

**Chapter 29**

My hands shake as I write the formal request for an audience. Each careful stroke of the brush feels like I'm carving my fate into papyrus. The words are proper, respectful - everything expected of a concubine addressing Pharaoh. But beneath them burns all my questions, my anger, my fear.

When the response comes that same evening, my heart stutters. He wants to see me now. Tonight.

The walk to his chambers is both endless and too short. Guards bow as they open the doors, and then I'm there, standing before him again. The sight of him hits me like a physical blow - Amen, my Amen, looking at me with such pure joy it makes my chest ache.

His face lights up the instant he sees me.

"Neferet," he says, and the sound of my name on his lips is almost enough to make me forget why I am here.

His expression is warm, his dark eyes filled with something that looks dangerously close to relief. He steps forward as if drawn to me, as if he has been waiting for this moment just as much as I have.

But then—nothing.

He stops just short of reaching me.

He does not touch me. Not even a hand to my waist, not a brush of fingers against my arm. And yet, his gaze remains fixed on me, devouring me in a way that should make my skin burn.

A strange unease coils in my stomach. I had grown so used to his overwhelming presence—the way he always reached for me without hesitation, the way his touch always lingered—that the absence of it now feels unnatural.

Heket's words creep into my mind like poison.

You think you're special to him?

I swallow down the thought, lifting my chin. "Your Majesty," I say carefully.

A flicker of something passes through his expression, something unreadable, before he gestures to the cushions near the table. "Come, sit with me."

I do, lowering myself onto the plush seat, watching as he pours wine into two goblets. He hands one to me before taking his own, settling across from me in a manner that feels... controlled. Calculated.

"How have you been, my sweet lotus flower?" His voice wraps around me like silk, but he remains frustratingly far. "The festival preparations must be keeping you busy."

I force myself to play along, to match his light tone while my questions burn inside me. "Yes, the preparations are extensive. The harem has been quite active."

"And how are you feeling?" His dark eyes search mine. "Since our last night together?"

The memory of that night floods me with heat, but I push it aside. I need answers more than I need his touch, no matter how my body yearns for it.

He is calm, composed, his tone light.

But I see it.

The way his fingers tighten slightly around his goblet. The way his shoulders are wound with tension, despite the ease he tries to project. He is holding something back.

We dance around casual conversation - the weather, palace gossip, upcoming ceremonies. All the while, I watch him avoid any physical contact while simultaneously devouring me with his gaze. It's maddening.

Finally, I can't take it anymore.

I place my goblet down with deliberate care, my fingers brushing over the cool surface of the table. "You never told me the truth about the first ritual," I say, my voice even.

A small silence stretches between us.

Amen exhales softly, setting his own goblet aside. His expression does not shift immediately, but something in his gaze sharpens.

"I should have expected this," he murmurs.

"You should have told me," I say, my voice gaining an edge. "Instead, I had to hear about it from others. Do you know how I felt, realizing that every other concubine before me has suffered through something I wasn't even warned about? That you kept it from me?"

His jaw tightens, and for the first time, the warmth in his eyes dims.

"I did not want to frighten you," he says. "I wanted you to remain as you were for as long as possible—before you had to carry this burden, before you had to know."

I shake my head, unable to accept it. "That was never your decision to make."

Amen looks at me for a long moment, and then he sighs, running a hand through his dark hair. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his gaze dropping to the floor as if weighing his next words carefully.

Finally, he speaks.

"The curse I bear is not just a fate written by the gods," he says slowly. "It is something deeper. Something tied directly to Osiris himself."

My breath catches in my throat.

He looks up then, and I see it—the flicker of something ancient in his eyes, something powerful and haunting.

"I carry within me a fragment of Osiris's soul," he continues, his voice steady. "A piece of the god's very essence."

It is more than I ever expected. More than I ever could have imagined. A fragment of Osiris. A piece of the god of the underworld, embedded within the very man who now sits before me.

"You... you bear a god's soul?" My voice comes out quieter than I intend, barely above a whisper.

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Amen nods. "It is why I must undergo these rituals. It is why the first ritual exists—to determine if one bears the blessing of Isis, the only force capable of countering the fragment I carry. The one who bears her true blessing is the only one who can..." He hesitates, his gaze flickering with something unreadable. "The only one who can bind it."

I feel my pulse quicken. "Bind it?"

"Keep it from consuming me." A cold shudder runs down my spine.

I recall the night on my balcony—the way the air had thickened, the way the plants had withered, the way something dark and unnatural had stirred in the very space between us.

I had felt it. And now, I understand. The thing inside him—the thing tied to Osiris—it is alive. And it is growing stronger.

I swallow, my fingers curling into my lap. "And if no one can bind it?"

His silence is answer enough.

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

A Chance Meeting