longer and become more intense.

She trembled and writhed as the waves of orgasm continued. Drawing the very last shiver out of her, he gently massaged her sensitive clit. He left his fingers hard up inside her and gladly accepted the clenching spasms. Her body shaking, Violet moaned her satisfaction. He would give her

more. Ty felt satisfied at her peak, smiling, still on his knees. He would have her climax again, this time to satisfy a fantasy he'd had from the night he'd met her. It was time to eat her out. Lick into her creamy cum and satisfy his hunger for her juices.

"Oh, you ain't seen nothing yet. I'm going to eat your pussy until you scream!"

"You best let me sit down on this crate. My leg isn't going to hold out for much longer." After removing her foot from the crate, Ty allowed her to sit with her ass on the edge and back against the wall. Placing each of her heels up on the crate, he pressed her knees outwards. This opened her pussy to the maximum. Then he placed his thumb and fingers either side of her clit, popping it out, to unveil her sensitivity from its hood and splay her completely. This alone caused shudders. Ty realized Violet remained sensitive to touch from her last orgasm.

He applied his tongue softly, lapping gently at her until he felt Violet relax into the action, and before long, under his lush tongue strokes, she encouraged him for more. As he worked on pushing her to the second orgasmic level, Ty licked her opening. She tasted so sweet. It tipped his passion over the edge. Wrapping his lips around her opening completely, he sucked at her. Ty encouraged the remains of her last explosive peak forth and into his mouth.

She growled, and he drove his fat tongue into her constricting vagina, to the hilt. Violet cried out. He reamed her out with his tongue until all the remnants of her first orgasm had gone. Now, it was time to bring on her second.

This time he relaxed his tongue, licking her from her opening to exposed clit, which he guessed would be begging for contact after the caress of the cool, night air.

He guessed right, because as he dragged his tongue slowly over her pussy, she screamed at him, "Yes Ty! Yes, do it. Lick me, baby...harder...harder..."

The flat of his tongue rasped over her exposed clit while groaning his enjoyment. The intensity of her grip on his shoulders deepened, and he knew her next orgasm loomed.

Now moving his whole head up and down, he licked with furious determination along her furrow, from bottom to top and finally the paroxysms of pleasure hit her body. As if in a delirious joy she screamed out. The tip of his tongue tickled speedily at her clit, ever so lightly, during her eruption, to put her into a multiple succession of tiny 'gasms. He shafted three fingers inside her rippling tunnel, and Violet worked herself up and down on them. "Yes, yes, yes, fuck, fuck...yes, ooooooh yes, oooooh..." Finally her climax receded.

"Damn, Violet! You go off violently...I love your fucking orgasms, they are for real." he scooped a little of her juice onto his fingertips and licked it up.

Still panting with pleasure, she laughed, "No kidding? I am rather partial to them myself," and her slow descent began. He laughed with her as they stood up. Violet grabbed his hard cock again, no hesitation this time, no slap.

"I suppose a fuck is out of the question?" she asked, innocently.

"No way, it's not. You will be fucked, girl. Well and truly."



He quickly undid his trousers and threw them out of the way. Then Violet felt herself lifted from the crate and spun around. He pushed her firmly in the middle of her back and exposed her bare ass. Without further ado, Ty opened her cheeks and placed his shining knob at her sopping pussy opening.

"Are you ready for the hardest fucking of your life?" Tyler felt an uncontrollable lust take over for the woman he loved so much.

"Ready? I thought you would never ask," she quipped.

With that, he rammed her to the hilt. She urged him on again as he bottomed out inside her, thrusting back to meet his strokes.

"Fuck me harder, fuck me harder, fuck me harder!" she chanted, and he did. His cock rammed into her mercilessly and a third wave of orgasm hit her insides. Her three orgasms were a record, with a man anyway. She could do it to herself easily enough, but it never felt this good. Violet came hard again for him, and she heard Ty let out a yell of his own.

"I'm gonna come, I'm gonna come, ohhhh ohh ohhhh. Fuck yes, yes...ohhhhhh!" he thrust hard up into her, pulling back on her hips as he unloaded his cum inside. She felt his cock throb as he released his seed. Pulling back on her shoulders, still inside her, he moved his hands to cup her breasts and kissed her shoulder and neck. Arching her back to maintain connectivity, she turned her head to kiss him fully.

In a darkened corner, at the end of the alleyway, George cursed the mess on his hand. He hadn't counted on them coming into the alley so soon. Trapped in his hiding spot, he

could see them, through the gap in the timber, but they couldn't see him. His jaw still smarted from her right hook. Having no desire to be punched by her again, he couldn't go out, and he couldn't get out of the way, so he did what any red-blooded male would do...he masturbated.

The display had him so heated, his first orgasm happened, before Violet's. George came again after that as he watched Ty ram her with his cock. He couldn't stop himself from beating off. Their display so horny, not even on his DVD collection had he seen such raw passion. He only wished he could have joined in, but commonsense told him that would not be wise to try. Determined to do the right thing from now on, he would never mention this again. After all, Violet gave him another chance, so he figured he owed himself one as well.

"Oh my God, that was the very best sex I have ever had. But it was so much more than that, Violet. You are amazing, and I want to be with you forever." Holding his arms around her rib cage, he lifted her and sat on the crate himself. Violet spread her legs and straddled him, her wetness touching his dick and her arms entwined around his neck. Their hearts beat against each other.

"I love you Tyler."

"I love you, Violet."

"Shall we go back to my place and continue this?" she unashamedly asked.

"Absolutely," Tyler grinned.

"You know I always wanted to visit Egypt," Violet admitted.

"Let's go back on our honeymoon, and see if our temple is still there," he added.

"Yes, let's."

\* \* \* \*

The End

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Entombed

by

Mae Powers

\* \* \* \*

While searching for a rare type of marshmallow plant, Callie Owens comes across an ancient underground tomb, complete with a cursed mummy, who puts a delightful hex on her heart and body and entombing her within his immoral crypt.

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(vampire time-travel)

Spellfire Sinful Sundaes 4

(paranormal collection)

\* \* \* \*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## **Entombed**

**by**

**Mae Powers**

Cally Stevens lay in the darkness, dazed and coughing up dust. She felt her insides shivering unexpectedly. A strange tingling suddenly encompassed her. Her senses had never failed her yet, but this sensation boarded on all-consuming. It slowly moved up her arms, down into the pit of her stomach and then settled on her toes. Her eyes scrunched instinctively, going from the bright sun and into the dimly lit tunnel, then she blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the dimmer light supplied by the florescent rocks fluctuating around the area.

She groped for her backpack, and pulled it off. Rummaging inside, her hand closed around her small flashlight and pulled it out. Adjusting the pack on her shoulders, she slowly stood up and turned on the tiny battery operated light. Her uncle always said to have a flashlight handy, when she was a little girl, and Cally had always carried one since. Now she felt glad. Thankfully, its range lit up a good deal of space.

She got up, beaming the light ahead of her, and saw she stood in a very small rounded chamber with only one tunnel leading out of the cavern. A small tunnel, sloping downwards, barely wide enough for her tall form to fit through. She ducked her head slightly, to avoid being hit. She followed the jagged trail for a while before she felt the floor sloping

upwards and the cavernous corridor turned sharply to the right.

The tunnel seemed to narrow and she almost ventilated with fear. The bottom of the cavernous tunnel became less gravelly and she felt the softness of sand shifting beneath her dragging feet. Using the flashlight, she noticed the granite walls were lined with jagged cracks as if dark lightening struck them.

A loud chattering noise made her halt in her tracks. Rapidly the fear rose from the pits of her stomach and shoved up into her throat. What was that noise? What creatures of the night prowled this hidden pathway? A pain of fear shot through her. Calm down, she told herself, you'll find a way out of this dungeinous labyrinth, if you just calm down.

She forced herself to move further into the dark lit path. For a few moments, only the dark eeriness was her companion. She pushed herself to move faster, almost at a jogging pace down the ancient pathway. The air became humid, and musty smelling the further she moved. She swayed the flashlight in front of her, and couldn't remember if she'd changed them since her last backpacking expedition. Why had she gone on this foolhardy adventure now? Oh, yes, to please her uncle, to find him a rare plant reported to be in the area. A rare type of *Althaea officinalis*, the marshmallow plant. If she and her uncle hadn't both been marshmallow nuts, she might not have done this. She kept the sweets in her backpack at all times, along with a tall plastic bottle of Oasis Spring water.

Cally had mapped out the area, and didn't mean to go too close to the marshland, where some species bloomed. Then she'd spotted one on that slippery mound, and even trying to catch her bearing, she still fell. The ground gave away and she'd landed in this dark foreboding place. Wherever the hell here was.

Then she heard a different sound, more eerie, more droning. Cally halted abruptly and flashed the light around. She found herself in a clearing, a smooth cavernous, rounded area. Moving the light from side to side, she discovered several old torches lined along a wall. Cally dug in her pockets and was glad she'd left the matches there in her jeans. She tentatively moved over to the ancient stick lamp and fired up a match. It was a wonder, she thought, that it took after trying a second match.

She turned off the flashlight to conserve the batteries and took the torch she'd lit. She used it to light several more. Stepping back, she observed her surroundings, and the reality made her gulp. Before her, looked like what seemed to be an ancient Egyptian tomb or chamber. She slowly moved around the enormous stonewalled room. Near her, she saw walls with hieroglyphs of women and men in various garb, as well as exotic birds she'd never seen before. Yet, there was something she'd never seen before in her textbook studies. These were neither really Egyptian or Mayan hieroglyphics, but a combination of both plus another culture she didn't recognize.

She moved closer to a wall containing only one long picture. She peered closer, and the flickering light from the



torch danced across what she soon realized was the face of a mummy buried within a wall. It seemed so life-like, almost as if it beckoned to her to do something. But what? She thought, peering closer. Then that strange tingling sensation washed over her again.

She took a step back and it stopped. Cally held the torch higher and she noticed a jewel embedded within the chest of the mummy's stony picture. It was oval and surrounded by a star shaped border. The border glittered like diamonds, but when the light of the torchlight fell upon it, the oval jewel glowed like a tiny flaming sun. The feeling encompassed her again, but this time she didn't move away immediately. She felt a sudden shaking followed by a creaking.

This time she took several steps back, and when she did, she felt something crunch beneath her feet. She turned to run from the room, and that's when she noticed the shelves with odd shaped jars upon them, some stacks of cloth, and prong like devices. She looked then at the slab arising up in the middle of the room, that couldn't be more than waist length to her. She gulped. How had she gotten in an ancient tomb, a place where perhaps mummies were mummified?

She heard the scuttling sound again, and looked down as something scraped softly against her leg. Then a slither against her ankle made her nearly jump backwards. Her heart thumped with a dreadful shiver of angst and she lowered the torch to get a better look at what had touched her. Slithering, crawly creatures like cross between a snake and a rat squirmed around her on the old floor.

She screamed out and the echo seemed to startle them. The echoing, creaking noise sounded again. That's when she noticed the ancient wall she'd touched earlier was open. She turned towards it, the dancing lights of the torch flickered off the wall revealing a the gap.

No, she thought again, an opening, as if a door had been pushed slightly ajar. Moving closer to discover only a small closet-like recess, just big enough for some one of maybe seven foot to fit into. What ever had been in there was now out.

The chattering and tiny snarls of the creatures snapped her attention back to her immediate predicament. She took a quick wary step backwards and tripped over what she'd only guessed to be a small boulder behind her. Cally fell backwards certain she would succumb to the heaviness of doom and darkness.

Then two hands grabbed her by the back of her waist, preventing her fall. She tilted her head back and her mouth gaped open. The torch fell from her hand, but the lights still flickered with some life allowing her to see who, not what steadied her.

A bandaged face with glowing orange eyes regarded her closely. Foul breath came from it's slit of a mouth and nostrils blared down heavily at her. She gulped again as she realized the tall cloth-wrapped creature was indeed a living mummy. Like any she'd seen in the movies, or books, or at a museum. The eyes shone ominously down at her.

It creaked and groaned all over as it looked from her, around the room and back again, as if suddenly becoming

more aware of the surroundings. The feeling of something unusual once more washed over her. The face now seemed to be more animate, or what it had of one, and it acted as if were coming out of a long deep thought. It waved a hand towards the creatures slithering on the floor and they immediately dispersed.

She looked in both fear and amazement as the creatures scuttled away. Pullin from the slight hold, Cally could sense the maleness before her. He glanced around the room as though taking the place in for the first time. His arms came out in a wide arc and he staggered, moving stiffly forwards towards the altar in the middle of the room. She noticed the jewel pendent on his neck glowing. It resembled the one on the outside of the tomb-closet. She wondered if her having touched the door's jewel set him free.

Moreover, she wondered why she just stood there as if nothing strange were happening to her. Yet she couldn't seem to move. It's as if she must stand there and watch the mummy shuffle away from her and make it to the altar. With bandaged feet scraping the ancient earthen floor, it shift-walked towards the slab. He groaned painfully with each step, mastering the movement, until he slowly gained more of his bearings.

Fright and fascination moved her forward. She followed unwittingly, yet knew she should run in the opposite direction, but also knew he meant to harm her, he would have already. Her fear lessened, but only a tad bit. Finally reaching the slab, he swayed then fell upon it. She moved away momentarily and picked up her fallen torch.

When she turned around he was half sitting, half lying on the slab, glancing with those orangish spheres as if searching for something or seeking someone. She shivered as his eyes rested upon her once more, as if becoming completely aware of her. She had a distinct feeling, she was the object he searched for.

She drew closer, warily, just a little closer. He groaned and half sat up at her approach. On a boulder nearby she found a crook in which to set the lamp and for some reason she pulled off her backpack. He looked weary but from what she wasn't sure. Still she felt he needed something from her, perhaps some kind of nourishment.

She knew it was idiotic to do so, but she still moved closer to him, albeit cautiously. She realized she took one step too many when he lashed out and grasped her wrists. She cried out as he brought her up against him. Then before she could stop him, his mouth, or what there was of it or should have been besides the slits, came down over hers. The musty, strong breath suffocated her and as she tried to gasp for air as well as fighting him off, the mummy breathed in the fresher air from her lungs.

She felt paralyzed with fear and dread. His large banded arms came around her and his hands held her head in place as he continued to suck the precious air from her lungs. She became dizzy and her head spun, and darkness soon followed.

He pulled the strange woman up on the platform and knew what he had to do.

His hands stayed over her temples as she passed out. Now her mind was open to him. He did not mean to take so much air from her, but he had, sweet refreshing, life-giving air. Her breathing now shallow but she remained alive. Her breasts heaved with life, barely, but they heaved. Within her mind, he saw images of her world, her history, and her present.

He in turn, flashed images of his world, his race, his world's last dying days and how they managed to save themselves from the destruction of the nova. He further sent images of how they came to her world, and how some didn't make it. For some reason, he wanted her to know everything. As if it were vital to his very life. (Interject more on his world here.)

Then he pulled her completely onto the table to help her recover from his alien onslaught. Momentarily he stayed beside her, relishing the heat her body brought to his own. She felt soft and supple against him. His bandaged hand raced out to tentatively touch her. Her yellow-blond hair lit up the room, and her high breasts jutted under the thin top she wore. He loved her tanned long legs and soon would want them to entwine with his own. Would she be willing to take him as he stood, in his mummified garb? Cold, hard, and thick as stone, would she be able to take him in? He hoped so.

He glanced down at her again, her eyes closed, her lips softly trembling. She breathed easier now, it seemed. Soon she would awaken and then he hoped she would help free him. He let out a musty sigh and placed his hands back on her temples. She would need to know. He'd been incarcerated

in the special unit for thousands of years, and as thoughts of life and saneness came back to him, he realized he'd practically forced himself upon her.

Now though, he knew he needed to once more enter her mind uninvited so she would know what was required of her, what he needed of her. With images in her mind, and their thoughts mingling, he hoped she would be less afraid of him, and more inclined to accept him in this mummy form. Because once he shared this way with her, for him, there would be no going back. He needed her help, but if she refused, there was only one thing left for him to do. He didn't have time to find another, he'd been in the chamber far too long already and fate already had a hand in saving his mummified butt.

He went softly this time, at first. Again he showed her images of his world, and learned more about hers. He kept the images from being too harsh, too fast at first, but he knew he lived on borrowed time. He told her about how the mumtae process was a special liquid substance that put the self-sustaining stasis on one, like being in a what her mind saw as a cryogenic unit. Then they were wrapped in the protective cloth to accommodate the space flight. Dust and debris leaked through, some people didn't survive the landing of some of the ships, and some of the creatures and people escaped and roamed the earth, interbreeding with earth fauna, flora and humans. Some Nesu awoke from other ships, or were awoken by Earth ancestors scoping the pyramid out. Scout sub ships were sent many years ago. The races intermingled and a mountain was constructed over this

particular deserted ship and the survivors left to roam the planet. So, his people were all over the Earth in Mayan, Egyptian and other lore.

Her mind came from its hazy sleep and soon their languages melded and they could understand each other. For some reason, she opened to his mind and listened as he told her more about himself, his people and more. He thought he felt and saw the intelligence within her mind, he repeated his images and his mind words several times, because he wanted to make sure she would completely understand.

"I am Sedekr, once, one of the High Leaders of my world. We Nesu came from a distant world also called Nesu. When our gifted scientist found out our sun-star was going nova, we made quick preparations to save all of our people. In our...what you call pyramid shaped...spacecraft; we came to your world. It was the closest to our own in habitation and similar resources. Your weather was harsh upon our arrival and some of our ships were lost, like this one I have stayed entombed in. Some escaped the damaged ships; others like me were brought back over the years. Upon awakening, images left in the message aura unit of the ship flashed into my mind telling me of what had happened to others. There are not a lot, but enough to let me know what has happened to my people. There is no one here but you to help me through the revival process. Some could not do it eons ago, because your people were more primitive back then. Yet, others had found a way to be released and have passed that on to me. My mind has taken in that most from this vessel is gone. In one of the other chambers, I believe a few may have

still survived. I must energize first and then can find out. I thank you for awakening me back to life."

Her mind opened further to his and she asked, "My touch upon the jewel freed you then?"

"Yes, the flight from the torch flames triggered a release mechanism within the sarcophagus closet, as you thought it was. The hibernating chamber allowed the mummification or cryogenic process to stay in put until we were released from our sleep units. Then, the heat coming from your hand upon and through the emblem finished my release process. I am sure others released my crew over the centuries. People such as yourself, whether male or female. I hope they have faired well. I think the last message was over 100 years ago. It has been over four thousand years since I talked with another intelligent being."

"What is it you require? How can I help?"

"I am sorry to have frightened you. But the process is not long, but I will need much from you." He uploaded into her mind the needs he had.

She did not seem too distressed even though what he asked of her required very physical intimacy at first. Somewhere at the back of her mind he read that it intrigued her; that she was not totally adverse to it. He slowly brought her back, to the world of the present and released his mind hold on her. Letting out a calmer breath of still must air, he moved away from her, to look down upon her beautiful form. He stood back and admired the long, slender beauty.

Cally trembled as she came up from what felt like a long deep slumber of flashing dreams and fantastically dark



hallucinations. She bit her bottom lip, as she adjusted her eyes to the flicking shady lights in the chamber and then she gulped once more in realization, that she looked up at a live mummy standing over her body. But not just any mummy, she knew now.

An alien mummy whose people were probably Egyptian and Mayan forbearers. She knew that the ancient Egyptian kinds were not always called Pharaohs. Some of her history lessons told her that the ancient Hebrews and Greeks used that name for meaning a king. She vaguely recalled that for a long time, eons ago, that Nesu was also an ancient name for the Egyptian kings, although there were also many other names used. He didn't look like a pharaoh, but Nesu fitted him, and sounded more regal and ethereal or otherworldly.

The thoughts took her a moment and he seemed to wait patiently as she assimilated all that he had mind spoke to her.

She realized he was giving her time to adjust to his mind talk and the telepathic images he put through her mind. It wasn't unheard of that people could speak telepathically or through visions these days. She had been tested in her college years for any kind of psychic powers, and the only thing she discovered was a highly sensitive empathic nature. Which, she felt was why she realized something unusual was about to happen to her.

A very crazy situation, she realized, but being a science fiction movie fan, made her imaginative side accept the wild situation more readily. In addition, the fledgling, or amateur scientist in her saw it as a plausible event of circumstances that could happen. She was a research assistant by

profession, and her college professor uncle who'd raised her after her parents death, taught her a love for botany and the paranormal and taught her to use her intelligence and natural drives to learn even more.

So why shouldn't she learn about beings from another world who crash landed thousands of years ago and became part of Earth's lore and history? She sat up slowly and got her physical bearings before she looked back up at the alien mummy with strange glowing orange eyes.

"You put images in my mind, but I'd like you to explain orally just what this rejuvenation process you need requires. But first, I am dying of thirst and need my backpack to get some things out of it."

He looked down at the bag she'd dropped. Stiffly, she noted, he reached down and handed it to her. She thanked him and opened up the khaki colored pack. She rummaged only slightly and brought out a bottle of water and her favorite snack. She then sat the pack on the slab.

"Are those a nourishment of your species?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "They are to me. Since you haven't eaten in four thousand years or so, perhaps you'd care to try them. Can you eat in your mummified state?"

He nodded. "I can mash swallow. I do feel a churn of hunger coming on me. Let me try them. I do not think our physiology was so different that I cannot stomach something small and light, as those rounded things seem to be."

"They are from a plant we call the Marshmallow plant or what our scientist refer to as *althea officinalis*. It's history dates back even before our ancient Egyptian cultures. It was

originally used, as medicinal purposes like for the digestive tract and healing wounds. But later they became a sweet treat and scientific means eventually evolved and processed it into the small round squishy thing here in this bag." She opened the bag and gave him one of the rounded thumb length cloudy, puffy white concoctions she loved to dearly munch on.

He opened his clothed palm and she placed on his ancient hand. He glanced at it from side to side in curiosity. "There was a similar plant on our world. We used it's beautiful leaves and flowers and roots for such purposes also, but it also helped to create the fluid-gel that saved our lives. It's properties were incredible and many. It was part of our culture also."

She could believe that. "Perhaps it was your ancestors, er your people, that brought it here and it just developed on our world."

"I think that is the case." On my world, such a plant or its soft marshy roots were confected also into a delicacy to enjoy in the open, and when lighted, it became a source of light in the dark. It was called altholakae, meaning a soft cure all. Its beauty was painted into our cultural artifacts. The foliage was often used for decorations too, because of its multi-hued visuals. The flower lobes were rose and white and sometimes filtered with sparkles of a dark blue. The stem was a vivid green, as I recall, and in our warmer seasons, its catchy but musky fragrance was considered a balm to the senses."

"I know this all must seem as strange to you as it does to me." She popped a gooey cool treat into her mouth and followed it with a sip of water.

He slowly put it into his mouth and mashed it, she saw, with his mouth, or what there was of it. "It is quite delicious. It does seem familiar. One I recall...of our bonding rituals..."

His words trailed off, and she noticed he swayed. She tossed her bags of marshmallow goodies down before she jumped off the altar and helped him to steady himself. She almost sniffed and realized he was still a bit musty, but had started growing accustomed to the scent. She pressed him towards the altar.

"Here, you sit. You've had a lot to get use to as much as I have."

"Thank you. I am fortunate it was you that found me. Another might not have been as kind or as intelligently accepting as you."

She nodded in understanding. Some scientists or government people might not have indeed. She felt it had been a fated thing; mostly that she'd "stumbled" into his tomb, or spacecraft. It struck he how odd indeed that she was in this musty cool tomblike chamber, talking to a mummy from outer space about the properties of a delicious little confection that may have actually derived from his world. And about it's unusual properties.

"You said bonding rituals. As in physical pleasures?"

He nodded slowly, bringing his hands to his temples. "I think that I have been affected by your marshmallow. As a sweet tidbit to our people...used in our bonding rituals, it

heightened the sexual pleasures and rejuvenated our bodies at the same time..."

"Oh." Was all she could muster.

He slowly seemed to gather his bearings and then grabbed up the bag of marshmallows. She was taken slightly by surprise as he poured a few of them out of the bag and in one swift movement he shoved them into his dark gaping hole. She reached over to grab a few herself, and munched quickly, then followed by some gulps of water. She handed the bottle out to him.

"You've got to be thirsty after so many years in that hibernation closet."

He nodded in agreement and then took the proffered bottle from her. She was amazed but amused to see him finish the container of water in a few gulps. "I thank you."

"No problem. You act as if those are a life-giving ambrosia."

"They are. Remember I told you they rejuvenate also. They lengthened our lives, but also, sustained us in famine and were an aphrodisiac that gave us renewed energy for many purposes in our physical and mental lives."

"So I guess you were telling the truth. They are similar to our plant, but yours must have had more purposes and properties indeed. I mean who would have thought a marshmallow could be used in mummification and rejuvenation."

She stepped back as his cloths or wraps suddenly took on a whiter shade. He groaned and lay back quickly. "It has begun. I think it is your chemical processed."

"Perhaps they are similar to your more ancient variety."

He groaned an affirmative and he went limp upon the altar. From the top of his musty head, down his long mummified body, and all the way to his bandaged dirty feet, his body became swathed in an eerie yellowish white glow. It continued coruscating for several minutes. She had to keep her eyes partially covered, but she glanced sideways to see what was happening to him.

Slowly, bit-by-bit, the glowing stopped. Her eyes widened, as she saw no longer a mummy, but a dark haired well-built man lying on top of the altar, completely naked. And he had a normal face, eyes and lips and hands and more. She liked the dark aureoles of his chest, and soft patches of sable brown hair trailed down his taut stomach ending at his groins. She shivered with unexpected need. His shaft was long and thick and hardening before her eyes.

Damn her friends would like to have a go at mounting him. She was astounded at her brash thoughts, but licked her lips. Oh she'd had some good tumbles in bed before, but the thought of getting it on with this man, this alien being, turned her on. She felt a large wave of desire wash over her as he turned his head and his dark blue eyes took in her every detail. She could sense this from him. The mind sharing had done more than share her mind; she felt that he had shared all of her senses and that her empathic aura reached out to him even now. She somehow felt then and there, that she'd waited all her life for someone like him, to bring her to heights of unknown bliss. And being from space, perhaps he could do just that.

"Your marshmallow is a derivative of Nesu history. I can feel it within me. Its properties were also able to enhance one's psychic powers. Come, Cally, rejuvenate me more." His deep sexy voice made her moist between her legs.

She gulped. Did she dare take the hand reaching out to her? He brushed her pack and stuff off the altar as he slowly sat up. His long hair fell temptingly over his broad shoulders. She saw desire so intense it made her inflamed with desire. The lights from the nearby torches played seductive over his body, flickering and teasing her to taste of his otherworldly delights. She wanted him. Wanted to share in his mind, and in the physical pleasures she knew with a certainty, that only he could bring to her now.

She reached out and took his hand, no longer afraid, but ready to approach the unknown within his arms. A fire of intense and strangely pleasing desires enflamed her body the moment she touched his hand. He pulled her tentatively closer to him, and when she didn't pull back, she felt his arms wind around her.

"I have never known such a beauty as you. So willing, so right for me. Come, rejuvenate me and share in what I can bring to your wonderful body and mine."

She could only nod as he picked her up and pulled her into his lap. His hands, though slightly rough and worn, moved over her smoothly. She did not mind that they were once half bandaged and half ancient flesh. They were now heated and alive from her first touch. Yes, she knew now, that from that first touch upon his sarcophagus, that she had opened his world, making it her own. Her hands gingerly touched his

chest, splaying over the soft thin hairs on his chest. She moved the pendant aside, and leaned down to kiss his nipples.

He groaned a responsive heat and she felt his breasts shiver in response against her own breasts. His hands reached under her arms, and he kneaded her fleshy orbs, gently, slowly, as if he revered them. Had it really several thousand years since this magnificent male had had a woman? The thought pleased her to no end. Although celibate for the last few years, none of the few lovers she had, brought her to such dizzying heights of sweet bliss, just by being in his lap, or being held so near and dear.

He shaft moved with need beneath her bottom. Oh she wanted him, but she also wanted him to know other delights. She looked up into his midnight hungry eyes and smiled wildly. She reached up and touched his temples as he had hers earlier. She knew instinctively how to reach his mind, and with heated images she flashed into his mind what she wanted to do to him.

He groaned an affirmative desire of wanting her to, and quickly released her. She slid off his lap as he lay down and slowly spread his muscular thighs. His erection thrust high into the air, proud and ready for her ministrations. She licked her lips and knew she was going to be slow in tasting his alien temptations. Her mouth watered for need of tasting him. She moved closer and bent her head and her hands splayed over his groins, teasing and touching and enjoying the feel of his male delights. He smelled now of sweet musk and not the



dusty musty odor that at one time was foul to senses. Now his scent only enflamed her own desires.

She leaned over and kissed his thighs and left small trails of wet teasing touches upon the man, then his stomach and back lower to his throbbing shaft. She tentatively touched him, stroking him up and down and then she widened her mouth and slowly inch by savory inch, took as much of him in as she could. He jerked beneath her, and she knew he wanted more, wanted to feel and know every delight and desire she wanted to share with him. She could empathically and physically feel his desires surging upwards to a heated high.

Intense desire wetted her appetites. She lathed him up one side of this long shaft, and down the other. He shivered intensely. She licked and suckled slowly rhythmically on him, giving her all to pleasing him and giving him pleasure. She widened her mouth, taking more of him in, pushing up and down in deep tastes of his glorious rod. She felt his hands on her back, caressing her urging her on. He groaned with needful wants. She knew he was close and moved away from him to climb on top of the altar, and then on top of him.

"So magnificent, so beautiful. Entomb me within you. Feel my heat mingle with your own."

His hands came up to touch her mound and she moaned her needs as he touched her intimately, exploring all her most feminine crevices. Then she straddled him, and eased herself slowly over his powerful shaft. She gasped at the same time as he did when their heat mingled and their bodies united in the closest possible way. Then his hips pushed upwards and

she moved up and down over him, slowly at first and then faster as he pushed up urgently to meet her downward thrusts. They boldly moved against each other, their sweat pouring profusely over them both.

She felt his rod tighten with painful need. She ached for only a release he could bring her. They moved faster and faster against each other, desiring the ultimate release together. No matter what world they belonged to it ceased to exist, save their growing powerful urges. She rode him hard and he pushed up against her with as much fervor. Their heat reached an inferno of passionate. Then both shivered intensely as waves of desire and pleasure washed over them, bringing them both to an incredible satisfying unity.

She collapsed over him and he brought his strong arms around her, pressing her close to his rapidly beating heart. Then his hands touched her temples and she saw within their combined minds how incredibly pleased she had made him. She sent her images of satisfaction and empathic feelings back to him. And in his mind, she saw that their union would help him bring enough energy for him to complete the task of garnering strength to bring his people back to life.

Yet also, she saw many more times to come of sharing his wonderful desires and his life. She laid back against him, closing her eyes and imagining the desires and bliss to come that was no longer entombed within a dark place. Her heart had been closed off to love, as his body had once been entombed. But now, there was so much more to come for them. Something more than just otherworldly and ethereal. Together they would find their fulfillments and destinies. And

love would seep in, uniting them even more, and giving them strength for whatever lay ahead in their futures. It was one she was glad she had stumbled

The End

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## **The Soul Jar**

by

Olivia Lorenz

Lucy goes to Egypt to mend her broken heart. Her salvation comes from an unlikely source—Khnum, god of creation. Khnum needs Lucy's help to fashion a new soul-jar for Osiris, king of the Underworld, but Seth, Lord of Darkness, is determined to stop them from their task.

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Also by Olivia Lorenz at [www.midnightshowcase.com](http://www.midnightshowcase.com)

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Egyptian Realms  
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(vampire time-travel)

Spellfire Sinful Sundaes 4

(paranormal collection)

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