



## Chapter 43



For the first time in months, I stood beneath the high stone ceilings, the light of the early morning sun filtering through the carved openings in the walls, casting soft golden patterns upon the polished floors. A wave of nostalgia crashed over me, tightening in my chest as I stepped through the towering gates of the Temple of Isis.

I had once imagined spending my entire life here. I had dreamed of devoting myself to the goddess, of mastering the sacred texts, of learning the deepest mysteries of magic.

But fate had other plans for me. And as much as I wished I could say that I had embraced my new life fully, I could not shake the small ache that settled deep in my bones.

I loved Amen. That much I knew. But had I chosen this?

No.

As I crossed the courtyard, the gazes of several priestesses followed me—curious, some warm, some unreadable. I had not expected hostility, but neither had I expected warmth.

A concubine of Pharaoh did not belong in these halls. But I was no ordinary concubine.

I carried Isis's name in my blood. For now I was almost sure of it.

At the temple archives, I returned the scrolls I had taken the night I had stolen away from the palace. The scribes accepted them without question, but I could see the unspoken thoughts behind their measured expressions.

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They know what I had done. But if the Pharaoh himself had not punished me, neither would they.

Once my task was done, I set out to find the one person I had longed to see since stepping into these sacred walls—the High Priestess Merneith.

I found her at the western end of the temple, overseeing the preparation of offerings.

At first, she did not see me, her attention focused on the priestesses arranging lotus blossoms and small clay figurines before the grand statue of Isis.

But when she finally turned and her sharp, knowing eyes met mine, a slow, pleased smile spread across her lips.

"Neferet," she greeted, setting down the scroll she had been holding. "It does my heart good to see you here."

Something inside me eased at her warm reception. For all her wisdom, Merneith had never been one to offer empty words. She was pleased to see me. Truly pleased.

And yet, when she congratulated me on my new status, I could only force a small, hollow smile.

How could I explain the storm within me? That while my heart ached for Amen, it also mourned the life I had once dreamed of?

I said nothing.

Instead, I let her lead me through the temple, through familiar halls where the scent of myrrh and lotus filled the air, where the chants of young priestesses echoed softly in the distance.

As we walked, Merneith spoke of the temple's recent affairs—the new initiates, the festivals, the rising tensions between the priesthood and the royal court. But I listened with only half an ear, my mind caught in the past, in memories of when these halls had been my home.

And then, her voice shifted, touched with amusement.

"Tell me, Neferet," she said, giving me a sidelong glance. "Have you not forgotten your blood magic amidst the luxuries of palace life?"

My heart skipped at her words. She had given me the opening.

At once, I turned to her, grasping her hands, my voice laced with urgency. "Merneith, I want to continue my training."

Her expression did not waver. She studied me, searching for something in my gaze, and after a long pause, she nodded. "Then you shall."

Relief flooded through me.

She did not question my place here. She did not ask if Amen had granted me permission. She simply agreed, as if it had been my right all along.

"It would be an honor to guide you further," she continued, her voice calm. "Especially if Pharaoh himself seeks the favor of the goddess."

I stiffened. That had not been my intention.

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I cared nothing for what the priesthood or the court perceived of my relationship with Amen. I had not come here to earn favor for him. I had come for myself. For knowledge.

Merneith must have sensed my discomfort because she let out a soft chuckle, brushing her fingers over my cheek like a mother soothing a restless child.

"Do not scowl, little one. I did not mean to wound your pride."

I sighed, shaking my head. "I only wish to learn. That is all."

"And learn you shall."

But then, my mind drifted to something else. To the nights spent restless, waking in cold sweats with the echo of a voice I could never quite recall.

I hesitated only for a moment before I told her about my dreams.

I told her about the Temple of Isis, standing tall beneath the moonlight, its steps bathed in the eerie glow of crimson waters.

I told her about the voice that whispered to me—guiding me, warning me. And yet, no matter how many times I dreamed, the memory of its owner always slipped away upon waking.

Merneith's expression darkened.

"Are you certain you cannot recall whose voice speaks to you?"

I shook my head. "It vanishes the moment I wake. I remember the temple. I remember the bloody water. I remember the

I shook my head. It vanishes the moment I wake. I remember the temple. I remember the bloody water. I remember the words. But the presence... it is always gone."

A long silence stretched between us. Finally, she exhaled.

"You may indeed be receiving a message from the divine." She lifted her hand, fingers tracing the sacred symbols embroidered into her robes. "The goddess speaks in many forms. But each manifestation carries a purpose—a warning, a prophecy, a command."

I shivered.

A warning.

I had suspected it all along.

"I must understand them," I murmured. "If Isis is speaking to me, I cannot ignore her."

Merneith regarded me for a long moment before stepping away, disappearing into a nearby chamber. When she returned, she carried a scroll—aged, fragile.

"Take this." She placed it in my hands. "It details the practice of oneiromancy. Dream divination."

I tightened my grip on the scroll, the weight of it settling deep within me.

"Thank you," I whispered.

Merneith touched my shoulder, her gaze unwavering. "The answers you seek may not come easily, Neferet. But they will come."