



I woke to cold sheets and lingering warmth where Amen's body had been. My fingers traced the empty space, remembering the weight of him, the safety I'd felt falling asleep in his arms.

I had no right to expect him to stay. He is Pharaoh—his duties extend far beyond this chamber, far beyond me. And yet, after last night, after the way he held me, touched me, whispered my name like a sacred prayer, I had thought...

I shake the thought away before it can settle too deeply in my heart.

Sliding out from under the sheets, I wrap myself in a thin linen robe. My legs tremble slightly as I cross the room, a lingering reminder of his possession, of the way his body had claimed mine so completely that I no longer knew where I ended and he began.

I sink onto a cushioned seat near the balcony, inhaling deeply as I gaze out over the harem gardens. The breeze carries the scent of lotus flowers, mingling with the distant sound of temple bells. The Golden House remains quiet, the concubines likely still asleep.

A soft knock pulls me from my thoughts.

"Come in," I call, adjusting the robe around my shoulders.

The door swings open, and Werel enters, carrying a tray laden with fruit, bread, and honeyed wine.

"My lady?" Werel's cheerful voice broke through my melancholy. She bustled in carrying fresh linens, her eyes bright with barely contained excitement. "Oh, you won't believe what I've heard from the marketplace!"

Despite myself, I smiled. Werel's enthusiasm was infectious, and right now, I needed that more than I needed to dwell on Amen's absence.

"Tell me everything," I said, sitting up and wrapping myself in fabric.

She practically bounced as she worked, sharing tales of merchant scandals and temple gossip. A foreign princess had arrived with exotic gifts. Two rival priests had gotten into a fistfight over proper ritual procedures. The baker's daughter had run away with a Greek sailor.

Each story pulled me further from my worries, reminded me that life continued beyond the walls of the Golden House. I found myself laughing, asking questions, feeling almost normal again.

At some point, her bright eyes become sharp with mischief, and I know before she even speaks that she has something to share.

"You look exhausted," she notes with a grin, setting the tray down. "Though, I suppose that's expected, considering where you spent the night."

I arch a brow. "Do you make a habit of prying into my whereabouts?"

She laughs, unfazed. "The walls in the Golden House are thin, my lady. And more than one servant saw His Majesty carrying you back here like a prized treasure." She smirks, slicing a fig in half. "There are already whispers about you. Some say Pharaoh favors you above all others."

A warm flush spreads through me, but I fight to keep my expression neutral. "Court gossip is fickle. It changes as swiftly as the Nile's currents."

"Perhaps," Werel says, popping a piece of fruit into her mouth. "But for now, you are the current. And the others are not pleased."

I don't need to ask who she means.

Over the past few days, Heket's jealousy has become more apparent. At first, it had been subtle—sharp glances, whispered words to the other concubines when she thought I wasn't looking. Then, the sabotage began.

The first attack came during evening prayers. Someone had filled my incense burner with powder that made my eyes water and my throat close. If Werel hadn't noticed the strange smell and knocked it from my hands, I might have breathed enough to collapse.

"Lady Heket," Werel whispered as she helped me to my feet. "I saw her maid lurking near your chambers earlier."

That should have made me angry, but all I felt was tired. "Why does she hate me so much?"

"Because you have what she wants." Werel's voice was unusually serious. "The Pharaoh's attention. His trust. His..."

"His heart?" The words tasted bitter.

Werel just squeezed my hand.

The incidents escalated. My ceremonial robes were torn just

before an important ritual. My bath oils were replaced with something that would have burned my skin. Each time, Werel caught the sabotage just in time. Each time, I saw Heket watching from the shadows, her eyes growing colder with every failed attempt.

"Be careful," Werel warned one evening. "She's getting desperate. And desperate people are dangerous."

And she was right.

Heket's frustrations have only grown, her usual biting comments now laced with open hostility. Her glares no longer attempt to hide their malice. Yet, with every failed scheme, her fury deepens, and I know it is only a matter of time before she reaches her breaking point.

That night, walking back from the bathhouse, the halls of the Golden House are quiet, the flickering torches casting elongated shadows along the walls. Then I heard footsteps behind me.

I round the corner—and suddenly, a hand grips my arm.

Before I can react, I am shoved against the cold stone wall, the sharp edge of a blade pressing just beneath my chin.

I gasp, my pulse leaping as I stare into the furious eyes of Heket.

Her breath is uneven, her fingers tightening around the hilt of the dagger she holds against me. There is no mask of courtly civility now—only raw, unfiltered hatred.

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"You think you can walk into the Golden House and claim him as yours?" she hisses, her voice laced with venom. "You think you can take everything without consequences?"

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

A Chance Meeting



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