



Chapter 23



"A reckless, foolish decision." Amen's voice cut through the silence of my chambers like a blade, sharp with barely restrained fury.

I had barely moved from where I stood, still breathless from the tension of his presence consuming the space, his eyes burning into me like molten gold.

And then—so quickly I barely registered it—he reached into the folds of my robe, pulling free the stolen scrolls.

I gasped, my hands flying to his, but he had already unrolled one, his eyes scanning the ancient text.

A muscle ticked in his jaw.

"You risked everything," he said after a moment, his voice dark and unreadable. "For this?"

"For you," I corrected, my voice softer now.

Something flickered in his gaze, but he tore his eyes away from mine, rolling the scrolls back up with controlled precision.

"You could have been caught," he continued, his voice low but thick with anger. "Do you understand what would have happened if you were? If any priest had discovered you stealing from the temple? If any of my enemies learned that my concubine was sneaking through the night like a thief?"

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of his words pressing down on me. I had been reckless. I had risked too much. But I refused to regret it.

"I needed answers," I said, lifting my chin defiantly.

His jaw clenched. "And you thought the best way to find them was to put yourself in danger?"

"I thought the best way to find them was to stop waiting for someone else to tell me what I already know is being hidden from me." My voice was steady, but my pulse thundered in my ears. "You keep me in the dark, Amen. You disappear without explanation. You leave me surrounded by whispers and half-truths. How am I supposed to sit here like a good little concubine and pretend I don't feel the weight of something more?"

His nostrils flared as he took a step toward me, his presence like a storm building in the air.

"You are more," he ground out, his tone like a warning. "That is exactly why I cannot risk losing you."

His words sent a sharp pang through my chest, but before I could respond, something else caught my attention.

A strange sensation prickled at my skin, an eerie shift in the air around us. I turned my head slightly, my gaze falling upon the small cluster of lotus flowers that had been placed near the window just that morning.

My stomach twisted.

The petals, once full and vibrant, had begun to curl inward, their rich hues draining to a sickly yellow. The stems darkened, shriveling as if all life had been siphoned from them.

The effect spread outward, creeping like a silent death through every plant in the room. The entire chamber seemed to breathe the decay. And at the center of it all—Amen.

His fists were clenched, his expression still burning with frustration, but there was something else there now—something deeper. He was unaware, oblivious to what was happening around him.

The curse.

I had suspected it before. I had sensed it in the way his presence shifted, in the way his skin sometimes carried an unnatural warmth, in the way his hunger—for me, for something beyond—seemed insatiable.

My heart slammed against my ribs as I moved without thinking. I reached for him, pressing my palm firmly against his chest, right over the steady beat of his heart.

"Amen." His breath hitched.

At my touch, the withering slowed. The creeping death that had begun to consume the chamber stopped. The brittle leaves, the dying petals—suspended in their decay.

I felt it—the shift in him. The moment his anger gave way to something softer. His body relaxed beneath my touch, the rigid tension melting away as he exhaled a deep, shuddering breath.

He closed his eyes for a long moment before whispering, "Forgive me."

The apology was quiet, almost reverent.

I searched his face, the sharp planes of his jaw, the slight furrow of his brow. The anger that had ignited the air around us had faded, leaving only something raw behind.

"I was worried," he admitted, voice barely above a murmur.

"When I found out you hadn't left your chambers before nightfall—when no one knew where you had gone—I..." He trailed off, exhaling sharply.

For the first time, I heard it clearly in his voice.

Fear.

I softened, my fingers tracing small, soothing circles against his chest. "I didn't mean to make you worry," I murmured.

A small, humorless laugh escaped him. "You are constantly making me worry."

I smiled faintly, but the weight of everything I had learned, everything I still didn't know, pressed heavily on my chest. I couldn't let this moment of tenderness distract me from the truth.

I kept my hand on his chest, afraid the darkness might return if I let go. "I'm sorry for sneaking away. But I'm not sorry for seeking answers."

"Neferet—"

"No," I cut him off. "Listen to me. I've been patient. I've seen the consequences of the rituals. I've heard the pain in the voices of the other women. I know there's something you're not telling me."

His grip tightened on my hand. "It's not that simple."

"Then explain it to me!" Frustration burned in my throat. "If I'm truly the one who can break your curse, why haven't I been called to participate in the first ritual? Why keep me in the dark

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called to participate in the first ritual? Why keep me in the dark about my own destiny?"

Silence.

The room felt impossibly still, the weight of my question hanging between us.

For a long moment, he said nothing. His expression was unreadable, his gaze dark and searching. Then, before I could press him further, he moved.

Swiftly. Decisively.

His hands tangled in my hair, tilting my face up to his. Instead of answering, he kissed me. His lips crashed against mine with desperate intensity, like he was trying to silence not just my words but the truth behind them.

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

A Chance Meeting



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