

PROLOGUE

RIPENING

Seth crouched down to peer at the face of the mortal woman trembling at his feet. It had been an accident – a wonderful, terrible, incredible accident. Euphoria and horror twisted together inside him, until he was almost physically sick from the emotional turmoil of what he'd done. From what he...was.

Centuries had passed with no sign that Seth was ever going to come into his powers. Osiris – tall and handsome with his chiseled jaw and quick smile, everyone's favorite hero – had been flaunting his abilities since he was a strapping boy. Isis – Seth's beautiful, glorious, and chilling sister – was every inch the untouchable and perfect goddess. If he'd had even a fraction of her ability to cast spells and manipulate magic, he'd thank the stars and be happy with his lot.

Even Nephthys, as unassuming as her gifts were, had developed a talent as a seer and an ability to discern the messages of the stars long before he had come into his own.

It wasn't fair.

Seth stood and clenched his fists as he thought of it, ignoring the writhing woman prostrating herself before him.

He was the last born. The youngest. It wasn't his fault that the Waters of Chaos had been nearly emptied by the time he was born, and yet he was the one who had paid the price. While his siblings learned to hone their burgeoning skills and spent their evenings showing off to one another, all he could do was watch them enviously, chest tight and jaw clenched, wondering when, or even if, he would ever find his place in the universe.

During his awkward adolescence – which lasted aeons longer for gods than for mortals, since the spans of their lives were more consistent with those of stars – he'd practice fixedly for days and weeks at a time, never taking sustenance or resting until he'd crumple with exhaustion and fall into the valley of his father's chest looking for respite. He'd hoped that his father would at least acknowledge his efforts, perhaps take note of the

prickly sweat that ran down the back of his neck and his overheated red face. But the god of the earth cared not for such things and, in fact, viewed his youngest son's painful lack of progress as less than godlike.

When Seth complained and begged audience, his father, Geb, answered with merely a rumble of the ground, if he bothered to answer at all. Gradually, Seth stopped seeking out his guiding hand.

He next turned his eyes to the sky and cried out to his mother who looked down upon him, the clouds of her hair stirring. There was nothing she could do to comfort him except offer her tears. Salty drops would fall and soon he'd be sitting in a pool of her sorrow. No. Geb and Nut would not help him.

Once, he'd turned to his grandfather for advice. But Shu, the god of the wind, just told him to quit his whining and get on with being the god he was. If he couldn't manage that, then he should try to act more like his older brother, Osiris. And to top off his remarks, Shu sent a stiff gale to dry young Seth's tears but the hot wind buffeted him, driving him halfway across the Earth before he managed to muster enough strength to resist the powerful push of his elder.

It wasn't long before he stopped seeking

their aid altogether. Over time Seth withdrew from associating with his elders and his siblings and ignored their summons to participate in the drawn-out meetings of the newly organized Ennead.

What did he care for the plight of mortals or of the governing of the cosmos? What had the cosmos ever done for him? Besides, he couldn't stand to see the pitying looks from his sisters, or, worse, see their giddy expressions of delight whenever Osiris graced the halls of Heliopolis with his presence.

In fact, the only reason he'd visited Heliopolis at all in the last century was to watch Isis. Seth had spent many long nights reclining in the leafy branches of the tree that brushed against her window. Often, she was away, attending to one duty or another that the ruler of all the gods, Amun-Ra, assigned her. He'd leave the tree disappointed, with an uncomfortable crick in his neck that a god of any reputation shouldn't be at all bothered by. But, every once in a while, his patience was rewarded and he would get an unobstructed view of the ice princess as she prepared to retire for the evening.

At first, he'd spied on her to try to learn her secrets, memorize the spells she'd create and practice before bed. But he soon found that no matter how meticulous he was, or how precise he'd been in copying the spell, he just could

not wield magic the same way she did. Even so, he was still drawn to her and found himself outside her window more often than not.

Isis was cold, lovely, and formidable. Seth considered her the most gifted of the siblings. As he sat uncomfortably, night after night, he imagined that he could snatch away her abilities and take them into himself. He would twist her magic and use it to suit his own purposes. Then no one would look at him with sympathy or wince at seeing his bumbling attempts with manipulating matter. Not if he had the gifts of Isis at his disposal.

In the beginning, Seth envisioned taking her power. Then, as time went on and he grew into manhood, his fantasies twisted. He fed his admittedly unwholesome and unnatural obsession with Isis to the point of ignoring his own physical needs. Starving was painful but it wouldn't kill him and the others either didn't care about or didn't notice the dark smudges beneath his eyes and the lankness of his hair. And no one paid him any attention at all whenever Osiris was around anyway.

As he perched in the shadows of his tree, watching her brush her hair, he'd summon a tiny wind – something so unnoticeable as to be considered a non-talent and yet it still took a great deal of his energy – to lift the perfume from her delicate neck. It raced toward

his hand where he'd capture it, holding it close to his face until it dissipated hours later.

Then, giving in to the object he kept hidden during the day, Seth would pull out the feather he'd taken from her bath and stroke it, his thumb running over the soft plume in a slow loop as he thought of the one it belonged to. When Isis finally slept, he'd make himself as comfortable as he could and keep silent vigil, allowing his secret, dark thoughts to take shape and embed their vacillating roots in his mind.

If he'd been more confident, he would have done something about his feelings years ago. He would have confronted Isis. Shown her that Osiris was not worth the attention she gave him. That true desire was much more than a winning smile and broad shoulders.

No.

True desire was the trembling he felt in his limbs when he looked at her, the need to absorb her completely into himself. To fashion a world where only the two of them existed, one where they could step into their proper places as king and queen of the cosmos and have all others kneel at their feet and worship them. That's what he envisioned when he looked at Isis. There was no one else worthy of him.

Especially now that he had finally come into his own power. Despite all the exhaustion, anxiety, and fear that had crippled him because it had taken so long to appear, Seth realized that it had all been worth it. For his ability was the most terrible and fantastic of all – he had the power to unmake.

It was evidenced in the form of the writhing woman on the ground. Seth had been annoyed by her frantic wailing. He had set fire to the woman's field of wheat, mostly because he knew Osiris had visited within the last year, haranguing everyone about the need to cultivate and grow their own food.

Seeing the ripe evidence of Osiris's sad, pathetic, and, in his opinion, pointless little abilities with plants had angered him, so he decided to burn the field. Perhaps it was out of pettiness, perhaps jealousy. Either way, it would hurt Amun-Ra's favorite golden boy. Also it pleased him to watch all the fleeing animals as they attempted to escape the smoke and flame. Seth liked knowing these sub-creatures feared him and his power. And using his newfound ability to thwart his brother's made him feel right, superior.

Then the woman appeared. She ran from her

cottage and fell at Seth's feet, wrapping her thick arms around his legs. Her round face was red and splotchy as she begged him for mercy, asking the "powerful god" to save her husband who was gleaning in the field.

When Seth ignored her and shoved her roughly aside, she exclaimed that he must be the one she'd heard about, the "impotent god." She raised her voice to the sky, keening and crying out to Osiris for help.

That a mortal would dare call him impotent left Seth shocked and, ironically, immobile. But that quickly turned to a fury, which surged through his frame. Any compassion he might have felt for the woman before, as unlikely as it was, melted in the heat of his rage. Seth normally felt next to nothing for the mortal creatures that Amun-Ra and the others always harped on.

With the name of Osiris still on her lips, Seth seized the woman by the throat, lifted her off the ground, and shook her. "You will cease your caterwauling immediately." When she didn't, he threw her on the ground and shouted, "By the gods, I wish the heavens would erase your face from my view!"

Her cries were suddenly cut off and all that could be heard was the bleating of the animals and the crackling of the wheat as it burned. The woman had crumpled to her hands and knees. Her whole body shook but no sound came from her.

Sticking the toe of his boot beneath her bulky form, he thrust her aside and her body rolled away. Seth gasped. Where there had once been a hooked nose, thin pale lips, and eyes that sat too close to one another, he now saw a blank oval. Skin as smooth as a reddening peach stretched where a face should have been.

The woman's hands reached up, clawing, gouging the skin where the mouth and nose once were. But as if a switch had been flipped, her body jolted and then she slumped over, dead. Without a mouth and nose, there was no way for her to take in a breath. Seth lifted his head, shocked and fascinated and sick. *Had he done this?*

Just to make sure, he lifted his hand and stretched it over the woman's foot, willing it to disappear.

Suddenly the foot, including the muddy boot she wore on it, evaporated in thin air, leaving

only a stump at the end of her leg. In quick succession, Seth unmade a snake that slithered from the burning stumps of wheat. Several mice disappeared next. Then, he ran, unmaking animals both completely and in parts.

He caused rocks and trees to vanish with the wave of his hand. And, when he came upon the dying form of the burnt farmer, the once husband of the now dead and defaced woman, Seth unmade him bit by tiny bit. He decided to leave only the man's torso and head so he knew exactly how much he could take away from a mortal while still extending their pain-filled life.

Now he was ready. Now he was whole. His power had finally arrived. And it was mightier than he'd ever hoped it would be.

Nothing.

No one.

Could challenge him now.

The world, the cosmos, was ready to be plucked and his first stop was the beauty that haunted him.

Isis was a ripe fruit dangling from a low limb—succulent, juicy, and begging to be consumed. And Seth had never been hungrier.

CHAPTER 1

BUDDING

A horn sounded, its echo filling the hills and valleys surrounding Heliopolis. Isis stood quickly, causing the stool where she'd been sitting at the spinning wheel to topple behind her. The bundle of gray wool in her lap tumbled to the dust. The mortal women surrounding the goddess laughed and clucked their tongues good-naturedly as they picked up the soft mass and shook the dirt from it.

“Go. Go,” they admonished, shooing her away. “You’ll come back when you can. In the meanwhile, we’ll take turns practicing what you’ve taught us.”

Isis gave them a graceful smile and though she attempted to act godlike in her demeanor as she left the village, nodding at the townspeople and patting the heads of the children who always flocked to her, her mind was elsewhere. As a result, her responses were more curt and distracted than usual. The moment she passed the stone wall signifying the border of the town, she shook out her powerful wings and took to the sky.

Energy surged through her body as the golden rays of the sun beat down upon her wings, filling her frame with heat and warmth to the point where she could feel the sting of a blush in her cheeks as well. She laid her hands against them and wondered at the excitement she felt simply because he had returned. Her shadow far below flit over the hills and valleys she passed, rising and falling like the tempestuous emotions that seized her mind.

She rose up through the sky, the blue giving way to the black, and she heard the fleeting whispers of the stars welcoming her home. As she passed through the barrier that separated the mortal world from the realm of the gods, speeding through space like a fiery and brilliant comet, the darkness pressed itself upon her. It captured her form,

moving her into another dimension. It was quiet in that space and during the transition she gave herself over to her reflections.

It was . . . unfitting, her burgeoning feelings. Isis knew it, but she couldn't help it. And yet, to stifle the way her heart beat with joy at the very thought of him, also felt wrong. Still, Isis had tried to be a proper goddess and ignore her budding affection during the long year of separation when he'd left, taking an assignment elsewhere. But now that he'd returned, she felt the stirring in her heart again and knew that she'd been unsuccessful in uprooting him wholly.

Though Isis had always enjoyed her work – teaching mortals weaving, how to grind corn, and to use plants and herbs to heal – that something else, *someone* else in her life had, of late, occupied her thoughts to the point of distraction. She often caught herself daydreaming or staring at the faraway horizon wondering where he was at that moment and if he was thinking of her as she was thinking of him.

At night, when Isis would slip into her bed, her heavy wings wrapped around her body, she'd catch herself wishing the soft feathers were his

arms instead. He'd often done so when they were younger. He'd pin her wings against her body as they played tag, never hurting her, but preventing her from escape until she acknowledged that he'd well and truly caught her. Recently, she'd found herself envisioning the chase once more, but this time, she wanted him to catch her. The thought of what might happen next often left her breathless and sleep would evade her.

Mortal men often fell at her feet, begging for her attention and pledging their undying devotion. Some even dared to reach out and touch her sensitive wings. But at one look from her, they'd drop their hands in fear.

Though a relationship with a mortal was technically allowed, Isis had never found any mortal man who was interesting enough to consider. Besides, the life span of a mortal was like the blink of an eye to a goddess. If she allowed herself to care for a mortal man, she'd watch him grow old and suffer from disease or even the elements.

Isis thought it cruel to tie herself to a mortal. She'd seen Seth toy with the emotions of humans, and it never ended well for them. The lucky ones would pine for him as he disappeared for years at a

time. And the unlucky . . . well . . . she didn't want to think about that. Seth had a . . . temper. No. Isis would always be what she was – a goddess. And the love of a goddess was enough to drive a mortal man mad.

Also, there was the fact that as kindhearted as Isis was, she was intimidating. Taller than any human woman she'd ever seen, she towered over most of the men. But her stormy eyes and figure would tempt any mortal. Many of them sought her favor by bringing her carved trinkets or jewels. These she accepted with the airs of a goddess and promised to look after their village or their loved ones in exchange.

But she never encouraged their subtle amorous advances. And any man that proved too bold to be discouraged was sent away. The women who served her made sure those men were banished from her presence, never to press their suit again. Isis by no means ever gave any indication that she was lonely or seeking a companion and yet, as the long years stretched ahead of her, she found she longed for such a thing in the secret places of her heart.

Once, she confessed as much to her soft-spoken

sister, Nephthys, the one person she felt truly knew her. Nephthys not only had a very different, much more approachable demeanor than Isis, but they looked as dissimilar as two beings could, despite having the same parents.

It wasn't that Nephthys was ugly. Far from it. She was just small and quiet and so unobtrusive that she was often relegated to the background. But Nephthys was still every inch the goddess. Her long blond hair whispered in the wind like a field of wheat and cascaded nearly to her feet. Delicate silver-tipped delicate wings folded at her back so neatly that they were nearly invisible, and her robin's-egg-blue eyes were lovely.

It was comforting being around her, for she loved absolutely and completely. She was never jealous, cruel, or condescending. Her younger sister saw the good in everyone and everything. No one could listen and empathize as well as Nephthys. To Isis, she was the perfect goddess, who never let troublesome emotions distract her from her duties, and was therefore much more capable than Isis often felt.

Many mortals also disregarded Nephthys, thinking she had no power, but Isis considered her

sister's unseen abilities the most potent of all. When Isis first approached her sister regarding her feelings for a true companion, not about any one person in particular, Nephthys listened. She held Isis's hand, her blue eyes wide with understanding and rapt with attention. Nephthys confessed that she, too, had such a desire. Then she said something that shocked Isis, something that she had not forgotten since.

Nephthys leaned forward and said, almost in a whisper, "The stars tell me there is someone meant for you."

"Can it be true?" Isis gripped her sister's hand tightly. "You have seen it?"

"I have," Nephthys responded with a tender smile. "There is much happiness in your future." Then her grin faded slightly.

"And what of you?" Isis asked, wondering what her sister might have seen to cause her sadness.

"Will *you* be happy?"

Nephthys sighed faintly. "I will be. Eventually. Unfortunately, trials lie ahead for both of us."

"But where there is love, trials may be

endured.”

“You are wise, sister.”

“As are you,” Isis said.

Nephthys nodded shyly, acknowledging the compliment as she hugged her sister tightly, causing their wings to flutter.

Threading her arm through her sister’s, Isis rose, and the two goddesses strode through the garden, Isis begging Nephthys for details. “Now, tell me more about this man who will be my true love.”

Nephthys laughed and replied, “You know it doesn’t work that way with the stars. I cannot see everything.”

“Ah, but surely you can tell me something. Is he handsome? Does he have kind eyes? Please tell me he isn’t shorter than I am. Is he . . . mortal?”

“No. Not mortal,” her evasive sister replied.

The two sisters shared their secret wishes and dreams until Isis sighed and stopped, a frown crossing her face. She took hold of Nephthys’s shoulder. “Enough of these imaginings, sister,” she said softly. “As much as I would like it to be true,

what you say cannot be.”

“I tell you it *will* be.”

“But the edict. How would such a thing be possible? For either of us?”

Nephthys lifted her head and closed her eyes, breathing in deeply. Isis knew she sought unseen answers. When she opened them, she replied, “I do not know. But the stars cannot lie. What I’ve seen will be.” Offering a small smirk, she added, “Trust in the stars, my beautiful sister.”

And Isis did. She went on with her work, at first having an absolute faith in the things her sister had told her. Decades passed, filled with longing and hope. But the more men she met, the more she wavered. Not one of them – mortal or immortal – caught her eye or made her heart flutter with anticipation. Isis began to despair thinking her sister’s omen had been wrong. That the stars had deceived Nephthys or that, at the very least, she had misunderstood the signs.

Then one summer night the horns blew, announcing that it was time for the Ennead to gather, a time when all the gods would meet. She hadn’t seen

him in over a decade but something had changed between them in the time they'd been apart. When he scooped her up and kissed both of her cheeks it felt . . . different than it once had. The warmth of his body seemed to linger, even though he'd left her to embrace Nephthys.

She found herself seeking him out all evening long, and attempted to sit next to him. When that space was already occupied, she fixed her eyes upon him and tried to discern what might have happened to him, what changes had been wrought to make her feel as if she was seeing him for the first time.

Was it the length of his hair? The glow of his skin bronzed by the sun? When he smiled she felt special, as if he were telling her something secretive, somehow meant just for her. When he told stories of his adventures, she wondered if he might be glancing in her direction more frequently than he looked upon the others. By the time the evening festivities were done, Isis knew that the stars had given her the long-awaited gift they'd promised.

The council adjourned, and the one whose attention she sought stretched and rose to retire. Quickly Isis also stood and asked if she might walk with him. He nodded, bright eyes twinkling as he

offered her his arm. Together they walked the long halls of Heliopolis, him asking polite questions as they did. All she could focus on was how her heart raced, and Isis wondered if he could feel the thick beat of her pulse where her wrist rested against his muscular arm.

When they reached the wing reserved for her when she was in residence at Amun-Ra's palatial home, he paused and brushed a finger against her cheek. "What is it, Little One?" he asked.

She grinned nervously at his old nickname for her. She'd been taller than him all through their adolescence and "Little One" had been his way of teasing her, but now he easily stood five inches above her, which was no small feat, even for an immortal. Isis had always bristled when he'd called her that before, but the name felt different now. More like an endearment.

"I . . .," she started to say as she gazed up into his eyes. A fluttery feeling set her nerves on edge and her wings shifted softly behind her. "I missed you," she finally managed to get out.

He laughed kindly. "I missed you, too."

She nodded and lowered her gaze.

Ducking his head, he tried to gauge her expression. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“Yes.” A pause, then, “No.” Isis wrung her hands and her tongue darted out to lick her lips, her mouth suddenly dry.

He took both her hands in his and gave them a little shake. “Something must truly be upsetting you. I’ve never known the great goddess Isis to act so flustered.”

Isis opened her mouth but couldn’t speak.

His gaze narrowed. “Has someone hurt you, Little One?”

“No. At least, not exactly.”

“I see. And who is *not exactly* hurting you?” His eyes had turned cold and flinty, his body rigid. Anger radiated from him.

“It’s not a person. It’s more of an idea.”

That gave him pause. “What do you mean?”

Isis let out a soft sigh, wondering how she was

going to explain her feelings. Would he reject her outright? Would he be shocked at her boldness? Or might he, perhaps, be wanting the same thing she did?

She began, "I've been thinking about the laws that govern us, and I find one of them in particular difficult to comply with."

"Which one?"

"The one that says we are not allowed to bind ourselves with another, like Nut and Geb did."

"Ah." He let go of Isis's hands and turned away. With his back straight and stiff, he asked, "So you've found someone you can love?"

"I think so. In truth, I've loved him for many years already."

"I see."

Feeling bold, Isis approached him, opening her wings and wrapping one around him as they stood side by side. She'd often hidden the two of them beneath her gleaming feathers when they were children so they could talk about their plans for mischief making in secret. Now the gesture felt

different, new, like she was opening another chapter of her life.

He sighed and turned toward her, his features hidden in the shadow of her wing. “You know the law only applies to immortals, Isis. So there shouldn’t be a concern regarding you and your newfound love. Tell me then, what mortal should I be congratulating?”

“I am not in love with a mortal,” Isis said.

Cocking his head, he clarified, “Then he *is* immortal?”

“He is. But it’s complicated.”

“I would say so, although the lines of the law are blurred regarding certain immortals. Your love might still be possible.”

“There’s another thing. You see, he doesn’t know how I feel about him yet.”

“Do you doubt that he returns your affection?” He ran a hand through his hair and mumbled, “That was a stupid question. Of course he returns your affection.” Lifting his eyes to hers, he touched his fingertips to her jaw. “How could he not?” He gave

her a small smile and dropped his hand. He sighed.
“I suppose he’s handsome.”

“Incredibly so.”

“Is he kind to you?”

“He has always been kind.”

“And he is worthy of you?”

“I can think of no one worthier.”

“Then why doesn’t he know?”

Isis placed her palm on his shoulder and slid it down the planes of his chest until it covered his heart. “Because he’s been gone for a very long time,” she voiced quietly.

His brow furrowed and then astonishment ironed out the lines of confusion. “Isis. You cannot mean what you’re saying.”

“And if I do?”

After cupping her hand with his, he added, with an almost desperate hiss, “Such a thing is forbidden.”

“I thought we already talked about that aspect.”

“Yes, but . . . this is different. Think of the consequences.”

“And what are the consequences of a life lived without love?”

He gently removed her hand from his chest and pressed it between his own. “You can’t mean this, Isis. You don’t understand.”

“I understand loneliness and longing.” She brought her other wing around until they stood in the midst of them. “I understand now that it was always you.” He swallowed, and when she saw the expression of panic on his face, she took a step back. “Do, do you not feel the slightest bit of affection for me, then?”

In the shadows cast by her wings he took hold of her shoulders and pulled her back. “Isis. Isis, look at me.”

When she finally did, he said, “The last thing I want to do is hurt you, but we can’t. I can’t. No matter what I feel. No matter how strong our bond. It isn’t allowed.”

Tears filled her eyes. “You . . . you don’t, then.”

He held her face in his hands, using his thumbs to wipe away her tears, and cursed under his breath. "I'm sorry. You don't know how much I wish . . . Look. You won't be alone. I'll always be with you. I promise you."

"It won't be the same."

"No, it won't."

"I didn't know how painful this would be."

"Then I'll stop talking about what I can't be and tell you what I can be, okay?"

Isis nodded slightly, tears still spilling down her cheeks.

"I can be your friend," he said as he trailed his fingers down a lock of her hair. "I can be your protector." Hugging her close, he murmured in her ear, "I will be your confidant and secret keeper." He kissed her wet cheek. "I'll be your ally." Moving to her other cheek, he added, "I'll be your advocate."

Touching his forehead to hers, he was about to add something else when she interrupted, "But you won't be my beloved."

He froze and stepped back. She lifted her

stormy eyes to his, pinning him in place. “We won’t seek out stolen moments in your garden or laugh together about memories only the two of us share. We won’t tumble in each other’s arms as we roll down a hillside. We won’t discover together what it truly means to devote ourselves entirely to the well-being of one another. Or understand a love so powerful we’re willing to cling to it by our fingertips like Geb and Nut.

“You won’t comfort me with kisses or soothing caresses when I’m sad or tired. I won’t know that you seek out my face above all others. Or be able to claim you as my own. But worst of all, you won’t hold me in your arms every night as we retire together after a long day, a long decade, or a long century of work. You’re relegating me, us, to a very long life of limited potential, of not knowing, of undiscovering. So I ask you again, my love, are you sure this half-life is what you want?”

Isis gazed into his troubled eyes and slid her hands around his broad shoulders, threading her fingers together around his neck. Never in her life had she wanted something so badly. Being on the verge of obtaining it, and knowing that it could at any moment be lost to her forever, was a heady,

frightening experience – one she'd never had before – and one she wouldn't trade for anything.

Shaking his head slightly, he began, "Isis, I want –" but he cut himself off and just looked at her. What Isis saw in the depths of his eyes made her pulse quicken. Their bodies were locked together. His lips were tantalizingly close to hers.

Held captive by the soft press of her wings against his back and the allure of her lips, he lowered his head to hers and nuzzled her ear, trying desperately to convince himself that he could stop at any time. That he still hadn't gone so far he couldn't pull back. But once he'd caught the scent of her hair, caressed the softness of her skin, and felt the supple length of her body against his, he was lost.

His lips branded a fiery trail from her temple down the curve of her jaw. Isis moaned softly and rocked against him, tilting her head back to grant him access to her throat, closing her eyes to savor the sensation of his lips on her skin. This was what she'd wanted. This was what she craved. A man who would love her wholly and completely. One who would be her companion forever. A man who would share in her sorrow as well as in her joy.

Slowly, achingly, he made his way from her neck back up the side of her face, and just as she was anticipating his kiss, he drew away. The hands that held her trembled. His jaw was set at a hard angle, his mouth in a grim line.

Finally, he opened his eyes. They were filled with pain and regret. "I'm sorry, Little One. You don't know how sorry I am." With that, he spun and disappeared, leaving a cold emptiness where his body had just been.

Isis drew her wings around herself, trying to contain the heat of this passionate moment, but it trickled away until she was left with nothing but loss.

The next morning he was gone.

It had been a year since she'd seen him, a short time by godly standards, but she'd felt each day of separation as if it were a tiny ache carved into her soul. And now he'd returned, and despite everything that had happened, Isis was more certain than ever that the love she felt was real and true. It was a gift from the stars, not to be refuted or squandered.

Isis touched down lightly on the marble balcony and tucked her wings behind her. She raced through the halls and porticoes, searching but not finding, until at last she discovered him. He stood in a room, alone, his back to her as he glanced through Amun-Ra's latest list of concerns and duties.

The sight of him filled her with a strange giddiness coupled with anxiety. She'd waited for him for a long year – the longest one in her memory. And she wouldn't be denied this moment, this reunion. Isis had tamped down the flames of her love until it smoldered slowly, quietly, like hot embers. But seeing him again stoked the fire, reigniting it until it burned hotly in her breast, threatening to incinerate anything that dared to stand in its way.

He must not have heard her approach because he didn't turn, not until she said his name, the name she'd whispered in her dreams.

Osiris.