

Iset's Pharaoh
Book 1

By

Mira Brooks

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Prologue:

Ari sat staring at the loading screen on his MacBook Air, irritation flickering across his narrowed brows as he sipped his coffee. The stainless steel breakfast bar was clear except for one plate with the crust of a bagel, his coffee cup, and laptop. The housekeeper had already gone for the day by the time he woke up, but his assistant, Charlotte, would be arriving shortly to give updates on anything he missed from the office.

Trying to focus after his minimal rest, he leaned his head against his hand. This coming home from the office at five am was killing him. To say he was exhausted did not come close to describing it. His body ached from the toll the late nights were inflicting on him. Agitated, he cursed his age and lack of stamina. At one time, he could go days without rest. Now, as his reflection appeared in the darkened screen, he examined his weary face for the briefest second, before his webpage loaded.

He looked like shit, which was fitting, because it matched how he felt.

His mood was already dark, as he clicked on his Outlook account and noticed the unread letter staring back at him. It turned his entire body deathly still. All his rational thoughts came to a devastating halt, as he felt a tingling begin from head to toe.

For the past month, a rumor had floated around Massimo and Illiot's office about a man who was investigating the firm, himself, and his wife, Iset. Normally, the second anything was reported unnatural, the M&IB took control.

M&IB Inc. stood, legally, for the Massimo & Illiot Brothers Incorporated. Enlightened members were specially trained visitors to Earth, who entered into the service of protecting the human race from outside forces, as well as themselves. They had chosen Earth, because of the abundances of resources, and struck a deal with Ari to export some, when necessary, to their own world. Most of the M&IB staff were Enlightened, but some humans were mingled in to help avoid any suspicions. They didn't hold powerful positions, and were completely in the dark about their employers' and co-workers' true identities.

The Enlightened worked discretely and closely with NASA, without divulging their alien origins, engineering new technology. Over recent years, much of their focus had been exclusively on exploration of Mars. It was being considered as a future option if Earth simply became unsustainable.

Despite all the efforts and time that had gone into establishing a trusted relationship with the governments around the world, M&IB Inc. was basically used as a cover. Strategically, they had infiltrated global networking involving all information that humans had of explorations into space. As long trusted friends of NASA, they were given uninhibited access to information many people would never be permitted to view. The only problem was every few years or so, a switch was necessary, and Massimo and Illiot needed to insert a new figurehead to deal with the humans

they interacted with. However, they always were somewhere close behind the scenes, making sure everything went smoothly.

Massimo and Illiot knew, or at the very least were among the first to hear of any and all UFO happenings around the world. They had to be since on occasion a craft would be spotted or crash with Enlightened members inside. They were also able to contain the threats of their own exposure because of their close ties within the human levels of government—though humans remained oblivious to their true identity and mission.

The Enlightened, or what humans call aliens, were controlling much of the information about their visitations and purpose for Earth. They even sent out men to investigate issues when something publically happened to raise eyebrows. Ironically, their company, M&IB Inc., resembled the media nickname for the men that were in their control—the black suited henchmen who inspected possible alien presence. It was a well-used joke among Enlightened members that the public had nicknamed the group so while still having no idea about how close their hypothesis was.

The Enlightened could go about their affairs because of the delusions some people still had about aliens. Massimo loved watching Hollywood depictions. He often joked with Illiot about the little green men, with big eyes and baldheads. "Well, they got one out of three right!" was his favorite catchphrase.

Illiot was bald, and did not appreciate the reference.

Under normal circumstances, Massimo only did it when someone new was around, and might find humor in the joke. Massimo had a full head of hair that he was vainly proud of. Illiot always failed to see the humor, and merely rolled his eyes whenever the joke came up.

Ari covered his face, rubbing his tired eyes. Reminiscing about his coworkers wasn't accomplishing anything, he reminded himself. He had come up to the city from his Ranch early, hoping to find whoever was causing the panic to ensue, before Iset joined him. Yet, nothing had turned up, and it was creating mass chaos.

Normally, the resources they had at their disposal were explicitly accurate in detecting any people who knew or saw too much, and yet all traces led to dead ends. With the unlimited and extraordinary technology of both Earth and beyond, it was agonizingly frustrating for all involved to continuously fail at solving the issue. All he needed was one little slip, but so far, the person behind the campaign against him was too much of a pro to leave a trail. People of this intelligence were rare, and it had everyone doing everything they could to unmask the assailant.

Ari was growing increasingly impatient and irritable with everyone around him.

Dr. Ari Ramsey was a well-respected businessman in Houston, but a notoriously shy man. He was running one of the state's most prominent international consultant firms, Ramsey International Inc. It was a business that he and his closet friends had contrived as his cover about seventeen years ago. These days, he was taking a less active role, and eventually would be forced to abandon the company entirely. It was the one thing about being immortal that really did get

old. Staying in one spot for too long roused suspicion. People tended to notice when their friends didn't age. Botox was making life easier now, but even he knew that it was only a temporary cover story.

Ari liked to move on before the questions started. He hated press, and with the reputation the company had, it made more sense to put someone else in as a figurehead. Soon he would be announcing his successor, a human whom he admired and respected. Jacob was perfect for the position, and made him a lot of money.

Of course, as of yet, Jacob was unaware of the promotion he would be receiving. But, when Ari felt the time was right, he had full confidence his pride and joy would be left in very capable hands.

Ari didn't relish the thought of retirement, at all. When they moved again, his profile would need to be even more 'low key' for about a hundred years. He was thinking of buying a compound in New Orleans this time, or perhaps in Northern Canada. He hadn't been to either in place in longer than he could count. Both held the promise of the anonymity he knew that they needed.

Ari was so accustomed to being the boss, resigning control was irritating. Yet, maintaining a low profile away from the eyes of the world was not only a choice, but a necessary evil. Lately, he and Iset had retreated to the Ranch about an hour outside the city, because as social media grew, his privacy was not as protected as it once was. Already he needed to start wearing makeup again to show some age to his flawless features.

The M&IB makeup artists were the best on or off the planet, and even worked on sets of Hollywood movies occasionally. When you lived immortal amongst mortals so closely, you had to show some changes, and the Enlightened were masters of disguise. Part of him hated not being as free to do his work as he had once been.

But he had to admit, country living with his wife was nice at times too. They had time for one another. Time to sleep in, and eat breakfast in bed. Time to lie on the sofa and pretend they were normal people, lazily enjoying their days in mindless splendor. Also, it helped that he had a state of the art office within his estates. This meant he could control affairs from the comfort of his home, and keep in constant contact with M&IB, even while playing the devout husband.

But that said, it had been almost a month since the first threat arrived innocuously in Ari's email. And in that time, no one had collected any solid information.

At the same time, there had been two computer hackings trying to infiltrate classified documents. Both attempts failed, narrowly, causing just enough chaos to raise suspicion. Illiot and Massimo were doing everything they could on their end to help, but many of their people—other Enlightened stationed to help maintain their anonymity—were baffled. Every lead came to a dead end, which was making all of them crazy.

Ari, put up extra security, but judging by the searched document files that both attempts failed to locate, someone seemed to be specifically targeting information in areas they knew to

look. Places that held information so critical, that it *could not* be leaked. Lives were at stake. It had become an obsession of working day in and night, tirelessly, for some mistake from the unknown assailant who seemed to taunt them, and then just disappear without a trace. Whoever this person was, had come looking for proof of suspicions that Ari and the Enlightened had been so careful to not raise. It meant that whoever it was, needed to be eliminated before the threats became a reality.

Concern filled Ari. What would the world do if they had proof aliens were real, and they had been here on Earth for centuries, living among them?

Probably the same thing they'd do if they discovered that the Great Pharaoh Ramesses II was not in the Cairo museum under a glass box, but very much alive. They'd panic, he thought wryly. And the Enlightened would be forced to destroy a planet they had been protecting for a few millennia. Ari squeezed the bridge of his nose. If only immortality took away the trivial pain of headaches, he sighed.

Until today, there had been no direct contact. MUFON, a group devoted to the exposé of UFO phenomena, was really the only name he kept coming back to. They were annoying little pests who were growing in popularity, thanks to the internet. When he had devised a short list of who might be attempting to expose him, they were near the top.

Yet, even after all their years of investigation, nothing they published ever pointed a finger at him or M&IB. They had theories about time travel, and mummies who were not really mummies... but beyond the odd hypothetical, nothing but circumstantial ideas ever really made it to the media. No one in his office or the M&IB, had been contacted or threatened, and business was running for the most part as usual. This made him think ultimately they were not involved, but without proof, he was lost. Even with all staff alerted to the possible threat, without any more contact, things remained at a standstill. Everyone was just waiting for the next attempt at breaching the system's firewalls.

That was, until this moment, he thought bitterly. Staring at the screen, as if in a trance, Ari calmly moved his mouse over the subject line: *Dr. Ari Ramsey or Your Majesty?*

Closing his eyes, he held a long breath and braced for the information about to materialize. Yet another all-nighter with Illiot, going back over all evidence gathered had provided absolutely nothing, and now here it was, contact. A deep irritated sigh escaped his lips. This could finally be evidence that someone had information to expose them. Shit! It had to come when he had, glancing down at his watch he was further perturbed, six minutes before he had to get in the shower.

Chapter One

From: anonymousservant@gmail.com

Subject: Dr. Ari Ramsey or Your Majesty?

Date: Fri, 8 October 2014, 3:47:32

To: ariramseyCEO@outlook.com

Your Royal Highness, or may I call you Ari?

It must be a long time since you were last addressed by your royal title. I must say, I am both excited and nervous at writing you. I have dreamed ever since my research proved true, of the day I would be conversing with the Great Pharaoh, Ramesses II. Finally, the time has come.

I was given some files about you a little over seven years ago, and was interested enough to devote these past years to researching if what I was reading and hearing was truly possible. Obviously, I have come across enough evidence to contact you personally. I cannot explain my delight at what a pleasure it is to finally be able to do so.

I have been compiling a book, one that could be a great inconvenience to you and your lovely wife. My benefactor plans to release it, but I will offer another option.

I would love for us to speak privately. However, I have my obvious concerns. What I want is immortality, something I believe you have the ability to grant. In all my research, nothing has been found to describe just how your longevity became possible, though it is a secret you no doubt possess. In return for this favor, I will destroy all the evidence, plus give you the name of the person who has commissioned my work.

I understand you may need time to think about this. I implore you to message me, but if I do not receive a response, I will contact you sometime again in the near future. In the meantime, enjoy the Gala tonight, I know I will. Queen Isetnofret always looks magnificent.

Your Humble Servant,

Hapet

* * * * *

Prick thinks he's clever, Ari bemused as he folded his hands almost in a prayer stance and tipped them to his lips. The name of his former personal slave was a nice touch to such a personal blackmail. It also confirmed that this person knew far too much.

No history books would know something as trivial as a former slave's name. He was certain that would be of little personal interest to scholars. There was no written record about slaves. Even his wife's slave origins remained a long forgotten secret.

Hapet, he thought bitterly, as he remembered his dear friend. He hadn't thought of him in centuries, but hearing an enemy use his name made him angry. It almost sounded blasphemous. It was too sacred, too personal.

Hapet had been like a father to him, guiding him and giving him advice, whether he wanted it or not. Ari bemused at the memories that flooded back. He was his closest thing to a father he could remember. Seti had been ill for a few years, and when he died, Ari was barely more than a boy of 14. It was very young age to suddenly find yourself with unlimited power, an image to mold, and armies to command.

Clearing his throat as the emotion for the loss came to him, Ari tried to focus. This person worked for someone who wanted to publish a book chronicling him. That meant he had to have existed somehow, and kept his immortality a secret. That, or he had access to information that Ari himself was unfamiliar with. How, or who? Still remained a frustrating mystery.

Quickly rescanning the email, he tried to break it down, looking for any error this man might have made in disclosing too much. Analyzing each line, Ari tried to consider the depths of this human's stupidity. Trying to extort someone of his caliber was insane. This fake Hapet was a Judas, and yet he really believed that Ari would be so naïve to just give him immortality? He almost laughed at the foolishness. Obviously, this man's employer had no idea he would be betrayed, or he would not have commissioned him to be the writer of this book.

So, if the assailant could so innocently convince him of his loyalty and then betray, he would do it again when the tables suited his favor. Ari had much experience with the issue, having lived this long. He knew it well. As a boy, people flocked to be his friend when he was important. Fake people disgusted him. For that, this man deserved the fate he instigated.

In all their years, no issues ever arose to give him the slightest clue that other immortals existed, until now. The Enlightened had never found any signs of rogue employees, or other travelers visiting out of curiosity. M&IB had taken all necessary precautions with ensuring privacy for the Enlightened members, and he had to admit that their loyalty to him and Iset was beyond any he could have expected.

So the puzzling thoughts of why now, and who, buzzed annoyingly around his brain. The internet age was both a curse and a blessing.

Ari drummed his fingers in quick repetition as he scowled at the screen. It was yet another distraction plaguing his mind, as he thought about the importance of tonight for so many

charities in the Houston area. Fuck the internet! Fuck this cursed being for coming to him, now... and fuck whatever god-forsaken thing got in his way today!

Slamming his hand down on the counter top, he cursed everything. Life had been so much simpler when technology was limited to just quills and paper. When people just feared him, and he had a reputation that people understood meant that he should not be crossed. He could kill at a whim, without care about some smartphone catching a picture. Deceit and treacherous activities existed, but they were more neatly hidden—and resolved—than the internet age allowed. Sometimes he missed the good old days, even with their own frustrating qualities.

Ari frowned, remembering various incidents that had happened over the years. Why did everything always need to be so goddamn frustrating?

Breaking his sulky silence, his cell buzzed beside him. Glancing down, he wondered if it was finally Iset responding to his earlier message. He had found her fumbled note on the pillow when he arrived home this morning. She had stayed with Elise and Hassana last night, despite his orders contrary, and he'd been ready to throttle her. His caller ID illuminated, and his scowl deepened.

It was just Charlotte. She was just boarding the elevator.

Have you seen the picture, she asked via text.

He knew she would be meticulous in her timing, it was a requirement for everyone who worked so closely with him, but he was still not expecting her this early. He took note of the time, and realized she wasn't early at all. They would need to make their meeting brief.

He glanced back to his phone. *What picture?*

He was curious if this pseudo-Hapet had sent her something.

Quickly, she forwarded the photo and his brows concaved. It was the cover of the Houston Gazette. Jason Price, the actor was in the arms of a few women, and in the background, Iset's eyes were staring back at him.

He then saw the low V of the neckline, her loose hair falling around her and fury consume him.

Was that a near nip slip? He thought that's what they called it when a woman nearly popped out of her top.

He tapped his foot very fast, as he expanded the image to read the headline.

Socialites Abound. And Jason Price was basking in the glow of beauty around him. Ari was not surprised to see Elise's smiling face was right beside his wife, and he thought in that moment he'd never stop whipping her once he got his hands on her.

Sitting back on the stool, he knew he had to focus. So much shit was coming to him at once, he felt as if his head was going to explode. Right now, the email needed to take precedence, but he was finding it difficult to concentrate when he felt ready to strangle his wife.

What was she thinking going out like that without security? Without fucking clothes either, if he was really thinking about it. So much for low-key living!

Being seen with a fucking actor known for his antics out on the town was just outright defiant. Jesus fucking Christ, he cursed trying to wrap his head around what he was seeing. Had she gone completely mad?

Trying to keep a little control before he stood up and flung his cell, and whatever else he could get his hands on, he stole another glance at the image before placing his phone face down. Counting to ten in his head, he tried to steady his nerves. He really didn't need Iset's little games throwing him off his focus today.

Glancing back at his laptop he examined the email again, and considering the small list of men contrived over this past week. Almost all of those listed had been exonerated, but anyone stupid enough to send this email must have made another mistake.

Considering some of the information that was mentioned, he had to revisit the possibility that someone in the Enlightened might have flipped. He hated it, but in the darkest places of his mind, he even doubted his closet friends. Not many would remember or even know of Hapet, let alone his name. Who other than a member would have such details trivial enough to prove this was more than some hoax?

When he closed his eyes, he saw the revealing photo of his wife splashed all over the paper again.

He took another deep breath, and ordered himself to focus on the email. Obviously, the man was making more than an educated guess, since the name Hapet wasn't common. This person had to know much more. He also had to have some pretty powerful protection to be taking him on. A lone wolf running with some miniscule proof was unlikely. Even someone with balls wouldn't risk making him an enemy.

Massimo had been compiling lists of former clients, those who seemed to be too interested into the firm, or asking too many questions. None of their efforts had provided anything more interesting than a few pricks with a jealous grudge. No one even raised the suspicion of being intelligent, let alone to the level that this person, or possibly his boss, seemed to be. It was torturing him.

Reconsidering the words, Ari bit the inner part of his lip. It was a quirk when he was in deep thought. It was a time to be smart, he scolded himself. The fact that this man wanted to extort him for the vial, meant it couldn't be an Enlightened member. Upon their entrance into the service here, they signed ironclad contracts, which stipulated that if any of them exposed themselves, or others, to any humans, the penalty was deportation and death. A creator of immortality could also create the destroyer of its monster, after all. Hell, even superman had kryptonite.

The Enlightened were stationed on Earth to protect and conserve its resources. On occasion, they exported goods to their planet, but mostly their sole duty was to stop humanity

from destroying themselves. It was an uphill battle mostly in recent years. Yet, so far, the mission was still being considered a success.

Ari took great pride in his work here, an acting King positioned internally to be the protector of the planet and human race. When he ascended his throne, he sought immortality, never dreaming of what fate had in store. He was a kid, only fourteen, and when he obtained the power, he honestly had no clue about what to do with it.

Hapet had guided him.

It was Hapet who taught him to fight with the mind as well as a sword. Gave him a good cuff when he needed it, and overall showed him that being a good King meant being a fair King.

Massimo had told him once that was why he was chosen. Visitors to Earth had watched much longer than just when he took the thrown. However, they never saw another ruler with the heart and brains to work with them, like they saw in young Ramesses.

In the agreement, when one was finally negotiated, he was made King for all time. What could be better to a man who craved immortality as strongly as he? Fool that he was, he forgot the true meaning of forever, and sometimes wished he could just request the anecdote to immortality and leave all the work to someone else.

A thought hit him in his reminiscing. Hassana was being watched lately. She was the head of their international commerce division, which required her to basically live on a plane. Thinking of Hassana conjured the Houston Gazette photo again, and he flipped it open to examine again. Sure enough, she was in the photo, too.

“Girls night out my fucking ass,” he spat disgustedly. He wanted to beat all three of them for their stupidity. He had encouraged Iset’s relationship with Elise and Hassana, but if they were going to endanger his wife, he would be quick to step in.

Illiot had better take control of his wife, he thought, and considered possible punishments for Hassana. As her closet male living relative here on Earth, it would be up to him to hold her accountable for her actions.

Remembering conversations, Ari tried to think of what Massimo had been saying. They had thought very little of all Hassana’s recent trips to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, until the hacking attempts began. Ari had given the order for everyone internally to be watched for any unusual behaviour. One of the investigating officers reported some odd activity surrounding Hassana, but nothing was really alerting them that she had flipped. If she had, and she was with his wife last night, he shuttered to think of what could have happened.

It was the Enlightened Investigating Officer Division to ensure that everyone within the organization and firm was doing what he or she should be. Some were in normal jobs, looking after the running of Ramsey International. Others were strategically placed to be overseers keeping continuous watch on global news and international issues that might cause major problems. If something like nuclear war were about to break out, they would be sent in to ensure

the safety of the human race. They were like the CIA, watching for threats from external forces, as well as the internal.

Ari hadn't given the Hassana situation any serious attention until now. It hurt him to think she might possibly be a threat. She was like family to he and Iset. If their son, Khaem, hadn't died, she would have lived as their daughter-in-law for much longer than a mere two days.

Ari had denied his son's request to marry Hassana repeatedly, until the request was again made on his deathbed. Even though relationships between members and mortal humans were discouraged, they were so in love, and he liked to imagine he would have allowed them to be happy for as long as possible.

It had caused much discourse between the pair, which looking back now made him ornery. He searched his brain for any indications of late that she might have seemed off, but couldn't think of one time she had disappointed him until, now.

Another thought occurred to him, discouraging him from believing her involvement was the fact that Hassana was immortal herself. Her need to betray them for something she had been freely given was absurd, and made him scold himself for even questioning her involvement.

Ari chided himself for even giving it any consideration, as he gently tapped his pen against the steel, lost in contemplation. Why was his gut pointing him in Hassana's direction? A sudden flash began to echo in his head. What if she had fallen in love with someone mortal? Now that was something not far beyond the realm of possibility. He filed that in the back of his head just as the bell sounded at the elevator.

When the doors opened, Ari's gaze flicked to the black pantsuit clad woman exiting. Charlotte was tall and always dressed professionally. She was a newer member to Ari's staff, but had worked her way up into the higher intel of the M&IB. Her brown hair was tied back, and flowed down to her mid back. She was attractive, but very stern in appearance.

Most Enlightened members were almost robotic like in their attitude. Their training to come to Earth was extensive, and professionalism was drilled into their character. Elsie and Hassana were the exceptions. He didn't think it was possible for either woman to be typical in nature.

"So, why was your wife out partying last night? From what I understood, no security was on her." Charlotte almost sounded reprimanding, as if Ari actually would have approved.

She wasn't as used to working with Ari, as he preferred, since she often spoke out of turn. Women over the past few hundred years sometimes annoyed him. Illiot was to blame for Charlotte, since he had recruited her. She was the best, he said, and tried to keep his temper under control when she spoke too freely.

Ari shrugged, crisply replying in a deep Texas enunciation. "I was unaware, and I disapprove of that tone, Charlotte."

Charlotte had the decency to look embarrassed, and lowered her eyes. "Forgive me," she stated.

Ari shifted. "I assure you, I will handle it when I see her." Soon as I can get her alone for a second, he added in his head, but he didn't speak that part aloud.

"I have some of the files that Illiot asked me to bring over. He has been made aware of last night's situation as well, and has procured the location they stayed last night."

Ari silently fumed, betting all his money on the fact that it was not Elise and Illiot's penthouse, as he had been led to believe.

Charlotte took a seat on one of the stools, flipping through the files she had come to deliver.

Ari was dwelling on Iset's misbehavior. Apparently, he wasn't the only man losing control of his wife. Reaching over, he took the folders with mute interest. He opened one, and handed her the computer in return. "I will deal with Iset. I need you to handle this!" He kept his eyes focused on her, interested in her response.

Curiosity flickered across her face, for the briefest of seconds as she turned the laptop to look. Scanning the document her mouth gaped open, and Ari could swear he saw her pale before his eyes. "Jesus!" she exclaimed, casting her eyes to meet Ari's. "Is this real?"

Ari nodded, his mind buzzed with the breakdown of what this letter told of the writer. "When did you get it?" she asked, not able to stop staring at the screen. She was trying to do as he did, search for a screw up, something that would tell a little too much.

"I just got it. Which has me wondering if others have received anything?" Charlotte shook her head, still hypnotized. She was known for her photographic memory, and it seemed like she was mentally recording each character, of every word.

"Not that I'm aware of."

Her phone and his buzzed in sync.

Illiot was messaging them about the girls. Ari opened his and it said, *Just spoke to Elise, they are on route to the Gala now. I'm very sorry about this.*

Charlotte's text said, *Tell Ari, Iset will meet him at the Gala.* Charlotte passed Ari back his laptop.

"Yes, well... I need to get dressed. I want all eyes at the office looking into this while we are at the party." Glancing once more to his clock, he stood. "I need you to try to find out what you can, and keep me up to date if anything new arises. Our man is getting brave, so I want him sniffed out while he is foolish enough to leave a trail." He clicked forward, and then on his wife's email. Hopefully, Iset would read it before he got to the party, and avoid some of the talking that they needed to do.

Dialing her number one last time, he was irritated further when it went to voice mail again. He hung up without leaving one. He really didn't trust himself at the moment to speak to her. She knew he was undeniably pissed.

"Do you want to keep these?" Charlotte asked, referring to the files on the counter.

“Yes, but I won’t have time to look them over until I get back.” As he exited his account, he hit search on the tracer for Iset’s phone. It flashed bright red, right where his building was located. Illiot was right, the girls had been on route. At least Iset had the sense not to be petulant tonight. He was in no mood for further disobedience.

Smiling to himself, Ari knew she would forget that her phone doubled as a tracking device when needed. Sometimes she was too cute, he bemused. After all these years she was still so naïve that she thought she could do as she pleased without him having any idea.

Well almost, he thought bitterly, as the image of her night flashed again to mind, and he had to admit that sometimes she did surprise him. If he hadn’t been so distracted by this threat, she would never have been able to get away with this insubordination.

Charlotte was on her way to the elevator as he closed his laptop. “Sir, I’ll head back and see what I can find. I’ll try and do damage control with the press, in case Mrs. Ramsey gets identified in the photo.”

Ari mutely nodded his approval, and began to walk to the hall. “If she is identified, get Peter on the phone and tell him I’ll have his balls if he runs it.” Peter Dennings was the owner of the Houston Gazette, and received some generous donations to not publish stories about Ari or anything concerning him. Dennings didn’t ask questions once the check cleared. He knew that a lower level employee must have run the story with Iset’s photo. If they had realized who she was, they would have cut her out or scrapped the story entirely. Peter would have also called him, long before the publication.

As he entered his bathroom, he tried to focus. No real harm had come from the girls’ foolish night out, so he needed to put more energy into the email. If anyone else had been contacted, he knew he would know by now. If this assailant knew his and Iset’s true identities, he was certain that Illiot and Massimo, Elise, and Hassana were at risk as well. They were the Enlightened who had been on this journey with them the longest.

Taking an educated guess, he estimated it was only because he was one of historical significance to a delusional history freak to have the honor of being contacted directly. It was no secret that there was a great deal of interest surrounding his reign, and while many believed they had the answers their truth was nothing but fabrication. Mortal beings were simple creatures that liked their constructed theories and so called factual history.

The sickening thought hit him that this freak most likely now had a photo of Iset, something he had been careful not to provide publically. They were photographed occasionally, but never in such a revealing way as the Gazette’s piece. Most of the attention was on that actor fellow, but still it was now a recorded piece of evidence that could be used against them in the future. The internet was unforgiving.

Shaking his head, Ari pinched his fingers around the bridge of his nose again as he started the shower. The gentle sound of the water hitting the marble was inviting. Nothing ever went fucking easy, Ari thought as he undressed quickly, tossing his clothing in the hamper. He

had to focus and get back to reality. Time was ticking he scolded himself, slipping into the luxury glass shower.

Ari's mind was going so fast he could almost feel the electrical current of the synapses flickering. Of all nights for his mind to be preoccupied, he sighed. The Ramsey Annual Fundraising Gala was taking place in less than an hour in the great ballroom of his 45-floor office building, and the elite of Texas would be attending. Contemplating the email, his wife going out on the town getting herself photographed with a celebrity, and the events taking place tonight, he threw back his head and tried to hold on to his rapidly building temper. What had he read about moments like this? Aw... close your eyes and count to 10.

The water beat off his flesh and filled the room with a luxurious steam. Somewhat allowing himself a moment of rapture. He leaned into the steady waterfall basking in the massaging rhythm. Showering was one luxury he could never live without now. The extravagance he thought he had as the King of the Nile was nothing like the modern day appliances anyone could own with the right bank account these days.

His wealth was kept mostly within the M&IB's company, so as not to rouse suspicions. However, he had unlimited funding awarding him all the indulgences of owning and doing whatever he pleased, without ever having to work. That simply wasn't the point. He loved working, and the sense of purpose it gave him. It also provided a formidable cover for his traveling, and those closest to him. He had been born powerful, and thrived on the natural high he got off outsmarting people. Bringing down someone who was as power-hungry as himself was like an endorphin explosion. He craved it, almost as much as he craved his wife.

A deep feeling of contentment settled over him as he let the cares wash away from him on drops of the water. Iset was a good girl, even with her poor judgement last night. Despite her deliberate attempt to rile him today, she was always his rock. His eyes opened to watch the streams of water pooling at the drain, and he drifted back in thought to the day before.

Iset was asleep on the sofa when he arrived home. He had spent the night at the office making sure that the focus on security for the Gala was impenetrable. The television was still on, so she had clearly fallen asleep there. She only liked a handful of shows, mainly reality decorating ones that took homes and transformed their appearances. Ari couldn't understand it, but he was pleased she had hobbies that she enjoyed. He indulged her frequent whims of renovations, because he knew it made her insanely happy.

His wife had looked incredibly beautiful as usual, with her long dark hair curled around her body like a silk blanket. Carefully, he picked her up, enjoying the soft mews she made in sleeping protest. Cradled against him, he felt himself grow hard in an aching need to be inside her. When he entered their bedroom, he didn't bother with the light. Instead, he walked to the massive bed, and laid her to rest gently on her side. It was one of her many designs, that she insisted would breathe new life into their bedroom. Honestly, he didn't care a lot about what the damn thing looked like as long as he could climb into it with her.

He sighed looking down at her resting form. Maybe he was mellowing too much in his old age. He should have reprimanded her for falling asleep trying to wait up for him when she had no idea how late he'd be working. Yet, as he watched her peaceful slumber, he knew he wouldn't mention it. Like most women, he thought, when you gave them an inch they took a mile.

Climbing in next to her, Ari found himself gathering her to him. Her hair smelled of soft apples, one of his favorite smells. He thought about moving his lips down to those between her legs and waking her with a screaming orgasm, but he was unsure about when she had fallen asleep. He decided instead to cuddle her to him, and rest himself. Lord knew he needed it.

They had awoken together and got ready for the engagements that were scheduled for them.

Iset barely spoke to him, clearly feeling upset with all his late nights, although she never said it. He could tell with her body language and infrequent smiles, she wanted to have it out, but neither of them had the time to get into it then.

He should have made the time, he scolded himself. Damn hindsight's clarity. Every attempt he made to contact her yesterday, since she left him hanging in the car, had gone unanswered. Only one text flickered back from her, which he assumed happened when she was out partying.

CU TM.

What the fuck was *CU TM*? Couldn't she have the manners to type out the full words? Come to think of it, it was more than yesterday that her behaviour had been off. Normally, he would have nipped it in the bud when she had begun her insubordination. However, the last while he had been so busy trying to find the asshole that just grew a pair and contacted him, he had barely noticed anything beyond the office.

Standing in the shower, some of the haze he lived in the past while began to clear. A sudden understanding hit him like a progressive hangover as the water beat off his sculpted back. It made him feel like he might just get sick where he stood. Iset had been testing him to see if he would notice, because she noticed how distracted he'd become. She probably even thought he was actually betraying her with all the late nights and unexplained distractions. Women always went to something like that.

He let out a guttural groan and scolded himself for being so stupid. He should have noticed by her behavior, and yet it wasn't until this second that it all sank in. She had arrived last week, and they hadn't even had time to make love. That never had happened before.

Ari often thought she was asking for her punishments now when she acted out or blatantly defied him. They had been together for nearly two millennia and she knew what buttons to push or not to push. Shaking his head, he felt a guilty knot develop in his stomach. He was being facetious of course, knowing she never actually asked for a whipping.

There was a time it never would have progressed to the outright defiance she had exhibited yesterday, or today, but during that time, he would have made her more of a priority, too. For that, he blamed himself. He had been so busy with work, the threat, and preparing for the benefit Gala, that everything in his personal life was shelved. Even the one person who meant more to him than anything on earth. Iset had been begging for his attention, and he'd been too preoccupied to notice.

The steam continued to rise as he held his head under the pulsing waterfall. He almost smiled at the fact she dared to go out all night clubbing, leaving only a short note on the pillow to inform him of her knowingly deceitful evening. Her flippant text was also puzzling until this moment. As the water flowed over him, a renewed clarity entered his body with the warmth. He almost condoned her behaviour.

Almost, but she would still need to be held accountable. The fact she would dare go out without his permission, or security, made him shake with unleashed anger. The picture of her tits in that outfit displayed for the world angered him too, but he felt himself grow hard at how amazing she had looked. She would be paying for such indecency, but he would be framing the photo in secret. He now understood why she would go to the extent of all this melodrama. In a sense, Iset was pleading for any attention from him she could get, and like a stunned cunt, he ignored her. Well, she had his attention now. He smiled, leaving his hard-on untouched to make him even more cantankerous.

Shutting off the taps, he stepped from the steamed glass and wrapped a towel around his masterpiece waist. The large elaborate his and her closet was attached and his Gucci suit was dutifully laid out on his dressing chair.

Nori was an amazing housekeeper. Every detail was perfect. Dressing in his Calvin Kline briefs and securing his old, pure silver, beetle shaped cufflinks, he dabbed some expensive cologne on his neck. Catching sight of his appearance in the large full-length mirror, he remained expressionless. Fastening his pants quickly, he shrugged into his jacket with ease. Being a man was a lot easier than being a woman. He was so happy he didn't have the prep work his wife usually went through.

Grabbing his wallet from the dresser, he quickly noticed his Black American Express was missing. Shaking his head, he realized Iset must have snatched it before leaving for her outing.

Thief.

A wicked smile touched the corners of his lips as he deposited the wallet in his back pocket. Iset had always been mischievous. It was actually something he enjoyed, since it made for an interesting life as her husband. He mentally added stealing to her growing list of transgressions. At this rate, she was going to feel extremely attended to when he had a chance to get her alone, and probably for the better half of a century. He might even chain her to the bed, and force her to live in a state of sexual frustration for a while just to remind her who was actually the master in their relationship.

His time had invented BDSM, and there were no safe words for the submissives.

Combing his shoulder length black hair quickly, Ari secured it with a leather band. It was one thing he wished he could get eliminate, although he had long ago resigned that nothing about his physical appearance would change. It was just his formidable bad luck that long hair was fashionable when he was Pharaoh. Part of the gift of immortality was that it froze you exactly as you were when the elixir entered your body. You ceased to age, couldn't change anything about your physical appearance with modern hair dyes or surgery. Any alterations immediately reverted to the original state.

Ari looked no more than mid-thirties, which was close to the age he was when he injected himself with the elixir. He had a vial tested on a condemned prisoner first, and he was thrilled by the outcomes. They tried every possible test they could think of to kill or infect the man, even placing him in a pit of vipers. His screams were horrific, Ari had boosted incredulously to Iset and Hapet.

But just as promised, the man walked away from the encounter in perfect health. Locked deep away in the dungeon of the palace prison he remained chained to walls for a few months, until Ari finally offered him a pardon in exchange for his eternal service and silence. Honestly, at that point, he knew that he had very limited options about what to do with the man. Massimo had offered to have him sent back to their legion where he could be euthanized, but Ari had seen great promise for the man's devotions if he chose to place his allegiance in the proper area.

A month after Ari injected himself, he began to discuss options for Iset. Knowing that it was a major decision, he allowed her to choose. Nefertari, the woman his father had chosen for him to marry at fourteen, had died in childbirth a few years before the visitors arrived.

Iset struggled with the choice, praying for days, until an alternative was given.

Massimo had cornered her in the temple one afternoon. He had concerns about the young Queen being so conflicted by her decision that she was neglecting the life she currently had.

"There is another way, my Queen," he had said kindly. Walking up to the alter where she knelt, he dropped to his knees beside her and explained. "If the King were to inject you with his blood regularly, you would be given the same immortality."

Iset implored him to tell her more, eager to hear a possible solution to her problem.

"You see, you would cease to age, cease to get sick, never die... but if something were to happen, and you were separated from Ari, you would have limited time before the effects wore off, and your body would once more begin to decompose. How long someone might live without the injection is different for everyone. It could be a very powerful weapon to use against us, if an enemy were to ever learn your secret."

When she spoke of it to Ari, he had been less than thrilled, but saw little choice than to accept her decision. It was a safely guarded secret that Massimo, Illiot, Ari, and Iset swore would remain between only the four of them.

Determined to continue to try to get her to agree to make the decision permanent, Ari put a vial of the elixir in a protected place. Iset always knew at any time she could take the dosage and share his unchangeable fate. He had pleaded with her countless times, especially if business took him away. He also got angry and threatened her over the years as well, but nothing altered her judgement. Normally, she would accompany him, since they hated to be separated.

Two lovers, bound by an eternal gift from the gods. After all these years, she had not asked to make life permanent. He knew in truth, she liked the option of knowing her life was a choice. It just terrified him that at some point he could face this fate without her. It was selfish, he knew, and secretly, if he were being honest, part of him envied her.

However, mostly he was scared. Scared that the call of seeing their children would overtake her love for him and one day she would be gone.

Time was ticking too fast for his liking, and time was not something he paid much attention to these days. Shaking his head to focus, Ari quickly secured his jacket and adjusted his tie. Taking one last quick glance at his reflection, he plastered on the professional persona he embodied best. Tonight he didn't have any official title, but he looked the definition of royalty. Ari just had a glow about him that people often commented on. His confidence, dominant personality coupled with his unique masculine looks made women flock toward him. It was only when they saw Iset, and his possessiveness with her, that they would step back with envy. Every woman wanted a man to give her that look.

Walking briskly toward the elevator that would take him to the garage, his gold Rolex glistened off the living room lighting. It was fastened securely to his right wrist, but hung just enough to move with his body. Another symbol of how much wealth and privileged he could afford. Texas was all about flash, and Ari loved to emanate wealth and power. It was one of the traits that he had since his earliest of years. 5:35 pm shone from the pristine glass. He gave an approving nod to himself, before stepping into his private elevator.

Swiping his phone, he touched on *My Queen*, the nickname he had given her on his phone. Her face appeared, next to the texts they had exchanged lately. Typing, he carefully considered his words:

If you had of wanted a spanking you only needed to ask.

I do not want you to go anywhere with a stranger alone this evening.

Stay with Elise and Hassana until I find you. The time for the games has passed, you have my complete attention. Read the email I just sent, if you get this. I am on my way.

He attached a screen shot of the email from their mysterious stranger and hit a quick send.

As the floors descended, he wondered if she'd get it. Everything didn't get underway until 8:30 officially, and the office was only a block away from their penthouse. He was pleasantly surprised that despite his unpredicted distractions he would actually be early. It should

even be enough time to whisk his dear wife to his office for a little discussion about her behavior. It would be the first of many, he decided, since obviously she no longer feared any repercussions from him.

He sent a quick text to Charlotte to have a stylist and makeup artist in his office in an hour and ten minutes. He wore the belt he normally kept for correction, and was sure she would instantly notice. It was black, and thicker than many of the others he had lining his closet. The platinum buckle was thin, but had a royal staff going through the middle to secure the hole. If they didn't get the moments in private he was hoping, it was sure to make her squirm at the thought of it.

The muggy air of the garage assaulted Ari's face and was a disappointed change from the cool clean air of the elevator. He was quick to spot his driver and bodyguard, Jzime, standing beside the black Rolls Royce Phantom. Feeling a bit paranoid, he was well attuned to the surroundings.

Could the threat be watching him, here?

It was hypothetically possible, but unlikely. His building was equipped with the latest securities.

"Jzime," he acknowledged, climbing into the dimly lit leather backseat.

Jzime was his right hand man, and over the years had developed a unique friendship with both himself and Iset. Despite his beginnings, Jzime had proven to be a trusted confidant, and fiercely protected his master/employer. At age 23, Jzime had been sentenced to death after an accident killed a Palace guard. Luckily for him, Ari had required such a condemned man to be a guinea pig for the first vial of elixir. Since then, he had become an essential help in the royal lives, firmly believing his reprieve was an act of Ra saving him to watch over his son. He had sworn fidelity to his Pharaoh, and Queen so many years ago, and had honoured that pledge every day.

"Sir," Jzime responded, closing the door quickly, and walking around the back of the vehicle on full alert.

As the car pulled up the ramp and out into the Houston traffic, Ari shifted his thoughts back to Iset. He mulled over the last few days and tried to organize all the subtle defiance she had exhibited.

He played with his phone, more out of habit than actual curiosity. She wouldn't text him. Not after being silent for this long. It was very clear to him she wanted the first place they spoke to be in a public place. It was the safest way to ensure she had a moment to explain her behavior before being corrected for it.

It was all much clearer since that moment in the shower. She knew he would be furious with her, and that is why she chose to defy him in such a lavish fashion. He could almost read what it must have sounded like to be her, when she made the decision.

“Well, go big or go home!” Ari flipped to a picture of them he kept as his screen saver. It was them lying in a hammock by the pool on the ranch. Jzime had snapped it last summer. Ari was in a pair of causal ripped jeans, Iset in a simple white bikini. She was lying on top of him, with her hair blowing wildly around them. Her doe-like brown eyes were hidden behind the biggest pair of Oakley sunglasses she could find. He loved the photo, not because it showed off her amazing body, but because she looked like she was lit from within with happiness. To any stranger, it would seem like a honeymoon picture, given how young they actually appeared. After a few lingered glances, he pocketed it.

It had been a long time since he last felt as angry as he was right now with her, but he realized some of the fault fell on his shoulders. He had become too lenient with her as of late. When they first wed, she spent as much time being over his knee as she did with her legs open. Part pleasure, part pain.

Today she had all but screamed for him to track her down and take a belt to her, but by the time it occurred to him what game she was playing it was too late.

“Jzime, did you see my wife today?” he asked curiously.

Jzime got right to the point, “Yes, Sire, I believe all of Houston saw the photo of her Royal Highness today.”

Ari usually knew where Iset was at all times, so today had thrown him for a loop.

Jzime had never seen her disobey him in such a way before and he couldn’t help but smile at her courage. He didn’t think he’d be brave enough to cross the boss. “I understand you did not know about the outing last night.” Jzime asked in an attempt to make small talk. He was pretty sure he already knew the answer.

Ari let out a little crooked smile, making eye contact with his friend in the mirror. “What do you think?”

Jzime began to laugh, “The kitten has claws!”

Tensing slightly against the seat, Ari melancholy glowered out the window. “So it would appear.”

The Gala would be a hectic evening, and Ari had to center a lot of his attention on anyone who might be seen as suspicious. However, if he didn’t release some of the tension and anger he was feeling, he knew he’d never focus. Tonight this Hapet would be in attendance, and he needed to be on his game.

It was beyond disturbing to think that he would shake hands with the blackmailer as he made his rounds. At ten thousand dollars a plate, he tried to visit each table and thank people personally. All of the money raised went into children’s charities and the community of Houston. It was important for him, because he was finally beginning to enjoy Houston and feel at home. Contributing to the community in a positive way was something that he felt was a duty, and even with all the press, he welcomed the opportunity to do so much good in a few hours. He knew most of the people attending personally, but the odd high roller would attend from out of state.

There would be strangers and friends mingled together, and even while he skipped the red carpet, and enforced a strict no cell phone or camera policy, he was still on display more tonight than any of the other 364 days a year.

The building came into sight, with all the limos and town cars arriving in a steady procession. Jzime took the side street, which had the entrance to the underground parking lot. As they disappeared into the dark passage and the soft lights of the ceiling filtered through the car, Ari put away his phone, and prepared. This evening was pregnant with possibility.