

**Chapter 27**

"More grace in the wrist!" The dance teacher's voice interrupted my thoughts. My muscles ached from hours of practice, but rest was not an option with the court watching soon.

"Grace, Neferet," my instructor said while circling me during the sequence. "Every motion speaks of longing and sacrifice. It's a tribute to Osiris's suffering and resurrection. No hesitation, only surrender."

I took a deep breath and began again as the drums pulsed with my heartbeat. My body flowed through the movements, silk garments clinging to my damp skin.

My mind wandered to that eerie dream - waking up in cold sweats, details slipping away like water. All I remembered were those burning red eyes and the taste of blood in my mouth.

"Neferet! Focus! The festival is in three days!"

Three days until I danced before the court - before Amen and envoys who would scrutinize every move for signs of weakness in Pharaoh's newest concubine.

The teacher demanded sharper movements, deeper emotion—this dance was an offering. I inhaled, the warm air soothing my tense muscles. Despite unanswered questions, I enjoyed the challenge.

A soft, delicate sound reached me—a woman's voice singing. Unlike temple hymns or festival chants for the gods, this melody was personal. The sweetness captivated me as a harp accompanied her cascading notes.

Driven by curiosity, I approached the source of the sound.

There she was, perched on a terrace and half-hidden behind a column. A girl with hair like ripened wheat, glowing under the fading light. Her fingers danced over a small harp, melodies shimmering like moonlit water.

Her beauty was quiet and unassuming—unlike Meritaten's bold elegance or Heket's striking presence. She seemed untouched by palace life.

I stepped closer without disturbing her. "You play beautifully," I said gently.

She gasped, fingers freezing on the harp. Suddenly, she darted behind a nearby statue, as if trying to disappear into the cold stone.

I blinked, taken aback.

"Forgive me," I said, lifting my hands. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

The girl peeked out, dark eyes wide with nervousness. She only stared.

"Please," I called softly, "don't be afraid. Your music was beautiful."

A small face peered around the statue's base, eyes watching me warily. "You... liked it?"

"I've never heard anything like it." I took a cautious step forward. "I'm Neferet."

"I know who you are," she whispered. "Everyone knows about the priestess with green eyes."

Recognition dawned. "You must be Nebetta." I remembered her as the youngest concubine, the one always absent from meals. "Why haven't I seen you before?"

She emerged slightly from behind the statue, hand trailing along its surface.

"I prefer to stay in my chambers or here, where it's quiet."

Looking at her now, I understood why this place could be cruel to those who didn't fit its mold. Nebetta's youth and shyness made her an easy target.

"Would you play something else?" I asked, settling onto a nearby bench.

Nebetta hesitated, conflict on her face. My expression seemed to reassure her as she approached the harp. Her fingers trembled slightly on the strings.

"It's a song about Isis," she whispered, "how she searched for Osiris."

The melody started, delicate as morning dew. Nebetta's voice grew stronger, conveying divine love, sacrifice, and a goddess who would defy all odds for her beloved.

"That was incredible," I said, wiping away tears. "Where did you learn it?"

"My mother taught me," she replied, her face clouded with sorrow.

"Do you miss the temple?" she asked abruptly, then blushed.
"I'm sorry, I shouldn't..."

"It's alright." I smiled, touched by her concern. "Yes, I miss it.
Everything here feels..."

"Hollow," she finished. "Like we're playing parts in an
incomprehensible story."

Her insight surprised me – she observed more than she
revealed.

Glancing at the darkening sky, inspiration struck. "Would you
like to watch the stars tonight? The view from here must be
amazing."

Nebetta hesitated. "... I don't know..."

"Only if you wish to," I reassured her. "We could bring
blankets and sweet dates. I'd love to hear more of your
songs."

She studied me, a small smile curving her lips. "I'd like that."

"We'll meet here after nightfall," I said. "Just us. And the
stars."

She nodded, dark eyes shimmering.

I left her to her music and walked through the winding halls of
the Golden House, realizing it was a prison for many of us, all
searching for something more.

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