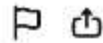


THE PHARAOH'S FAVORITE



Chapter 61



[POV Neferet]

I watched detachment as Amen's face turned ashen, his eyes wide with shock but not, strangely, with fear. The betrayal I saw there cut through me despite the haze of rage that clouded my vision.

Amen's hands gripped my wrists, but he did not force me away. His dark eyes, usually so steady, so full of unshakable confidence, now stared at me with raw disbelief.

I could still hear the chant, low and dreadful, hammering against my skull: "*Seth, Seth, Seth...*".

My grip tightened around Amen's throat once again, my vision swimming while my heartbeat a frantic drumbeat against my ribs.

The rage that had flared inside me, the rage that does not feel like entirely mine, clawed at my sanity, urging me to squeeze harder, to finish what I had begun.

In the periphery, the high priests backed away, their white robes swishing against the sacred stones as they muttered protective incantations.

Cowards.

They sensed the power of chaos flowing through me and fled like mice before a cobra.

Amen's throat moved under my palm, his pulse hammering against my fingertips when his fingers brushed against mine, light as moth wings.

I braced for him to shove me away, to strike, to command the guards to drag me screaming from this sacred place. Not this.

"Neferet..." he said, voice rough but steady. "Look at me."

I didn't want to, but his hand covered mine, firm now, grounding.

"Come back to me..." Amen said, quieter this time. "I'm here. With you."

He pressed his palm on my cheek gently, tenderly even, as though cradling a precious thing that he refused to destroy, even as it tried to destroy him.

His thumb traced soothing circles against my skin, a silent plea that spoke louder than any prayer.

"Remember the night outside the Temple of Isis?" he whispered. "The dawn when you asked me for a kiss... just one."

The memory flickered: the marble steps cool beneath my feet, the sweet scent of lotus flowers in the air, the gentle brush of Amen's lips against mine. Tentative at first, then deepening into something that stole the very breath from my lungs.

My grip faltered.

"I remember..." I whispered back, though the words came out cracked and broken.

"You called it a revenge, a farewell," he said. The ghost of a smile tugging at his lips despite the bruising grip I still had on him. "But I knew... I already knew, even then, you would never leave my heart."

A breath, sharp and shuddering, punched from my chest. The corner of my mouth twitched without meaning to, a tremor, a crack in the frozen

horror.

"You were radiant," he said, the weight of love and sorrow packed into those three words.

I blinked, awareness returning like the sun breaking through storm clouds. My hand loosened further, the strength leaking from my fingers like water through broken pottery.

A sick wave of terror surged through me — *how could I ever undo it?*

I fully released him with a gasp, stumbling backward. Water splashed around me as I nearly collapsed, my legs suddenly unable to support my weight.

Strong arms caught me before I could sink beneath the sacred water. Amen pulled me against his chest, one hand around my waist and the other cradling my head as though I'm his treasure rather than the monster I had just revealed myself to be.

"I'm s-sorry..." I tried to say, the words catching in my throat. "I didn't mean to... I'm so sorry, Amen. I couldn't—"

Amen pressed a gentle finger against my lips.

"Not here," he murmured, his voice for my ears alone.

He lifted me fully from the water, my weight seemingly nothing to him. I curled against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

The heart I had nearly stilled forever.

"My Pharaoh!" The High Priest stepped forward with outrage. "This woman attacked you! She bears the mark of Seth, the great enemy! This woman must be—"

woman must be—"

"Silence." Amen's voice was quiet but carried the weight of absolute authority.

The priest fell shut immediately, though his face contorted with suppressed protest.

"The ritual is finished," Amen declared, meeting the gaze of each priest in turn. None could hold his stare for long. "What happened here tonight remains within these walls. Anyone who speaks of it will answer directly to me."

He shifted me higher against his chest, cradling me gently as I clung to him, hid my face in his neck, too ashamed to meet the eyes of the watching priests, too afraid to look at my own hands.

Over Amen's shoulder, just before the great doors swung shut behind us, a flicker of movement caught my eye.

In the deepest shadows of the temple, the red-haired stranger stood half-hidden behind a carved pillar.

Our gazes met across the distance and he smiled.

It was not a victorious smile, it was the cold, patient smile of a hunter willing to wait for his prey to wander back into his jaws.

He dipped his head in a small, deliberate nod.

A promise or a warning. Then he was gone, dissolving into the darkness like a nightmare chased away by dawn.

I shivered violently against Amen, my fingers fisting tightly in the wet fabric of his robe. I was shaking not from the cold—but from the memory of the man's eyes.

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Crimson. Endless. Hungry.

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

Chapter 61



Comments

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Gifts

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