



Chapter 13



"Then let me help you believe," I say.

As our words hang heavy in the air, a distant clatter breaks the silence. We freeze, our eyes meeting in recognition of the familiar sound - palace guards on their nightly rounds. The echo of their footsteps reverberates through the abandoned temples around us, a stark reminder of our precarious situation. With a final lingering touch, he pulls away and we hurry back, our conversation unfinished.

Dawn painted my chamber walls gold as we slipped inside, our hearts racing from the close call with the palace guards. Amen's hand was still warm in mine, our fingers intertwined like they'd forgotten how to separate.

I stifle a laugh as Amen pulls me faster, his hand firm around mine, guiding me through the secret paths only he seems to know. My heart still races from the night—its stolen wonders, the golden sand shifting beneath our feet, the dawn stretching endlessly over the ruins of a forgotten god.

We are breathless—partly from the hurried return, partly from the weight of everything we've shared.

For a moment, neither of us moves. The space between us hums with something unspoken, something left unfinished in the desert.

Amen is the first to break the silence.

"You should sleep," he murmurs, stepping closer. His voice is softer now, the teasing edge from earlier replaced with something deeper. "The day will begin soon."

I smile, but the exhaustion doesn't quite reach me yet. My

mind is still too full, too restless. "And you? Do pharaohs not sleep?"

His lips quirk at the question. "Not often."

I watch as he lifts a hand, brushing a strand of loose hair from my face. The gesture is slow, deliberate, and my breath stills at the feather-light touch of his fingertips against my skin.

"You're warm," he notes, voice quiet.

"So are you."

He exhales a soft laugh, shaking his head. "I mean from the ride. The desert."

I step closer, feeling the heat that still lingers between us. "Or maybe something else," I say, my voice dipping lower.

The moment stretches, neither of us pulling away.

And then, with a quiet sigh, I step back, reaching for the ties of my tunic.

"I should change," I murmur.

Amen doesn't move at first. His dark eyes stay locked on me, his expression unreadable in the dim light. Then, slowly, he nods.

I turn away, loosening the ties of my outer tunic, slipping it from my shoulders. Before I can remove the rest, I hear the soft rustle of fabric behind me. When I glance over my shoulder, Amen is undoing his own belt, removing his outer robes with practiced ease.

He is unhurried, comfortable in his movements. As if this is natural. As if undressing in my chambers at dawn is something he has done a thousand times before.

I swallow, forcing my gaze away.

The bed calls to me, and I climb beneath the cool linen sheets, sighing as I sink into their softness. The tension of the night still lingers in my body, coiling low in my stomach, refusing to release me entirely.

Amen watches me from where he stands, bare from the waist up, his robes discarded beside him. He doesn't move to leave. Instead, he crosses the room, easing onto the bed beside me.

We lie there, side by side, the space between us a thread pulled too tight.

"You are quiet," he murmurs.

I glance at him, then back to the ceiling. "I have a lot to think about."

He hums in agreement, his fingers tracing idle patterns on the sheets. "The temple?"

"The temple."

A pause.

"And... you."

His gaze sharpens, though his expression remains unreadable. "What about me?"

I reach for him, my hand resting lightly against his forearm.

Something flickers in his eyes. He turns, shifting onto his side to face me fully. The movement brings him closer, so close that the space between us barely exists.

His gaze flickers downward—to my lips, my throat, the rapid rise and fall of my breath.

It would be so easy.

So easy to close the space between us.

So easy to surrender to the tension coiling among us, pulling us closer like the invisible threads of the gods themselves.

His hand lifts, fingers grazing my cheek before trailing lower, barely touching the column of my throat.

"You make it very difficult to leave," he murmurs.

"Then don't," I whisper.

He does not hesitate. His lips claim mine in an instant, the kiss deep and consuming.

I gasp against him, my hands fisting in the sheets as he shifts over me, his weight pressing into me, pinning me in the best way.

I taste the desert on him, the remnants of wine from earlier, something darker beneath it all.

He kisses like a man who has wanted for too long. Like a man who does not want to stop.

And I do not want him to.

The heat between us builds, hands roaming, fabric slipping from skin. His fingers skim down my side, tracing my hip, my thigh, leaving a path of fire in their wake.

I arch into him, desperate for more—

A knock at the door shatters the moment. I stiffen beneath him, breathless.

Amen curses under his breath, his grip on my waist tightening before he exhales sharply.

The knock comes again, more insistent.

"My lady?" A maid's voice called through the wood. "I've brought your morning meal."

"Leave it," Amen commanded, his voice carrying the full weight of Pharaoh despite his disheveled state. "The lady is not to be disturbed."

A beat of silence. Then, footsteps retreat down the hall.

I bite my lip, attempting to suppress the laugh that bubbles up. "You didn't even ask who it was."

"Didn't need to," he mutters, his lips grazing my jaw, my throat. "Anyone knocking at your door at dawn does not deserve to be answered."

I hum, threading my fingers through his long dark hair, tugging just enough to make him groan. "And what about you?"

His answering grin is wicked. "I'm the only exception."

He kisses me again, harder, deeper, his hands finding the last of my clothing, slipping it down my body with practiced ease.

Heat coils low in my belly, liquid and dangerous. I pull him closer, my fingers ghosting over his skin, reveling in the way his muscles tense beneath my touch.

Then the warmth in my limbs suddenly vanishes. A sharp chill pierces through me, spreading like ink in water.

I inhale sharply, my vision blurring. My hands, which moments ago had been burning with need, suddenly feel weak.

Amen notices instantly. His head snaps up, eyes scanning my face, his touch suddenly less heated, more searching.

"Neferet?" His voice is tight, controlled, but I hear the concern beneath it.

I try to answer, but my voice catches in my throat. It is not exhaustion. It is something else.

Something foreign. Something wrong.

Amen curses again, pulling away entirely, sitting back as his eyes narrow. He studies me like a puzzle suddenly missing its pieces.

Then, something changes in his face.

Realization.

The heat in the room dissipates.

He pulls back, standing abruptly. The shift is sudden, the loss of his warmth stark against my skin.

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I blink up at him, still dazed. "What—"

"I have to go." His voice is unreadable.

He is already reaching for his discarded tunic, tying it quickly.

I push myself up onto my elbows, still fighting the strange wave of weakness. "Amen—"

But he is already at the door. He does not look back as he leaves. And I am left alone, the cold lingering where his touch once was.

End *of* *The* **Chapter**

A Chance Meeting