



A warm breeze curled through the balcony, lifting the edges of my linen robe, sending a shiver across my skin despite the heat.

Nebetta sat beside me, her small frame curled against the stone railing, her hands wrapped around her knees as she gazed at the stars.

I had expected her to be timid, hesitant—but as the night stretched on, she surprised me. She spoke in a hushed voice, careful but certain, as if sharing the secrets of the heavens themselves.

I had not expected to trust her so quickly. Yet here we were, alone in the quiet night, and I found myself hanging onto her every word.

"It happens under the full moon," Nebetta said, her voice barely more than a whisper. "The first ritual."

I stiffened at the words. She didn't need to explain what she meant.

Heket's warning.

My unanswered questions.

The truth that Amen had refused to tell me.

I swallowed, my throat dry. "And what does the ritual do?"

Nebetta turned her head toward me, her dark eyes gleaming in the moonlight. There was something haunted in her expression, something I recognized from the shadows in my own heart.

"It reveals, searching between gods' marks." she murmured. "It takes and takes and takes until nothing is left except the truth. Until it finds Isis's."

I shivered.

Nebetta exhaled, glancing down at her hands, tracing invisible patterns against the fabric of her robe.

"It drains you. It steals the strength from your bones, leaves you weak, cold—" she hesitated, gripping her wrist. "Like something is being pulled from your soul."

The pit in my stomach deepened.

"How long?" I asked, my voice barely steady.

"A night," she answered, then hesitated. "But the worst is what comes after."

I didn't dare interrupt.

"The dreams," she whispered. "The nightmares. If the ritual rejects you, the souls of Duat will not leave you in peace. They linger. They haunt. You will see them in the corners of your room, hear them whisper in your sleep." She swallowed. "They do not forget."

I couldn't breathe.

I had felt something similar before—the shadows in my visions, the voices lingering at the edges of my dreams. But what Nebetta was describing was something else. Something worse.

"And if you succeed?" I asked, my voice hollow.

Nebetia's lips curled into something too small to be called a smile. "Then you are bound to him forever."

I forced myself to ask the next question, though I already feared the answer. "What happens to those who fail?"

Nebetia hesitated. Then, finally, she spoke.

"Petepses," she murmured.

I frowned. "I didn't hear about her."

"You wouldn't," Nebetia said softly. "She was one of us once. A concubine. She bore the blessing of Bastet, protector of Pharaohs." Her fingers tightened against her arms. "But the ritual... rejected her. Far harsher than the other of us."

The weight of the words sank into me.

"She went mad," Nebetia continued, her voice quiet with grief. "She sees things that are not there. She speaks in tongues no one understands. She was meant to protect Pharaoh, but the gods decided otherwise."

I swallowed. "What happened to her?"

Nebetia hesitated, then finally met my gaze. "Amen did not cast her out," she admitted. "He gave her a palace of her own, attendants to care for her."

My heart ached.

I had not known what to expect—perhaps I had feared something worse. That he had disposed of her like a broken object, tossed aside a woman he had once brought into his home. But Nebetta's words painted a different picture.

A man who still bore the weight of the lives he touched. A man who did not forget.

My fingers curled into my lap. "You all underwent this?" I whispered.

Nebetta nodded. "Heket bears the blessing of Sekhmet. Strength and war. Meritaten carries Nephthys—mourning and healing." She glanced down at her hands. "And I... I am marked by Hathor."

The goddess of love. Of beauty and joy.

It made sense. Nebetta, with her music, her quiet heart, her fragile kindness.

I exhaled.

I had not expected to feel anger tonight. But as Nebetta spoke, I could feel it curling in my stomach, simmering like a flame waiting for air.

Amen had not told me.

He had known—he had known all of this, and yet he had not prepared me for it.

Would he have allowed me to walk blindly into the ritual, knowing the risk? Knowing that if I were not the one Isis had chosen, I could suffer? That I could be lost to Duat, tormented

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by ghosts that would never let me rest?

The betrayal struck sharper than I expected.

Nebetia must have sensed it, because she shifted closer to me, her voice softer now.

"Neferet," she said gently, "do not think cruelly of him." I pressed my lips together, trying to push down the tide of emotions in my chest. "He carries a burden heavier than we will ever understand," she murmured. "He is not heartless. He is not cruel. He simply does what he must."

I wanted to believe her. I wasn't sure if I did.

"He has always been kind to me," Nebetia said, a small, faraway smile touching her lips. "When I first came here, I knew nothing of the stars. I was afraid. He taught me how to navigate them." She glanced up at the sky, the constellations scattered like pearls across dark silk. "He told me that no matter where I was, they would always be there. That I could always find my way."

I looked up too. The stars shone, unbothered by the worries of those who lived beneath them.

Nebetia sighed. "I do not wish for power, Neferet," she said softly. "I do not wish to be Pharaoh's wife and queen of Egypt. But I do wish for his happiness. If the gods have truly chosen you... then I only hope that you will not resent him for the things he cannot change."

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