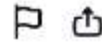




## Chapter 63



[POV Neferet]

I stood alone among the flowering hedges, the hem of my linen gown gathering dust where it brushed the earth. The garden of the Golden House stretched before me, heavy with the scents of hibiscus and jasmine.

I kneel beside a patch of flowers, my fingers hover just above them, not quite touching. The scent of them hung thick in the air, but it did little to soothe the knot twisting in my chest.

Lately, there have been... gaps.

The voids in my memory trouble me more than I dare admit, even to myself. Hours vanish like water into sand. Conversations end, and I cannot recall how they began. I wake in places I do not remember walking to.

Moments I could not hold in my memory. Words half-spoken and then forgotten.

Something is happening to me. Something I cannot control.

My attention returns to the flowers before me. Absentmindedly, my index finger traces a pattern above the sandy ground – a simple curve, nothing more. But then the sand beneath shifts, following the movement of my finger like an obedient servant.

I freeze, my breath catching in my throat.

Surely it was just the wind. *A coincidence.*

At first, I thought it a trick of the light, the shimmer of heat rising from the ground. I blinked, leaned closer.

Cautiously, I draw another pattern in the air, more deliberate this time. A spiral. The sand responds instantly, swirling into the exact same shape.

*No. No, this was not real.*

It couldn't be.

Horror floods me and I snatch my hand back as if burned, frantically glancing around to ensure no one has witnessed this disturbing phenomenon. The garden remains empty, but I feel no relief.

I stand shakily, brushing sand from my linen dress with trembling hands. The mark of Seth pulses against my chest, a constant reminder of my changed nature.

I've taken to wearing high-necked garments to conceal it, though the heat makes the fabric cling uncomfortably to my skin.

Worse than these waking manifestations are the dreams that plague my nights.

*He* appears in each one – the red-haired man. No longer a shadow at the edges of my mind, but a constant companion, walking beside me through landscapes of black sand and crimson waters.

Now I recognize him. *I remember him.*

Most disturbing of all, I have begun to anticipate these dream encounters. Even look forward to them. The realization fills me with shame so profound it threatens to consume me.

I pressed a hand to my mouth, swallowing down the bitter taste rising in my throat.

*What in the name of Ra is happening to me?*

That night, as sleep claims me, the dream begins differently. The Nile still runs red and the temple of Isis still stands silhouetted against the night sky. But something has shifted.

*I am so angry.*

When the red-haired man appears beside me, I immediately whirl to face him, days after days of fear and confusion boiling over into rage.

"Who are you?" I demand, my voice echoing strangely in the dreamscape. "Why are you haunting me? What do you want from me?!"

He seems taken aback by my outburst, but only for a moment. Then his smirk widens into a grin that makes my skin crawl with equal parts fear and fascination.

"Oh~ You know who I am, little priestess," he replies, his voice smooth as honey yet sharp as a blade. "*Deep in your soul, you've always known.*"

"I do not," I spat, though some traitorous part of me was thrilled at the familiar endearment.

The man laughed, a low, rumbling sound that made the hairs at the back of my neck stand on end. He circled me lazily, like a lion toying with wounded prey.

"*I am the god of chaos, of storms, of the desert,*" he announces, straightening to his full height. "*Brother and slayer of Osiris. Enemy of Horus.*"

He stepped closer, the heat of his body brushing mine without touch.  
*"I am the god your priests fear to name at their sacred altars. The one  
whose shadow you now carry in your very blood."*

I recoiled, heart thundering. "Seth," I breathed.

His smile widened, slow and predatory. Then he bows – a mocking  
gesture, theatrical and grand.

His crimson eyes glitter with malicious amusement. *"And now, your  
master."*

At that moment the dream shatters around me, and I wake with a gasp,  
my body drenched in cold sweat despite the warm night air.

*Seth.* The name reverberates through me like thunder, settling into my  
bones.

I need to tell Amen. Now.

I throw aside the bedsheets and rise. Dawn is still hours away, but  
this cannot wait. My bare feet make no sound as I hurry through the  
corridors toward Amen's chambers.

The guards recognize me, stepping aside without question.

I find him asleep, his face peaceful in repose, untroubled by the dark  
knowledge that burdens me. For a moment, I simply watch him,  
memorizing the contours of his face as if I might never see him again.

Then I shake him gently. "Amen," I whisper. "Please, wake up. I must  
speak with you."

His eyes open immediately, alert despite the hour. "Neferet?" He sits up,  
concern etched across his features. "What's wrong?"

I open my mouth to tell him everything – about the dreams, about Seth, about the magic that now flows through my veins unbidden. But as I try to form the words, my throat constricts painfully.

My tongue feels frozen, heavy and useless in my mouth. The words die before they can be spoken.

It's as if some external force prevents my confession.

I try again, fighting against the invisible restraint. "Amen, I—" Pain lances through my head, sharp enough to make me wince.

"Neferet?" Amen takes my face in his palms, warm thumbs stroking my skin. "What is it? You can tell me anything."

But *I can't*. And the realization fills me with despair so profound I could drown in it.

"I see that something is troubling you. Please, talk to me," he says, his voice gentle but probing.

I turn to face him, tears threatening. Once more, I open my mouth to reveal everything – but instead find myself pulled forward as if by invisible strings.

My body collided with his, pressing against him with a hunger I barely recognized as my own.

I seized his face between my hands, capturing his lips in a kiss so fierce, so desperate, it stole the breath from both our lungs. His initial shock melted away under the intensity of my touch.

*The distraction worked. Perfectly.*

Amen's concerns, his careful questions, were swallowed whole by the rising tide of desire between us. I pushed him back toward the bed with frantic urgency. He let me, his own arms wrapping around my waist, pulling me down with him.

His lips found mine again – hungry now, matching my feverish pace – and we sank together in a tangle of limbs and sighs.

His hands curved around my thighs, then higher, up the flare of my hips, thumbs brushing bare skin beneath sheer linen.

His gaze never left mine. "Neferet..."

I leaned down and kissed him again, slower this time, coaxing the heat between us into something molten. His lips moved with mine, greedy, reverent.

One of his hands splayed over my lower back, the other slipping beneath the folds of my thin garment to cup the bare curve of my breast and I gasped when he lowered his head a moment later.

"So beautiful," he whispered, worshiping my heated skin with lips and tongue, his touch igniting every inch of me. "You are carved from the breath of the gods..."

His reverence made me tremble. Not because I didn't believe him, but because I did. Because he saw me like no one else had ever dared.

I ground against him, needing more, needing *all* of him. He was hard beneath me, and I welcomed the friction, the pressure, the way his breath hitched with every sway of my hips.

"Let me..." I whispered, voice low, thick with want



His hands tightened, guiding me as I began to move over him – slow at first, a sinuous rhythm. I rode him like a storm, like the only thing keeping the darkness at bay.

We moved together, faster, deeper, until the only sounds were our breath, our cries, the rustle of silks as I unraveled above him. Amen's head tilted back, jaw clenched, the muscles of his chest tight beneath my palms.

"Neferet," he groaned, my name breaking from him like he was being undone.

And gods help me, so was I.

I cried out as I shattered, his hands pulling me tighter against him as he followed, breathless and shaking, buried deep inside me.

Silence followed as we lay together in his bed later. He lay beside me, arm draped over my waist, skin slick with sweat and satisfaction. His face – so serene in sleep – seemed untouched by the torment lashing inside me.

But I couldn't sleep. I stare at the ceiling, tears silently tracking down my temples.

Amen sleeps beside me, spent and satisfied.

He does not see my anguish. Cannot hear the voice that echoes in my mind: *"He cannot help you, little priestess. You are mine now."*

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