



## Chapter 16



Werel has been my personal maid since the first day I arrived, but until now, she has remained quiet and professional, speaking only when necessary.

But as the days stretch into weeks, something changes.

Perhaps it is the way I do not snap at her like Heket does. Or the way I allow her to braid my hair as she pleases without complaint. Or maybe, it is simply that Werel enjoys gossip too much to keep silent forever.

Whatever the reason, she has begun to talk. And once she starts, I realize there is little that can stop her. Her young face carried wisdom beyond her years, earned from watching the secrets of the Golden House unfold.

"You're lucky, my lady," she chatters one morning while fastening golden bracelets onto my wrists. "Most concubines have far worse treatment when they first arrive. I've heard stories of girls being left in their rooms for weeks before Pharaoh so much as glances at them."

I arch an eyebrow. "And how long have the others been here?"

Werel hums thoughtfully, tightening the last bracelet.

"Meritaten has been here the longest—she grew up here in the palace with His Majesty back when he was just a prince. She is the eldest daughter of the former Pharaoh's right-hand man." Werel's fingers fidgeted with the hem of her dress. "Some thought they would marry, before... before everything changed. Now she's like the frizziest corners of Duat. Beautiful, but so cold it burns."

That would explain Meritaten's coldness—the way she carries herself with silent authority. Unlike the others, she is not here

to be chosen. She is already claimed.

"And Heket?"

Werel snorts, moving to my hair next. "The General Ahmose's Daughter? Oh, she acts like she is queen of the harem. She's been here about a year now, but she thinks she's more important than all of you because her father commands Pharaoh's armies. She wasn't always so... harsh. The rituals changed her."

My heart squeezed at the mention of the rituals, but I kept my voice steady. "And the others?"

"Then there's young Nebetta," Werel continued. "She was given to Pharaoh only months ago. I don't think she has spoken more than a few words to anyone since arriving. Poor thing. Just sits in her chambers, playing her harp like it's the only friend she has left."

Something about the way Werel says it makes my chest tighten.

"She was given?"

Werel nods, securing the last braid. "Her mother was a greek—came from the islands to the west. But after her father was murdered, her mother fled back to her homeland, leaving Nebetta behind as a peace offering to the new Pharaoh. His Majesty accepted her into his harem to maintain political peace between our lands."

I swallow the bitterness rising in my throat.

"Does Pharaoh favor her?" I ask, though I already suspect the answer.

Werel hesitates. "Not really. She's too... shy. And too afraid."

I do not ask if it is him she fears or something else entirely.

The picture Werel painted made my chest ache. Four women, all trapped in this gilded cage for different reasons. All waiting for... what?

"The rituals," I said softly. "What can you tell me about them?"

Werel's hands stilled. "Nothing, my lady."

The lie is clear.

"You must know something," I pressed.

Werel lowers her gaze. "Only that they are private." She swallows. "Even the palace attendants are not allowed to be present."

I frown. "Not even the servants?"

"No one."

That is odd. Even the most sacred rites require attendants to prepare the participants.

"Have you never heard anything?" I ask, desperate for something—anything.

Werel hesitates before shaking her head. "Only whispers. And I do not believe in whispers."

I closed my eyes, fighting back the fear that threatened to choke me. "Thank you, Werel. For telling me the truth."

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Later, seeking peace, I made my way to the bathhouse.

The steam rose like ghosts from the heated pools, filling the air with the scent of lotus and myrrh. I shed my robes, letting the warm water embrace me.

The harem's baths are always empty at this hour, most of the concubines prefer to visit in the mornings. I prefer the stillness of night—the quiet that allows me to think.

I slip into the water, letting the warmth seep into my skin, my muscles loosening beneath its embrace.

Alone in the pool, I thought about the others. Heket with her bitterness, Meritaten with her frozen heart, Nebetta with her silence.

Were they all meant to save Amen? Did they all fail, one by one, their souls trapped between worlds?

But I do not have long to enjoy it.

I hear him before I see him.

The soft footfalls against marble. The faint rustle of fabric. And then, a familiar voice.

"You are alone again, lotus flower."

My breath catches.

I turn swiftly, and there he is—Amen, standing at the edge of the baths.