

The Pharaoh's Favorite

Chapter 10

I woke to silk sheets and emptiness. Amen's scent lingered on the pillows, but his warmth was gone. Sunlight streamed through alabaster screens, painting patterns across the royal bed where he'd tucked me in last night instead of sending me back to the harem.

I sat up slowly, the events of the previous night rushing back in vivid clarity. His touch, his words, his kiss – everything had felt so surreal, so overwhelming.

Yet now, the room was empty. A part of me had expected him to be there, watching me with that sly smile of his. Instead, silence greeted me, save for the muffled sounds of palace life beyond the thick doors.

My feet touched the cool marble floor as I rose, unsure of what to do. Before I could dwell on the strange ache of being left alone, the door creaked open, and a maid entered.

She was young, with wide, observant eyes that darted toward me before quickly lowering in deference.

"Good morning, my lady," she said softly. "I've come to assist you in preparing for the day. His Majesty has instructed that you be escorted back to the Golden House."

Her words struck me with an odd mix of relief and disappointment. I nodded, allowing her to help me into a flowing gown of pale blue linen embroidered with golden threads.

She worked with practiced efficiency, braiding my hair and adorning it with delicate beads. Though I'd been prepared for the harem before, this felt different.

Now, I was marked – not just by Amen's attention, but by the knowledge that my life had irrevocably changed.

The journey back to the Golden House was quiet, the maid leading me through a labyrinth of corridors until we arrived at the entrance. As I stepped inside, the opulence of the harem quarters struck me anew.

Every corner was a display of wealth – silk cushions, intricate mosaics, and golden accents. But despite its beauty, the space felt heavy, as though the very air carried secrets.

I had expected to find a bustling community of concubines, women whispering, laughing, or competing for Pharaoh's favor. Instead, there were only three. Each lived in her own chamber, surrounded by gifted servant girls who attended to their every need.

During breakfast in the grand dining hall, I tried to strike up polite conversation, but the women's responses were curt, if they responded at all. They seemed to exist in separate worlds, their interactions marked by a palpable tension.

"Is it always this quiet?" I asked one of the servants who brought me a tray of fruit and bread.

She hesitated, glancing nervously around the room before answering.

"The others prefer to keep to themselves, my lady. They... they do not often speak with one another."

Her answer only deepened my unease. The isolation of the harem was not just physical but emotional, a cold and calculated distance that left me feeling adrift.

Days passed without a glimpse of Amen. Tension coiled through the harem like a cobra waiting to strike.

I missed the temple's familiar rhythms, the comfort of sisterhood, the pure connection to Isis that didn't come tangled with royal politics and burning kisses.

Over the next few days, I found myself trapped in a cycle of waiting. Waiting for Amen to summon me. Waiting for something to give meaning to this gilded cage.

I filled the hours with what little activity was available – studying the scrolls in the archives, though most offered little on the magic I longed to understand. The words of Isis seemed so far away here, the connection to the goddess a faint whisper compared to the clarity I had once felt.

One morning, as I sat in the courtyard reading, one of the other concubines approached.

Her name was Heket, a striking woman with sharp features and an air of authority. She stood over me, her shadow falling across the page I had been studying.

"You're wasting your time with that," she said, her tone biting. "Do you think Pharaoh brought you here to play at being a scholar?"

I looked up, startled by her harshness. "I'm only trying to make use of my time," I replied, keeping my voice even.

She scoffed, crossing her arms. “You’re new, so I’ll tell you this once. The Golden House is not a place for ambition or idle curiosity. We are here for one purpose.”

The words cracked like a whip. I turned to find one of the other concubines – Meritaten, the one who watched me with particular venom. Her beauty was sharp as a blade, her eyes holding secrets darker than kohl.

“None of us are here by choice,” I countered.

Her laugh was bitter as unripe dates. “Choice? You know nothing of choices, little priestess. We’re here to save him.”

“Save him?” The words hit like cold water. “Save Amen from what?”

But she was already gone, leaving me with questions that writhed like scorpions in my mind.

Later that evening, as I sat alone in my chamber, the summons came. A servant arrived with a message: Pharaoh wished to dine with me in the oasis garden.

My heart raced as I prepared, the prospect of seeing Amen again stirring a confusing mix of anticipation and resentment.

The garden was breathtaking, a lush haven filled with the scent of blooming flowers and the soft murmur of fountains.

Amen was already there, seated at a low table laden with dishes of fruit, bread, and spiced meats. He rose as I approached, his smile warm but tinged with mischief.

“You look beautiful, Neferet,” he said, his voice as smooth as the wine he poured into two goblets.

“Thank you,” I replied, my tone polite but guarded. I took the seat he offered, my fingers brushing against the cool metal of the goblet he handed me.

During the meal, I couldn’t entirely mask the undercurrent of my emotions. It wasn’t anger exactly, more a simmering frustration mingled with an ache I didn’t want to name.

Each stolen glance in Amen’s direction brought a flutter of something unfamiliar, and yet I kept my tone reserved, my words carefully chosen.

I told myself it was decorum, though I knew better.

Amen noticed, of course. His gaze lingered on me as I toyed with the edge of my goblet, his lips curving into a soft, knowing smile.

It was maddening how easily he could read me, as if he had cracked some secret code written in my smallest gestures.

“You’re displeased,” he said, his voice warm and teasing. “Or perhaps simply restless?”

I looked up sharply, startled by the accuracy of his words. Before I could reply, he leaned forward slightly, his tone gentling.

“I’ve been away these past few days on matters of the kingdom. State business can be demanding,” he explained.

“You disappeared.” I didn’t bother masking the accusation.

He reached across the low table between us, fingers brushing my wrist. “But know this – it pleases me more than you can imagine to return and find that I’ve been missed.”

Amen’s explanation was reasonable, but it did little to soothe the frustration that had built up in his absence.

“I... I thought perhaps I’d done something wrong,” I admitted, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

Amen’s smile softened, and he reached across the table to take my hand. “Never think that,” he said, his tone earnest. “You have done nothing wrong. It really pleases me to know you’ve been eager to see me.”

Heat rose to my cheeks at his perceptiveness. “I’ve had much to think about,” I said, trying to steady my voice. “I... I’ve learned something strange about the Golden House today. That the women here are meant to save you.”

Amen’s expression grew serious, and he set his goblet down. For a moment, he said nothing, as though weighing his words.

Silence stretched between us, broken only by water trickling over stone. When he finally spoke, his voice carried the weight of centuries.

“You’ve heard the whispers, then,” he said finally. “Well, it is true. I carry a mark from the gods, a blessing and a curse from Osiris himself.”

His fingers tightened on my wrist.

The revelation sent a jolt through me. “A curse?”

He nodded, his gaze searching for mine. “There is a prophecy that speaks of my destiny. That I am bound to a soulmate, one blessed by Isis, one who carried her mark and who alone can lift the shadow that looms over my reign.”

My pulse jumped beneath his touch. “What kind of mark?”

“One that demands balance. Power always demands balance.” His eyes found mine, intense as desert sun. “The prophecies speak of a woman marked by Isis – my divine counterpart, my salvation.” His free hand reached toward my shoulder, where my robes concealed the ankh-shaped birthmark I’d carried since childhood. “Or my destruction.”

Ice slid down my spine. “How did you-”

“I’ve known since the market.” His thumb traced circles on my inner wrist, sending shivers through my body. “Your magic called to mine. The mark of Isis recognized its mate in Osiris.”

Understanding crashed over me like a wave. The dreams, the instant connection, the way power surged between us at the slightest touch – it all led here.

To this moment.

To this choice.

“The other women,” I whispered. “They all carry her mark?”

His smile turned sad. “They carry marks, yes. But not hers. Not truly.” His hand slid up my arm, leaving fire in its wake. “Only you, Neferet. Only you have the power to complete the circle – or break it forever.”