



Chapter 21



The inner harem garden was different at night. I hadn't intended to wander so far, but the harem was suffocating, and my thoughts were restless.

The encounter with Heket still lingered in my mind, her voice echoing in my ears like a warning. But more than that, I couldn't shake the sensation I'd felt when I touched her—that pulse of power, raw and unbridled.

Answers were nowhere and yet, as I turned a corner near the reflecting pool, my steps slowed.

I hadn't expected anyone else to be here at this hour, but there she was - Meritaten, still as a statue among the blooms.

She stood near the water's edge, bathed in moonlight. The sheer fabric of her robes shimmered with each slow movement as she reached out, fingertips grazing the petals of a blooming lotus.

She was... beautiful. Not in the way Kiya had been, all bright smiles and intoxicating charm. No, Meritaten carried herself like a queen already crowned—elegant, controlled, untouchable.

Her profile was perfect, carved from silver light and shadow. Everything about her spoke of careful control, of a lifetime spent learning exactly how to exist in this gilded cage.

She didn't turn when I approached, though I knew she heard me.

"You should know by now that it is rude to stare," she said without looking at me, her voice smooth as polished alabaster.

Caught, I exhaled a quiet laugh. "Forgive me," I said, stepping forward, my sandals making the faintest sound on the stone path. "I didn't mean to intrude."

She finally turned her head, her dark eyes meeting mine with measured coolness. "And yet, here you are."

The words were not unkind, merely factual. There was no warmth in them, but neither was there malice.

I took a few more careful steps closer, glancing at the lotus she had been admiring. The soft pink petals gleamed under the silver light, half-opened, waiting for the full embrace of night.

"They are breathtaking," I murmured. Meritaten nodded slightly, resuming her slow tracing of the flower's petals.

"They only bloom in darkness," she said. "Yet they are drawn to the light."

I tilted my head. "Much like those who live in this palace."

She let out a small, almost imperceptible breath of amusement. "You are poetic, Neferet."

I hesitated, unsure whether she meant it as a compliment or an observation.

A silence stretched between us, heavy but not unbearable.

And then, carefully, I said, "I have been meaning to ask about that night, Meritaten. The night I heard... the screams."

Her fingers paused against the flower, her entire body stilling. I knew I had overstepped before she even spoke.

Her shoulders stiffened, but her face remained perfectly composed. "Did you?"

"Were you... was it the rituals?"

A small smile curved her lips, but it didn't reach her eyes. "So direct. How refreshing." She touched a lotus petal with one elegant finger. "Yes. The rituals can be... demanding."

"You endure them willingly," I said, more to myself than to her.

Meritaten nodded, her fingers resuming their slow touch over the lotus petals. "It is an honor to serve him this way."

There was a tenderness in her tone that caught me off guard. The way she said 'him' made my chest ache. It was not obligation that bound her to these rituals. It was devotion.

I hesitated before asking, "How long have you loved him?"

Her head snapped toward me, shock breaking through her careful mask. For a moment, I thought she might deny it or send me away. But something in my face must have reached her.

"Since we were children," she whispered, and for the first time, I heard real emotion in her voice. "Before he was Pharaoh, before the curse... when he was just youthful Enhotep, with scraped knees and wild dreams."

I nodded, understanding flooding me. "It must have been captivating, watching him grow into the man he is now. Magnificent. Divine." I smiled faintly. "It would be difficult not to fall in love with someone like him."

The temperature seemed to drop. Meritaten's face hardened,

her brief vulnerability vanishing like mist in sunlight.

"You understand nothing," she said, each word sharp as broken pottery. "And you never will."

I blinked, caught off guard by the sudden shift in her demeanor.

"You speak of admiration, of want," she continued, her dark eyes narrowing. "But love? Love is not a passing sentiment, Neferet. It is not mere fascination with beauty or power. It is a sacrifice, a devotion. And it is pain."

A chill crept over my skin.

"I didn't mean to offend-"

"No?" She stepped closer, her presence looming despite her poised grace. "You think you know him because he's shown you a favor? Because you've shared his bed?" Her laugh was bitter as unripe dates. "This will be our first and last conversation, Neferet. We are not friends. We cannot be. We are rivals for a position only one can hold."

I stayed silent, watching her gather her dignity around her like a cloak.

"One more thing," she said, already turning away. "Don't ruin my evenings in the garden again. It's the only peace I have left."

She walked away with perfect grace, leaving me alone with the lotuses and too many questions.

Then she was gone. I stood there, the scent of lotus blossoms thick in the air, my thoughts a tangled mess.

thick in the air, my thoughts a tangled mess.

She loved him. Deeply. Painfully. Entirely. And yet, she endured something I still did not understand.

If I truly wanted answers, if I truly wanted to understand everything, I needed to look beyond the Golden House.

The rituals. The curse. Amen's suffering.

Perhaps the truth lay where it all began.

In the Temple of Isis.

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

A Chance Meeting



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