

Prologue

Several Months after the battle at Masada...

Eve squatted down and touched the dirt, her elbow extended away from her body and lifting her forearm to allow a steely-eyed falcon to perch on it. Using every Neteru sensory gift she owned, her eyes followed the nearly imperceptible patterns in the earth, and then she stood in one graceful move that didn't unsettle her winged hunter.

"Fly!" Eve commanded. "It is in the form of a man now. The beast is no longer in its pupa stage." She threw the falcon away from her arm, and it took flight with an angry screech.

"How can this be? I brought you its slain carcass!" Hannibal shouted. His question and eyes were pained as he tried to steady his red battle stallion that pranced in agitation.

The other kings grunted their assent as they waited for Eve's reply, arms at the ready. Adam's tortured gaze met his wife's.

"We rode hard from Masada through the Judean Desert... we missed no trail all the way to Tel Jericho through to old Biblical lands of Amman and Moab, that they now call Jordan, and we circled back to slaughter it here on Mount Temptation." Adam's voice was laden with tension and fatigue as he dismounted from a gleaming white steed.

"Eve... my Queen," Adam pressed on when she didn't immediately reply, but kept her gaze to the horizon, "I know the mere thought that her progeny has survived is like a barb in your heart for all that Lilith has robbed from you. You must accept that Hannibal has conquered it. The nightmares will be slow to cease for both of us... given all that we have endured." He went to her and landed a hand on her shoulder. "Please... let your spirit rest."

She shook her head and turned to the group of Neteru warriors, her eyes glistening with tears of frustration. She cupped Adam's cheek for a moment and then allowed her palm to slide away.

"I am the earth mother. Nothing touches my soil that I do not feel in my womb, which has given birth to every nation. Why would you doubt my inner sense now, after all these years?" Hurt filled her voice as Aset stepped to Eve's side, the Queens resolute.

"Show us the carcass again, Ausar," Aset said, standing next to Eve.

He dismounted and brought over the blue-white energy containment sphere that had been in his saddlebags. Without a word he kinetically sent it into his wife's hands, one palm up, one palm down, and she received it that way as had been shown on the great walls of the pyramids at Giza since time immemorial.

"This," Aset said, "is a husk—only the pupa's shell." She jettisoned the orb back to Ausar.

Nzinga tightened her grip on her battleaxe. "Then we ride till we find it, no matter the fatigue."

"How can you be sure? This could very well just be a diversion to keep us expending energy resources to grind us down to the point of exhaustion. That could make us vulnerable! They need evasive tactics like that now that they've lost so many demon legions—and when Hannibal first brought what you call a husk to our Council, we all breathed a sigh of relief." Ausar glanced around at the assembled warriors and found agreement in all eyes except those of the Queens.

"All but Eve breathed such relief, dear husband," Aset said, her gaze holding his. "With all due respect, now she has added reason to believe that her theory was correct. I can feel it bubbling beneath the surface of my Queen Sister's skin."

Eve called over the top three generals from the King and Queen Neteru Councils with a wave of her graceful hand and then stooped down to point at minute changes in the earth.

"It took my falcon a long time to find this, but here is where it dropped from the sky from your first energy bolt, Hannibal." Like a forensic scholar, Eve drew an invisible trajectory with her finger and then allowed her energy to light the way just above the dirt without disturbing it. "It skidded and

left charred grasses, then got up on three legs, not four, in its normal, immature Harpie form.”

“It was injured,” Hannibal stated firmly, satisfaction resonant in his deep voice.

“Yes. Severely,” Eve affirmed, showing them where splashed acid had eaten away vegetation.

“Look at the wide, flat sweep against the dirt,” she added. “That’s where it also dragged its damaged wing.”

“That matches the carcass we have contained,” Ausar said, lifting his chin and glancing at Adam and Hannibal.

“True,” Eve said quietly, lost in thought. “But look at this strange, uneven dark charge,” she murmured and stood again as her falcon cried. Eve shielded her eyes from the glaring sun and began to walk toward her where her distressed bird circled.

“It just looks like the carnage after a fatal injury,” Hannibal said, leaning closer to inspect.

“What is the dark energy signature of the pattern?” Adam asked quickly as the elite squad of ancestral warriors began to follow Eve.

“Lucifer’s,” Eve said, bringing the group to a halt. “I would know the foundation of Cain’s DNA anywhere, even a generation or two removed.” She looked away. “He made this abomination with both Lilith and her Chairman... my son, Cain.” Eve closed her eyes and hugged herself as Adam’s arms enfolded her. “With assistance from that unspeakable source, it stood right up from its own blood splatter in a new form. Guaranteed my falcon has found the footprints of a man.”

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Lilith stood at the edge of her husband’s bedchambers, studying his unreadable expression and mood. He had allowed several months to pass without comment about the total devastation of eight

demon legions, an insidious spell that had backfired into the dark realms, and a network Light virus sent into their caverns and brain centers by the human Neteru team. Now he'd finally sent for her and the Harpies had escorted her here... not to his torture chamber, not to his war room—but here.

Knowing that his mood could shift to horrific wrath in the blink of an eye, she remained very still, waiting. She was old and wise enough, had been with him long enough to know that, one of his greatest pleasures was luring his victims into a false sense of security before he struck. That made the shock and terror all the more palpable, the betrayal more visceral, the tears and their cries more bittersweet. Therefore, she would not allow herself to be fooled by his exquisitely handsome smile or his calm repose on the heavy Baroque-style furnishings.

He absently stroked the feathers of one of his glistening black wings and tilted his head as he studied her reluctance to fully enter his domain. “No warm welcome from my mate after these many months?”

She allowed her eyes to travel along the perfect symmetry of his nude, muscular form, and swallowed hard as he spoke to her in a deep, sensual tone in Dananu.

“Come to me, Lilith. I know I have had my moments of rage... but not today.” He uncovered his flawless, sculpted body by moving a massive wing and held out his manicured hand. “No claws this dawn... no leather wings of fury or cloven hooves to stomp you. Look,” he said with a droll smile. “Even my tail is retracted, darling, I am deeply pleased... beyond your comprehension. You broke the code.”

Somewhat startled by his approach, she hesitated. “But we lost his trail when the second seal broke. They released the red stallion... there was nothing more we could do.”

“I know,” he said with a deep, slow chuckle, and then let out a long sigh. “Don't make me repeat my request. Come to me, Lilith. I've waited a very long time for this.”

Her voice caught in her throat as she braced for her final extermination. Lilith's gaze slid from her husband's sensual smile and lush mouth that crested a hint of fang, down his stone-carved chest to

witness his calm breaths. His sinewy abdomen was rigid with want, and her gaze briefly considered the massive erection he owned. Just seeing that made her fight the impulse to quickly back away. Whatever torture he'd planned this time in exchange for her failure had turned him on so much that her extinction was eminent.

“Just make it swift,” she murmured in Dananu, tears rising in her eyes as she finally approached the edge of the huge chamber bed. Her thighs came to a rest against black silk and gold brocade. “While you have every right to prolong my torture... I beseech you, for old time's sake... as your first... the only one who stood with you against Adam and even the unnamed at the beginning of days... be swift.”

“Be swift?” Her husband smiled and raised an eyebrow. His dark eyes hunted her. “Why, Lilith, I am completely offended.”

Lilith's voice fractured as her breath left her body. His power snatch was so quick and severe that she didn't even have time to gasp.

He smiled and kissed her slowly as he brought her beneath him and extended his onyx-hued wings to blanket them both. “You asked me to be swift and I complied. But I had never considered my giving you pleasure a torturous thing... should that be swift, too?”

She looked up into his intense black irises that held the depths of all darkness. Unable to help herself she touched the side of his face, confused when she witnessed raw passion and appreciation in his eyes—something she'd never seen to this degree in them before.

“You did it,” he said quietly, nuzzling her throat and beginning to call her jugular vein to the surface of her skin. “You made him. The males who took the lead throne of evil on my most cherished Vampire Council couldn't produce him, but you, my wife, you did.” His voice dropped to a sensual whisper. “My own son, Dante, couldn't even do it, but you did.”

Relief washed through her and her body relaxed in his hold, but she didn't say a word for fear of ruining the moment. She allowed him to lead the negotiation for now. Dark energy began to enter

her pores, infusing her with a slow, inner-leaking pleasure that caused her to writhe beneath him with a feral moan.

“He is not lost, Lilith,” her husband crooned as his hands lavished her body, leaving her so sensation-drunk from his touch that she could barely move. “He homed to my energies... millennia ago I had been there to challenge the one who we never name, and now, my heir went to Mount Temptation and slipped out of his birth skin to find the dark chrysalis of transformation. Forty-thousand demon troops as a cannon fodder diversion... what you did up on Masada was epic, Lilith,” he said, his breaths becoming ragged. “I will give you what I wanted to give our son, Dante—but he was never demon enough to have earned as a reward.”

She arched with a shriek as he entered her and bit her simultaneously in one deft move. It felt as though her heart would explode as temporal colors and scents and sounds from the earth plane erupted inside her. She dug her nails into his shoulders, her talons growing as he sent power into her throbbing vein while moving against her causing climatic bursts. When he lifted his head from the infusion, fangs dripping with her black blood, she was barely conscious.

“Give this to your Councilmen, and surprise them with the gift. They cannot pass it yet, only my heir will have that right. But you have pleased me, Lilith... this time you have outdone yourself.” He kissed her, making her taste her own power-infused blood on his mouth. “Stay with me this morning of your own accord... and let me take my time to do this with agonizingly slow precision. Tomorrow, you can share this with them. Is that fair exchange?”

All she could do was nod.