



Oracle of Destiny

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Chapter One

The jackal flew through the air.

Zenobia stopped.

His body struck one of the stone pillars marking the entrance to the Duat with enough force to shake dust from the ancient carvings. He slid down the column and landed in an unconscious heap beside two of Anubis' elite guards.

So much for the High Guard.

A roar thundered across the black sands.

Zenobia closed her eyes.

Anubis had given her one task. Meet Ra's Sentinel at the gate and escort him through the Duat. He had specifically assured her the lion was one of Ra's most disciplined warriors. The best of his kind, according to the god of the Underworld.

Apparently, Ra's definition of discipline differed greatly from hers. Another jackal rushed forward. The lion caught him around the throat, lifted him clear off his feet and slammed him onto his back. The warrior

snarled and shifted beneath him, his human form giving way to black fur and snapping teeth. He lunged for the lion's throat.

The lion moved faster.

One massive hand closed around the jackal's muzzle while the other caught him beneath the belly. With a grunt, he tossed the beast aside as though he weighed no more than a temple cat.

Zenobia raised a brow. Impressive. Idiotic, but impressive.

The remaining guards circled him cautiously, growls rumbling from their throats. Some remained in human form. Others had shifted into the black jackals favored by Anubis, their golden collars gleaming beneath the pale light of the dead moon. Blood stained the sand. One warrior limped badly. Another clutched his arm against his chest at an unnatural angle.

At the center stood Ra's sentinel. He stood among them completely male, his pale skin shimmering faintly in the moonlight, a startling contrast against the dark bodies surrounding him. Long black hair brushed his shoulders, several strands falling across obsidian eyes that tracked every movement around him. He wasn't breathing hard. His chest rose and fell, but there was nothing wild or uncontrolled about him. He wasn't angry. If anything, he looked bored. He watched the jackals with the cold patience of a predator waiting for one of them to make another mistake.

One of the jackals attacked from behind.

The lion waited until the last possible second before stepping aside.

The Sentinel's claws sliced through empty air. Fane caught his wrist, used the warrior's own momentum against him, and sent the much larger jackal sprawling face-first into the black sand.

Another came at him from the front.

Fane ducked beneath the swipe of a clawed hand and drove his shoulder into the Sentinel's middle. He lifted him clean off the ground and tossed him into two others attempting to flank him. All three went down in a tangle of arms, legs and snapping jaws.

Fane straightened and rolled one shoulder.

Zenobia stared.

He was playing with them.

The realization was almost insulting. Anubis' Sentinels were fighting with claws and teeth, drawing upon the strength of their jackals, while the lion hadn't summoned so much as a fang. He was studying them, anticipating their next attack. Allowing them close enough to believe they had a chance before putting them flat on their backs. There was something distinctly feline about the cruelty of it, like a great cat batting a mouse between its paws because killing it too quickly would end the entertainment.

Then another jackal made the mistake of rushing him.

Fane caught him around the throat.

The warrior's feet left the ground.

For the first time, Zenobia saw the lion exert himself. The muscles along his chest and arms tightened as he lifted the partially shifted Sentinel with one hand, held him there long enough for the jackal's legs to kick uselessly beneath him, then tossed him aside.

His body struck one of the stone pillars marking the entrance to the Duat. Dust rained from the ancient carvings.

Silence followed.

Fane swept his black gaze over the remaining Sentinels. "Anyone else?"

No one moved.

Now she understood why Ra had made him his top Sentinel. Something about him tugged at her memory. Zenobia took another step forward.

The male turned.

Her breath caught. Not possible. Could it be?

For a moment, the gates of the Duat disappeared. The ruined temples faded. She no longer heard the growls of Anubis' guards or the restless whispers of the dead wandering across the black sands.

She saw moonlight reflected upon pale skin. A garden hidden beneath the shadow of the gates. Blue lotus blossoms floating upon still water. Warm large hands upon her body.

Zenobia crushed the memory before it could fully form. It could not be him.

The lion wiped blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. His dark gaze moved over her without the slightest hint of recognition.

Why should the gods grant her even that small mercy?

One of the jackals lunged.

“Enough!” Her command cracked across the entrance.

Every head turned toward her.

Zenobia lifted the hem of her robes and walked through the scattered bodies with as much dignity as a queen entering her own court. Once, armies had bowed when she entered a room. Emperors had feared her name. Rome itself had sent legions to destroy her.

Now she stepped over an unconscious dog.

How the mighty had fallen.

The lion watched her approach.

Up close, there could be no mistake. Time had changed him. The young warrior she remembered had hardened into something far more

dangerous. His shoulders were broader. His face had lost the last softness of youth. There was a severity around his mouth that had not been there before, and his dark eyes held the weary suspicion of a man who had spent centuries expecting the next attack. But it was him. Fane. The Moon twin.

The lion who had wandered into the Duat centuries ago and left with no memory of the woman he had found there.

Zenobia stopped before him.

His gaze traveled slowly over her face.

For one foolish heartbeat, hope stirred inside her. Perhaps he remembered.

His brow furrowed.

The tiny flicker of hope died so quickly she despised herself for having felt it at all.

“Are you finished?” she asked.

The lion glanced around at the fallen jackals. “Depends.”

“On?”

“Whether they are.”

One of the guards growled.

Zenobia resisted the urge to sigh. This was going to be a very long journey through the Underworld.



Fane hated the Underworld.

He had been in the Duat less than an hour and already wanted out. Black sand stretched beneath a dead sky as far as he could see. Crumbling monuments rose from the darkness, half buried by centuries of neglect. Wandering spirits moved across the barren landscape, some appearing almost human while others were little more than transparent shadows drifting aimlessly toward whatever fate awaited them. The air smelled of dust, decay, and dogs.

Too many damn dogs.

Fane rolled his shoulder and ignored the growl coming from somewhere behind him. If the jackal wanted another beating, he would happily oblige.

Ra had sent him into the Duat for one reason. Find Se-Osiris and bring the magician back. The ancient sorcerer possessed knowledge they needed to restore Bast, and Fane intended to find him. What happened after that was for Ra and Anubis to decide.

Simple.

At least it had been until Anubis decided Fane needed an escort.

He especially didn't need a pack of jackals surrounding him, issuing commands and telling him where he could and could not go. The first one had grabbed his arm when he'd attempted to pass through the gate; the

second had threatened to drag him before Anubis in chains. The rest had made the unfortunate decision to defend them. Fane flexed his bruised knuckles.

 Their mistake.

 What bothered him more than the dogs was the absence of his brother. For the first time in longer than he cared to remember, Luke wasn't beside him. There was no golden lion guarding his back. No familiar presence inside his mind. No irritating voice reminding him to calm down before he did something they would both regret.

 Fane glanced at the jackal lying unconscious beside the pillar. Luke probably would have told him not to hit that one. Fane would have ignored him. Still, he would have liked having the option.

 His twin belonged with Cleo now. Ra had made that clear. They had been entrusted with protecting the Tears of the Nile, while Fane had been given another duty. He understood. He had accepted it. A Sentinel went where his lord commanded and completed the mission given to him. That didn't mean he had to like it.

 “Are you finished?”

 Fane turned toward the female standing before him. He hadn't heard her approach. That alone irritated him.

She was smaller than he'd expected Anubis' chosen guide to be, but there was nothing weak about her. Thick dark curls tumbled past her waist, framing warm brown skin and an arresting face dominated by large brown eyes heavily lined in black.

A narrow gold band circled her brow, while heavy earrings brushed her neck. Her clothing was unlike anything worn by the women of the Pride. Fine layers of dark silk and linen draped her body, gathered at one shoulder beneath an ornate gold clasp, the embroidered mantle falling open enough to reveal the softer curves beneath. Gold gleamed everywhere. At her throat. Around her wrists in stacked cuffs. Against fingers decorated with rings. She looked ancient and expensive, like a queen who had walked out of another empire and refused to acknowledge it had fallen.

His gaze lingered on the generous curve of her breasts, dipped to the flare of her hips, then returned to her face before she caught him staring. Or perhaps she already had. The slight lift of one perfectly shaped brow suggested nothing escaped her notice.

Fane almost smiled. "Depends."

"On?"

"Whether they are."

One of the jackals growled behind him.

The woman's mouth tightened.

There was something regal in the movement. Something practiced. She didn't carry herself like a servant of Anubis. She carried herself like someone accustomed to being obeyed.

More troubling was the way she looked at him.

Fane knew the difference between curiosity and recognition. She knew him. He searched her face again, but nothing stood out or felt familiar.

Yet something stirred deep inside him. Not a memory exactly. More like the sensation of awakening from a dream and knowing something important had happened without being able to recall what it was.

Her eyes. Something about them bothered him. Where had he seen them before?

Fane had spent centuries remembering faces. It was part of his duty. Enemies, allies, informants, traitors. He forgot very little, and he certainly wouldn't have forgotten a woman who looked like this one. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling.

She had become very still beneath his scrutiny. Interesting.

“Who are you?”

Something flashed across her face before disappearing, then being replaced by pride.

The female lifted her chin. “Zenobia.”

The name struck somewhere inside him and vanished before he could catch it. Fane frowned. She noticed. That bothered him even more.

“Have we met?”

Her brown eyes held his. “No.”

The answer came too quickly.

Fane stared at her. She stared back.

A lie. He could taste it on the tip of his tongue. He didn't know how he knew it, but every instinct he possessed told him the woman standing before him had just lied directly to his face.

Fane disliked liars.

He disliked mysteries even more.

Unfortunately, it appeared Anubis had given him both.