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SNEAK PEEK

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THE SNARE OF LOVE

With snare in hand I hide me,
I wait and will not stir;
The beauteous birds of Araby
Are perfumed all with myrrh—
Oh, all the birds of Araby,
That down to Egypt come,
Have wings that waft the fragrance
Of sweetly smelling gum!
I would that, when I snare them,
Together we could be,
I would that when I hear them
Alone I were with thee.
If thou wilt come, my dear one,
When birds are snared above,
I'll take thee and I'll keep thee
Within the snare of love.

—FROM *Egyptian Myth and Legend*

BY DONALD MACKENZIE

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PROLOGUE

Entombed

“It begins.”

“Yes, Master. The chains that bind you are weakening.”

“It was foolish of them to think that this prison would hold me indefinitely.”



Seth had despaired of ever escaping. But then a spark found him. A human, an ordinary man, discovered a scroll, long forgotten, that held a spell powerful enough to draw a thread from the dark tapestry that fell like a curtain over his mind.

The spell caused a tiny change. A chip in a wall of cement. Seth took hold of a dark thread very carefully and pulled. As he did, his mind's eye connected to that of the mortal, and he imbued him with power. But the mortal proved weak, easily defeated by the Sons of Egypt.

Then a new voice called to him. She was isolated. She was misunderstood. She wielded power. Seth whispered to her mind. Made promises. Told her the things she longed to hear. And she was his. He

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strengthened her until she was able to escape the bonds that kept her tied to the netherworld and brought her into his own prison instead.

Draining her stored energies, his frame filled to bursting, and in the blackness of the obelisk he sucked in the first breath he'd taken in centuries. Time and space rippled, and then the wall fractured. A bolt of lightning shot through the fabric of space.

Sliding his hands around the split edges, he used his power to open the gap wider, and the walls fell away, fading until he could no longer sense them. One by one, the stars appeared. Nebulas swirled before him in clouds of cerulean, amber, and magenta.

The stars brightened, and he knew they whispered of his escape, but it didn't matter now.

He knew what he had to do.

Once, he thought Isis was to be his counterpart. But thanks to the woman currently hanging on to his arm, her form a black fluttering cloud barely able to hold itself together, he knew there was another one destined to be his.

She was beautiful. She was powerful. She was untouchable. An adder stone clothed in flesh. Because of that, it would be difficult to find her. But there was one who held her heart. Who, even now, clutched it in his undead hands. And Seth knew exactly where to find him.



Pancakes and Papyrus

Nana's rooster crowed, the sound of his cry too jarring for me to ignore. I rolled over and licked my lips, which for some reason felt swollen and numb. My mouth was particularly dry. I groaned as I shifted beneath the sheets, tugging them over my head to block out the piercing beams of daylight. The light was an intruder—an unwelcome visitor disturbing the dark tomb where I slumbered peacefully.

There was an awareness tickling the back of my mind, but I doggedly ignored it. Unfortunately, whatever it was had sunk in its claws and wouldn't be pushed aside so easily. What was it that I couldn't remember? And why did I feel like I'd lost a boxing match? My head hurt. I longed for a cold drink of water and a bottle of aspirin, but I just didn't have the energy in my limbs to seek what I wanted.

The clattering of pots and pans told me I wouldn't be able to lounge in bed much longer. Nana was going to call for me soon. Bossy needed to be milked, and there were eggs to gather. My feet hit the cold wooden floor, and as I slid to the edge of the bed my hands shook. I had the sudden feeling that I was in danger.

When I stood, my knees buckled, and I quickly sat back down. Gasping, I took hold of my grandmother's quilt, my fingers tightening

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into fists that clutched the fragile fabric as fiercely as I would a life preserver. A cold sheen of sweat glistened on my arms. I couldn't catch my breath. Horrors filled my mind: Death. Blood. Destruction. Evil.

Was it a dream? If it was, it was the most vivid nightmare I'd ever had.

"Lilypad?" my nana's voice called. "You up yet, hon?"

"Yeah," I answered, my voice quavering as I rubbed my trembling limbs vigorously. "I'll be out soon."

I attempted to shake off the nightmare as best I could and dressed in a faded pair of overalls, a comfortable T-shirt, and thick socks. By the time I headed out to the barn, the sun had fully risen above the horizon. It perched in the cerulean sky, beaming down on me like an all-too-knowing eye. The light painted the thin clouds above in shades of rose and dusty orange. As I walked the well-worn path, the golden sunshine warming my shoulders and the fragrant air tickling my nose with the scent of Nana's flower garden, I felt like all should be right with the world. And yet I knew it wasn't. The gilded setting struck me as false, and I sensed evil things hiding in the shadows. *Something's definitely rotten in the state of Iowa.*

Settling onto the wooden stool beside Bossy, I thought I had never in my life been so tired. It was more than physical exhaustion. Deep inside I felt battered, drained—like my soul was one of Nana's wet towels, wrung of water and thrown carelessly on a line to dry. Pieces of me skittered around in the breeze, and it was only a matter of time until a gust of wind blew hard enough to send me flipping into the dust. Reaching up to pat Bossy's flank, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. The sound of streaming milk was soon pinging against the side of the metal bucket.

What kind of incomprehensible human ritual are you engaged in now? an irritated voice said.

I squealed and staggered up from my seat, accidentally kicking over the milk bucket and my wooden stool in the process.

It's called milking a cow, ya flea-bitten feline.

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Naturally, I assumed as much. But such an act is beneath us. And for your information, we don't have fleas.

"Who's there?" I called out, spinning around. I picked up a pitchfork and kicked open a stall, looking for intruders. "My nana has a shotgun," I warned, a statement I never thought I'd ever have to utter. "Trust me. You don't want to get on her bad side."

Why doesn't she know who we are? questioned a voice with an Irish accent.

I don't know. Perhaps there is something wrong with her mind. Lily, we are inside you, the initially irritated voice said.

"What?" I pressed my hands against the sides of my head and crouched down. *Maybe I'm still dreaming,* I thought. *Either that or I'm going insane. Have I finally cracked under the pressure of getting ready for college? I'm now imagining voices. That can't be a good thing.*

You're not imagining us, darlin'.

Yes. We're as real as that too-fat-to-run, very mouthwatering creature you were trying to milk. Milk is not nearly as satisfying as red, raw meat, just so you know.

An image of sinking my teeth into the body of a creature filled my mind. Steaming blood filled my mouth as I licked my chops.

I screamed, falling into the small pile of hay I'd broken apart to feed the cow.

Fantastic. You broke 'er.

One as powerful as Lily doesn't just break.

Shows what you know.

I've been with Lily longer. I think I know her well enough to know what she can handle.

Obviously, she can't handle this. Can't you feel her disconnect? It's like her mind is floatin' above us. Before she was as wrapped around us as a chicken guardin' her eggs. Now she's gone and flown the coop, leavin' us trapped in our little shells waitin' on some fox to scoop us up for breakfast.

I am one of Isis's chosen. An African cat destined to fight in great battles with teeth and claw. I am not a chicken egg.

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Well, without Lily, we're just as powerless. When the mama hen dies, her chicks die, too.

Lily is not dead.

Near enough.

I lay there, the prickly straw poking my neck and back as I listened. Was I dead? And all this some kind of special hell reserved just for me? The macabre thought made me want to bury myself deeper. Hide from the insanity surrounding me.

The two voices continued arguing. Whoever they were, they seemed to know me. They sounded familiar, but as hard as I tried, I couldn't conjure a memory. Bossy came over and nudged my prostrate form, bawling for me to finish the milking job I'd started.

When her long tongue darted out toward my cheek, I tried to move away but found I couldn't even wince. I was trapped in my own body. *A brain aneurysm. That's what must be happening. It's the only thing that could explain the voices and the inability to move my limbs.*

The door creaked open, and I felt someone reach out and touch my arm. "Lily?"

A man leaned over me. His eyes were kind and familiar, but I struggled to identify him. The skin on his face was weathered, like a timeworn leather vest, but most of the wrinkles around his eyes were upturned, as if he spent most of his time smiling.

Hassan! both voices cried at once. *He'll help us.*

"Oh, Lily!" he cried. "I feared something like this."

That didn't sound good. The man disappeared briefly before he returned with my grandmother. She eyed the man like he was a wolf trying to make off with her prize sheep. Still, she worked with him to wrangle me into the house. Once I was settled on the couch, she reached for the old-fashioned phone hanging on the wall.

"Please don't," the man asked in a soft, pleading voice. His eyes cut to my nana and then to me.

I could hear the anger and suspicion in her voice. It was lurking just beneath a layer of forced politeness that was steadily melting away

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like a snowpack blanketing an active volcano. Nana was fixing to erupt in all her protective grandmotherly glory. “And why wouldn’t I call an ambulance?” she asked, daring him to give her an answer. “Seems mighty convenient that you just happened upon my granddaughter in the barn. How do I know you didn’t cause whatever’s wrong with her?”

“On the contrary. I freely admit, I am partly to blame for her condition, though I would never wish her ill. If I had wanted to make off with her for some nefarious purpose, I wouldn’t have retrieved you.”

Nana didn’t respond with more than a suspicious *hmph*.

The man wrung his hat in his hands guiltily as he spoke. “As to why you should refrain from seeking medical attention, it pains me to inform you that what ails Lilliana is not of this world. I’m afraid a doctor would be of no help whatsoever.”

I couldn’t see Nana from my fixed position on the couch, but the fact that she wasn’t immediately pushing the buttons for 911 meant that she was considering his words. “Explain,” she demanded.

“It’s rather complicated . . .,” he hedged.

“I would suggest you give me the *Reader’s Digest* version, then.”

The man nodded, swallowed, then said, “Now, this is a supposition on my part, but I think Lily might be suffering from a form of extreme dissociative identity disorder. She’s had a very recent traumatic experience. One terrible enough that her conscious mind has . . . for lack of a better explanation, retreated. It’s a way for her mind to protect itself.”

“And when, exactly, do you believe this *trauma* has occurred? Lily has been under my care since she arrived.”

“That’s not precisely true.”

“That’s enough. I’m calling the police.”

“No! Please, dear lady, I beg you. I mean neither you nor her any harm. There is no one more qualified to help her than I. You must believe me.”

“Who are you? And how do you know Lily’s name?” There was a dangerous edge to her voice.

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He sighed. "My name is Osahar Hassan. I'm an Egyptologist by trade. Has she mentioned me at all? Spoken of Egypt?"

Nana came closer to the couch. I could see the uncertainty in her eyes. "Her . . . her parents said she's taken quite an interest in the Egyptian wing at the museum. She's spent all her free time there for the past few months."

Had I? If so, I had no memory of it at all. Why did I get out of bed this morning? I knew something was off. Still, my brain disassociating didn't make sense. Was that where the voices were coming from? And why did my mental state affect my limbs? I tried desperately to move my pinky. Just lift one finger. I concentrated like I was threading one of Nana's embroidery needles. I couldn't produce so much as a twitch.

"Lilliana has been helping me on a . . . a project of great importance. I'm afraid one of the discoveries we've made has put her in some peril." He raised a hand. "She's out of physical danger." He grimaced. "For the moment. It's her mental state that I'm most concerned about. You see, there was a spell. . . ."

"A spell?" Nana lifted her eyebrow along with one corner of her lip.

"Yes, a spell. A very ancient, very powerful one. If you will allow me, I can prove to you that what I'm saying is true." He took a step closer to the couch, but Nana dropped the phone, which was now beeping because it was off the hook. The half smile disappeared from her face as she picked up the rifle she kept tucked in the corner. Nana didn't keep it loaded, but the man wouldn't know that.

"I'll thank you to keep your distance from my granddaughter," she warned.

The man looked at the rifle, then at my grandmother. He gave her a small nod but lifted a finger as if to shush her, completely nonplussed by the gun pointed at him.

"Tia?" he said while looking at my inert body. "Are you there? If you are, I need you to take over for Lily."

In the few seconds it took for me to wonder who Tia was, my focus shifted. I felt smaller. Like I was looking up at the world through a thin

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layer of water. Instinctively, I bucked against the change. I knew that what was happening to me was connected to something bad, chained-to-an-anchor-and-thrown-in-the-ocean bad, but at the same time, I had the distinct impression that I was safe. Cared for. Loved.

"I am here," I heard one of the voices say, except now it was coming from my mouth. Slowly, my view shifted as my body sat up on the couch. *"The fairy is with me as well."*

I have a name, ya know, the second voice inside me said.

"The fairy?" The man frowned. "Apparently, Anubis left out some of the pertinent details, as usual."

"Fairy? Anubis? What exactly is going on here?" Nana demanded. "Lilypad, are you all right, honey?"

"The one you refer to as Lilypad is here. It is as Hassan has described. Her mind is fragmented. She is like a river after a rainstorm—clouded with silt. I can only hope that with time she will return to normal."

The man rubbed his jaw. "Yes, perhaps," he said.

"How can you speak of normal when she has a split personality?" Nana demanded. "Tell me exactly what is going on!"

The Egyptologist was about to speak when a new voice, like ethereal musical smoke, echoed around us. "Perhaps you will allow me to explain," it said.

My head moved and fixed itself on a pinpoint of light that grew steadily in the center of the room. I heard a soft gasp from Nana when a beautiful woman with moonbeam-blond hair as smooth and straight as a frozen pond stepped through a glowing doorway. The lighted background diminished around her, but there was still a brightness that never left her form.

"Who . . . who are you?" Nana asked. She looked to Hassan, but he just stared at the woman in awe.

She's a blinkin' fairy like me! the fairy voice said.

"Clearly, she is not," Tia answered. *"Do you not recognize a goddess when you see one?"*

A goddess? I thought with an inner snort. *That's crazy.* And I knew

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crazy. New Yorkers saw crazy every day—guys dancing on the street in Lady Liberty dresses, women jogging in heels, food trucks that looked like cheeseburgers, dogs as fashion accessories. But this was next-level stuff, my-boyfriend’s-an-alien kind of crazy.

If I hadn’t seen the woman magically appear, I would never have believed it. Even with photographic evidence. Whoever she was, the woman was as out of place on my grandmother’s farm as a chocolate cupcake was at the gym.

She is a fairy, the voice continued in a manner I was sure only I, and Tia, could hear. *I’d bet my tree house on it.*

“*She is not*,” Tia said vehemently, using what I decided to call her outside voice. “*She is the sister of Isis.*”

“Nephthys!” the man said as he immediately bowed. “It is an honor.”

With a kind expression, the goddess put her hand on his shoulder. “The honor is mine, Hassan.” Turning, the beautiful woman approached Nana. “And you must be the esteemed guardian of our Young Lily.”

“I . . .” Nana swallowed, the forgotten shotgun hanging limp in her grip. “Yes. I’m Lily’s grandmother.”

“Good. There is much for the two of you to do.” Her smile took in both of them. “It is up to you to train Lily. There isn’t much time. Even now, Seth has broken free of the obelisk. He is still shackled, but his minions heed his call. Without Lily coming into her full power, I’m afraid all will be lost.”

“What will be lost?” Nana asked.

“The grand vizier Hassan will tell you everything. I cannot remain here. Seth seeks Lily, and though I am shielded by her presence, even an adder stone of her ability cannot hide me from my husband for too long.” Nephthys pressed a rolled parchment into Hassan’s hands. “Are you familiar with the stories of Hecate? The maiden, the mother, and the crone? The furies? Sirens?”

Hassan nodded hesitantly. “They are not my particular specialty, but I know of the things you mention.”

“That is good. You are aware that Lily has taken on the power of the

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sphinx.” She ignored Nana’s gasp and continued, “She is to become Wasret. The concept of who and what Wasret is has been purposefully left vague in Egypt’s history. We did this to keep her safe from Seth. However, there are many references to a triple goddess peppered throughout the stories of antiquity. We have placed these things throughout history specifically to hide them from Seth and for you to draw upon. Use this parchment as a guide. Study all of these stories, for they will give you clues as to Lily’s potential and power.”

Nephthys walked over to me and placed her hand on my cheek. “Wasret is of vital importance. I’ve been waiting for her to come into being since the dawn of time.” She placed a soft kiss upon my forehead and turned around to face the others who stared in our direction with mutual expressions of shock. “Lily has not yet taken on the mantle of what she is to be. You must help her accomplish this. Fix what ails her. Reunite her with those she loves. They will help her overcome the beast.

“Even now, the battle of Heliopolis begins. I wish we could give you more time, but I fear that is the one thing beyond even our power. Good luck to you,” she said with a tinge of sadness in her voice. “Good luck to all of us.”

With that, the goddess raised her hand in a flourish, and a brightly lit gateway appeared. When she stepped through, it vanished with an explosion of color, and she was gone. In the electric aftermath of the goddess’s visitation, the three of us remained silent. The only sound in the room was our breathing.

Then the unmistakable cry of Bossy broke the tension.

“Well, now,” Nana said. “It looks to me like there’s more to this than I originally thought.” Turning to me, she said, “Tia, is it?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“You promise me my Lily is safe?”

“Yes. *She is here with me and is listening even now. But she is confused.*”

“As are we all, my dear. Do you perhaps know how to milk a cow?”

My nose wrinkled up. “*I can access Lily’s memories of the undertaking.*”

“Good. Then you get out there and finish up with Bossy. And

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you”—she pointed to the man—“put that dusty hat on the stand by the door and wash up. I’m making pancakes.”

The man nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Nana put her rifle back in the same spot she’d retrieved it from and started whistling. She then tied on her apron as if it were a normal day on the farm.

When we got back from milking Bossy, the man was sitting at the table with Nana, a bowl of scrambled eggs between them, and a stack of pancakes high enough that I was sure there was no way the three of us could make a dent. I was wrong.

My appetite was voracious. It was like I hadn’t eaten in weeks. Also, the persons inhabiting my body kept making strange comments like “The eggs would be better raw” and “The syrup is like the juice of honeybees.” I dipped my tongue into the glass of warm fresh milk like a very satiated kitten with a bowl.

Normally, I couldn’t force myself to drink it warm; it was a little too close to the musky animal for my comfort. Today, though, I lapped it up and licked the sweet cream from my lips with a shudder of deep-rooted pleasure.

When our breakfast was finished and Tia, who was still in control, stumbled through washing the dishes, the man named Hassan took out the parchment and spread it on the table.

“Now then,” he said. “Shall we begin?”