



A chill wraps around my spine. "Why? What's happening to Meritaten?"

Heket looks away, as if choosing her next words carefully. "She is sick."

It's a lie. I see it in the way her jaw tightens, in the way she avoids my gaze.

I take a step back. "Sick?" I whisper. "That was not the sound of a woman with an illness."

She says nothing.

I shake my head. "Heket—"

"I am warning you for your own good," she cuts in, her voice edged with something almost desperate. "Leave it alone, Neferet."

I can hardly breathe. "Is this about Amen?"

At that, something shifts in her eyes. A flicker of something dark. Something knowing. Then, as quickly as it came, she masks it.

"You ask too many questions," she murmurs.

"Because I don't have answers."

"Listen carefully," she hissed, her voice barely above a whisper. "If you want to live, stay away from the others. Don't ask questions. Don't interfere. And most importantly..." Her grip tightened. "Avoid the rituals with Amen, for as long as you possibly can."

"Rituals?" My heart stuttered. "What rituals?"

"The ones that will destroy you if you're not ready." Her eyes held no warmth, only a harsh warning born of experience.

"The ones that broke all the others."

"Please," I caught her arm as she tried to turn away. "I need to know more. What happens during these rituals? What broke them?"

Something flickered across Heket's face - not quite pity, but close. "You really don't understand what you are, do you? What being his concubine truly means?"

"Then help me understand."

Her laugh was sharp as broken pottery. "Why should I? You're just another pretty girl who thinks she's special. Another priestess who believes her magic makes her different." She yanked her arm free. "But I've seen enough 'special' ones die screaming."

The words hit like physical blows, but I pressed on. "If you hate me so much, why warn me at all?"

"Because watching you die slowly will be tedious." She turned away, then paused. "The first ritual involves blood. His blood, your blood, mixed with something darker. Something hungry." Her voice dropped lower. "After that, the dreams start. Then the cravings. Then the pain."

"And then?"

"Then you end up like Meritaten, or perhaps even as Petepses." She glanced over her shoulder, her expression unreadable. "Unless you're truly the one. But I doubt it."

Before I could ask more, she was gone, leaving me alone with questions that felt like serpents coiling in my stomach.

The next day, I rise with a plan.

The Golden House has its own set of archives, separate from the temple's, containing records of past queens and concubines, of rituals performed within these walls for centuries. It is maintained by scribes and priests who oversee the Pharaoh's inner court.

Surely, they will have answers.

I dress quickly in a simple linen gown, braiding my hair in a single plait to keep it out of my face. Then, slipping through the maze of corridors, I make my way toward the Hall of Records, my mind a whirlwind of questions.

The room is vast when I reach it, lined with towering wooden shelves holding neatly stacked scrolls, their edges curled with age. The scent of ink and dried reeds fills the air, mingling with the faint aroma of sacred oils burned for preservation.

A handful of scribes sit hunched over their desks, their styluses scratching against parchment, their gazes flicking up only briefly to acknowledge my presence before returning to their work.

I step forward, my voice measured. "I wish to see the records on the Pharaoh's sacred rites."

The nearest scribe, an older man with a shaven head and ink-stained fingertips, does not look up. "What business does a concubine have with such records?"

My patience is already thin. "It concerns me directly," I say

evenly. "I have the right to understand what is required of me."

This time, he does look up, his wrinkled face unreadable. The other scribes have stilled, their gazes darting between us.

Silence stretches before he finally speaks.

"There are no records available to you."

Something in his voice—too firm, too final—sends unease curling through me.

"That is impossible," I say carefully. "There must be something —"

"You will not find what you seek here."

I grit my teeth. "Then tell me, scribe. Why is it hidden from me? I serve the Pharaoh. I am meant to take part in these rites, am I not?"

A flicker of something—fear?—crosses his face before he masks it with practiced indifference.

"Lady Neferet." His voice is lower now, a warning beneath the calm. "Leave this alone."

Frustration burns through me. "Why will no one answer me?"

A younger scribe shifts uncomfortably beside him, as though he wants to speak but knows he should not. But before I can focus on him, the elder scribe rises abruptly, his chair scraping against the stone floor.

"The Pharaoh's sacred practices are his alone. Not ours to question. And certainly not yours."

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"The Pharaoh's sacred practices are his alone. Not ours to question. And certainly not yours."

He turns to the other scribes. "We are finished here."

The tension in the room tightens like a noose as they bow their heads in silent dismissal, their attention returning to their work.

My pulse hammers. I am being shut out.

Not because they do not know—but because they do.

And they are afraid.

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

A Chance Meeting