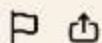




## Chapter 64



[POV Amen]

Conversation and the clinking of goblets filled the space of the palace's hall as Egypt's nobles, commanders and foreign dignitaries gathered to discuss the ever-worsening threats to our borders.

I sat at the head of the long banquet table, around me, the most powerful figures in Egypt debating the growing threats that plague our borders.

Military commanders with weathered faces recount encounters with creatures that should not exist. Priests argue over interpretations of ominous signs. Foreign dignitaries listen with barely concealed skepticism, weighing our weakness against their own ambitions.

But my attention strays constantly to Neferet.

Seated a few places to my left, radiant in a gown of deep sapphire silk that clung lovingly to her figure, adorned with gold and lapis jewelry that shimmered with every flicker of torchlight.

To anyone else, she would appear the perfect consort – beautiful, serene, attentive.

Yet only I notice the subtle signs of her internal struggle: the slight tremor in her fingers as she lifts her wine cup, the momentary vacancy in her eyes before she forces herself back to awareness.

The way she occasionally tilts her head as if listening to something – or someone – no one else can hear.

My stomach twisted in knots.

I have watched her deteriorate over the weeks now since the ritual. Watched as something foreign grows stronger within her. Something that wears her face but is not her.

"The creatures at our southern border move in unnatural patterns," General Ramose is saying, his scarred hands gesturing emphatically. "They attack, then retreat before victory is certain, as if testing our defenses rather than seeking conquest."

The High Priest of Osiris strokes his beard thoughtfully. "Perhaps we face not multiple threats, but aspects of the same corruption. A darkness seeping into our land from beyond the veil of Ma'at."

One of the generals leaned toward me, lowering his voice. "Your Majesty, shall we deploy another battalion to the eastern border?"

I opened my mouth to respond when Neferet's voice cut through the air.

*"All shall crumble."*

The whole hall froze. Neferet spoke and her voice, usually so melodic, so warm, dropped into a register that made the hair rise on the back of my neck.

Deeper. Resonant. Otherworldly.

The room held its breath and dozens of heads swiveled toward her in shock.

*"The darkness rises,"* she continues, her eyes vacant, unfocused. *"The chaos comes. The desert will reclaim what was stolen."*

"Neferet?" I pushed back my chair sharply, my heart pounding.

For a heartbeat, I think I've reached her. Her eyes flicker, focusing briefly on my face with a flash of recognition, of desperation.

Then the moment passes, and something else stares out at me from behind her beautiful features.

She throws her head back and begins to speak in a language that sends chills down my spine. The words are ancient and older than any living tongue, older perhaps than civilization itself.

Despite my extensive education, my divine connection to Osiris, I recognize nothing of this primal incantation.

The final syllables left her lips like a dying breath and every single flame in the hall extinguished at once.

Darkness followed. Absolute and complete.

Panic erupts instantly. Nobles cry out in alarm, dishes and goblets clatter to the floor, guards shout commands that overlap into incoherence.

Through it all, I remain standing, oddly calm in the eye of this storm.

"Light!" I command, my voice cutting through the chaos. "Bring light immediately!"

Torches flickered back to life, one by one, illuminating wide, terrified eyes and frozen faces. And there – in the very center of the hall – stood Neferet.

No one saw or heard her move from her seat to the open space between the tables. Yet there she stands, her face serene despite the confusion around her.

Her right palm is sliced open, the wound deep and deliberate. Blood drips from her fingers onto the marble floor, forming an unnaturally perfect circle that seems to absorb light rather than reflect it.

For a heartbeat, just one, her eyes flash crimson, like twin flames in the darkness. Then they return to their natural green, now filled with confusion and terror as awareness seems to flood back into her.

Her voice, small, broken, trembled through the stunned silence. "What's happened to me?"

She stares at her bleeding hand as if seeing it for the first time, then at the blood circle beneath her feet. Horror dawns across her features.

I want nothing more than to go to her, to shield her from the frightened, accusatory stares now fixed upon her.

But I cannot. Not yet. A Pharaoh cannot show weakness, even for love.

"Guards," I say, my voice level despite the turmoil within me. "Escort Lady Neferet to my chambers. Post sentries at the doors, no one enters without my express command."

The guards move quickly, forming a protective circle around her as they lead her away.

As she passes me, the tears streaming down her face nearly break my resolve to remain in my place, to project strength and control before my court.

Her eyes lock with mine, pleading and desperate.

"It will be fine," I tell her softly, quiet words meant for her alone. "I swear it."

Once she has been removed from the hall, I stand to address the assembly. Fear has given way to angry muttering, to whispered accusations.



*I cannot allow this to fester.*

"What you have witnessed tonight is divine in nature," I say, my voice carrying to every corner of the vast chamber. "Not an act of malice, but a message from the gods themselves."

"A message of doom!" someone cries out.

"A warning," I corrected firmly. "One I intend to heed. Lady Neferet is not to blame for being chosen as the vessel of this communication. She deserves your respect, not your fear."

My words do little to calm them, but they do not dare contradict me openly. One by one, the guests bow and take their leave, eager to escape the lingering tension in the air.

Eventually, I stand alone in the emptied hall, the echoes of tonight's events hanging heavy in the silence.

I move slowly to the center of the room, where Neferet's blood circle remains – still warm, unnaturally vibrant against the pale marble.

Kneeling beside it, I studied the perfect circumference, the way the blood refuses to dry or fade as normal blood would.

When I reached out, fingers touched the blood circle expecting pain or resistance.

Instead, the blood beneath my fingers pulses once and then it begins to fade, sinking into the marble until no trace remains – nothing but the memory of crimson eyes staring out from the face of the woman I love.

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