

THE PHARAOH'S FAVORITE



Chapter 62



[POV Amen]

I carried Neferet through the dimly lit palace halls, cradling her burning body against my chest, feeling every fevered tremble as if it were my own flesh.

The events and consequences of tonight's ritual took away her consciousness somewhere halfway to my chambers.

Servants scatter before us, their eyes widening as they glimpse on Seth's mark that lies on her chest now. Their whispers follow like shadows – "*cursed*," "*defiled*," "*dangerous*" – but I pay them no heed.

Let them speak. Let them fear. They know nothing of what truly transpired tonight. Neferet needed me—and I'd let no voice of fear or suspicion come between us.

"Bring fresh water and cloths to my chambers," I commanded a wide-eyed handmaiden who stood frozen in our path. "Then leave us. I will attend to her myself."

The girl bows deeply, scurrying away as though fleeing from Seth himself rather than the woman in my arms.

Perhaps, in her mind, there is no difference now.

When I finally reached my chambers, I kicked the heavy doors with my feet. The guards stationed outside flinched but said nothing. They knew better.

I lay Neferet gently upon the bed. Her skin glistens with sweat, her hair a dark tangle against the linen. The mark of Seth stands stark against her chest, pulsing with a rhythm that matches her heartbeat.

When the servants arrive with water, I dismiss them immediately. Their curious eyes linger too long on Neferet's exposed mark and I will not have her treated as a spectacle.

"I said leave us!" I commanded again, my voice leaving no room for argument.

Alone with her, I wring cool cloths over her burning forehead, her neck, her shoulders. The water beads on her skin like tears, sliding down to dampen the sheets beneath.

I work methodically, rhythmically, as if the simple act of caring for her body might somehow tether her soul more firmly to this world.

I refused the servants when they came again, and refused the palace healers too.

No one would touch her but me.

Hours pass, the moon shifts across the sky. Still, Neferet burns with fever, occasionally whispering words I cannot understand. Not the sacred language of priests, nor any tongue spoken in the lands of Egypt.

Dawn breaks, painting the eastern sky in gold and crimson, yet I have not slept. My eyes burn, my muscles ache, but I do not leave her side. I cannot.

At last, as the first pale light of dawn slipped over the Nile, she stirred.

Her eyelashes fluttered weakly against her fever-reddened skin before finally lifting, revealing those familiar deep green eyes.

"Amen..." she croaked, voice raw and ragged.

"I am here," I answered, taking her hand between mine and adding gentle soothing kisses to her soft skin.

Tears spilled over her lashes as she tried to sit up, only to collapse against me again, wracked by sobs.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against my chest. "I'm so sorry... I didn't know... It wasn't me... I'd never— I never wanted—"

"Shh," I murmured, pressing my lips softly to her hair, smoothing the sweat-damp strands away from her face.

I cupped her cheeks between my palms, brushing away her tears with the pads of my thumbs.

"I know," I said quietly. "But at last you came back to me."

"Am I still myself?" Her hand clutches mine with surprising strength.

"Am I still yours?"

The question strikes me like a physical blow. *Is she?*

The woman before me bears Neferet's face, speaks with Neferet's voice, looks at me with Neferet's eyes and yet, something has changed. Something fundamental.

But I cannot voice these doubts. Not now.

"You are mine," I tell her, making my voice firm with conviction. "And I am yours. Nothing – not gods, not curses, not destiny – will change that. Ever."

She clutched the fabric of my robe weakly, burying her face against me as more tears soaked the linen.

I held her through it all, through her shame, through her broken apologies, rocking her gently as one might soothe a frightened child.

"I love you," she whispers as sleep begins to reclaim her.

"I love you too, my sweet lotus flower," I answer, though I am not certain she hears me.

As she drifts into a healing sleep in my arms, when exhaustion claims her again, I gaze out the window at the heavy sunrise, its golden light bleeding across the desert horizon.

Questions swarm like locusts in my mind, devouring any certainty I might grasp.

Was the connection I felt with Neferet from our first meeting real, or merely part of some divine trap? A game played by gods who view mortal lives as pieces on a senet board?

And most terrifying of all – is the woman I love still herself?

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For the next three days, I remained at her side. I cancel audiences, postpone councils, ignore the increasingly urgent reports from my generals.

Egypt can wait. The world beyond these walls can wait.

On the surface, Neferet seems to recover: her fever subsides completely, color returns to her cheeks and her strength grows.

She smiles at something her maid Werel is gossiping about, she laughs when her puppy Apep circling all the time around her, small and full of energy, she reaches for me with the same love and tenderness as before.

Yet, I notice the changes.

Subtle shifts in her behavior that disturb me deeply. She sleeps fitfully, sometimes muttering those strange words I can't understand in her slumber.

During waking hours, her moods fluctuate wildly – moments of intense affection followed by periods of cold distance where she stares at nothing, her thoughts clearly elsewhere.

Most troubling are the episodes when she seems to lose herself mid-conversation. Her eyes darken, becoming unfocused as she stares unseeing into the distance.

Her laugh sometimes comes a beat too late and her voice occasionally shifts tone mid-sentence, as though someone else momentarily speaks through her.

When this happens, I notice how the air around her seems to grow colder, how shadows in the room appear to elongate toward her, as if drawn by some magnetic force.

On the fourth day, duty finally pulls me from her side. My advisors can wait no longer. Whispers of unrest at the borders have grown too loud to ignore.

In the council chamber, I find myself only half-listening to reports.

The words wash over me – skirmishes along the southern border, unusual movements among the Hittites to the east, strange phenomena reported in distant villages.

All concerning, yet my thoughts remain with Neferet.

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"Your Majesty?" General Ahmose's voice breaks through my distraction.
"Do you wish us to dispatch additional forces to the southern garrison?"

I blink, forcing my attention back to the matter at hand. "Yes. Send two more battalions."

The meeting stretches endlessly. When finally I return to my chambers that night, I find Neferet standing motionless before a mirror, staring at her reflection with a detached curiosity.

Her fingers kept tracing some patterns on the glass when she didn't seem to notice me at first.

"Neferet?" I ask, my voice carefully neutral. "How long have you been standing there?"

She startles, turning to me with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

"Oh, just a moment. I was thinking about..." Her hand drifts unconsciously to the mark on her chest, now hidden beneath her robes, "...you."

I crossed the room to her, my steps careful, slow, as if approaching a wounded animal.

Pulling her in my arms, I kissed her hair and murmured a short reply, but inside me, something cold and sickened twisted tighter.

End of
The **Chapter**

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