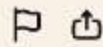




Chapter 67



[POV Neferet]

He comes to me in waking hours now.

Seth no longer waits for dreams to claim me. He appears when I am alone – a reflection in my washing basin that moves independently of my own, a shadow that stretches contrary to the light, a warm breath against my ear when no one stands beside me.

Today, without consciously deciding to, I found myself drawn to the palace archives.

As I approach, two guards stiffen at their post, uncertainty flashing across their faces. They know of my changed status, my volatile behavior.

They also know I am Pharaoh's favorite, perhaps even his beloved.

"Lady Neferet," one begins, his voice carefully neutral. "This area is restricted without proper authorization."

I feel my lips curve into a smile that does not belong to me.

"Does Pharaoh's favor and previous written permissions not grant me access to knowledge?" My voice emerges honeyed, seductive in its authority. "Or would you prefer to disturb him with such a trivial request?"

The implied threat works. They exchange glances, then step aside with reluctant bows.

"Of course, my lady. But... the eastern section is forbidden to all but the

highest priests."

"I won't disturb their sacred texts," I promise, the lie sliding easily from my tongue. "I seek only historical records."

Once inside, surrounded by thousands of scrolls neatly organized on cedar shelves, I abandon all pretense. My feet carry me directly to the eastern section, sealed with warnings and protective symbols.

The lock should stop me – yet my fingers know precisely how to manipulate it, as if the knowledge has always been there, dormant until needed.

I move as if in a trance, my fingers unerringly selecting specific documents hidden among hundreds.

I unroll the first on a reading table – a text detailing the older, darker aspects of Seth worship from before he became demonized, when he was still revered as a protector god, a force of necessary destruction and renewal.

The hieroglyphs seem to writhe beneath my gaze, rearranging themselves into meanings that should be beyond my comprehension.

Yet I understand every symbol, every nuance, as if I've studied these texts for lifetimes.

As I unroll a particularly ancient papyrus, the edges crumbling beneath my touch, I feel a presence materialize beside me – more solid than ever before.

"My clever little priestess," Seth murmurs, his voice both in my ears and inside my mind. *"You begin to understand."*

I do not startle this time. Some part of me had been expecting him,

waiting for this manifestation.

"What exactly do you want from me?" I ask, my voice steady despite the fear churning in my stomach as I turned to him.

His smile is predatory, all gleaming teeth and ancient hunger.

"I simply want what is rightfully mine," he answers simply. "Egypt. Power. Revenge against the brother who betrayed me."

"Osiris is long dead," I counter. "Slayed by your own hands thousands of years ago."

"Dead, indeed," Seth laughs, the sound like distant thunder. "But not gone."

He circles me, his crimson robes brushing against the ancient scrolls.

"Just as I am not gone. Gods do not die so easily, lotus flower. We merely... change forms."

"Amen..." I whisper, understanding dawning like a terrible sunrise.

"Precisely." Seth stops before me, his crimson eyes burning with triumph.

"The young Pharaoh carries a fragment of Osiris's soul, just as you now harbor a piece of my essence for now."

Horror washes through me, cold and absolute. "No."

"Oh yes." He reaches out, his fingers brushing my cheek in a touch that burns like desert sand.

"Your blood magic, your very birth with connection to Isis made you a perfect vessel for me. I've been with you for a quite long time now, little priestess. Growing stronger with every intimate connection and every drop of your blood you shared with Osiris's vessel."

My mind reels, memories rearranging themselves like pieces of a broken pot finally assembled into its true form.

The dreams. The unexplained connections I felt to Amen from our very first meeting. The way our magic resonated together.

"You used me..." I whisper. "Everything I've participated with Amen to help him didn't just strengthen our bond—"

"—it created pathways between Osiris and myself," Seth finishes, satisfaction dripping from every word. *"Avenues through which I could finally make a direct strike."*

I recoil in horror, stumbling away from him, from the scrolls, from the terrible truth they contain. "Bastard. I won't let you use me anymore to harm him!"

Seth's laughter follows me as I flee toward the door.

"Run if you must," he calls after me. *"But remember — where can one run when the pursuer lives beneath your own skin?"*

I stagger into the sunlight, past the startled guards, through the covered walkway. My breathing comes in ragged gasps, my vision blurring with unshed tears.

Servants and courtiers scatter before me, their faces masks of concern and fear.

I ignore them all, focused only on putting distance between myself and the archives, as if physical space could somehow separate me from the god who dwells within my flesh.

By the time I reach my chambers, slamming the door behind me, my initial panic has crystallized into something harder, more determined. I

initial panic has crystallized into something harder, more determined. I sink to the floor, my back pressed against the cool cedar wood, and force myself to think clearly.

I am a vessel for Seth – but I am still Neferet.

I still have my own mind, my own will. And if the god of chaos believes he can simply claim me without a fight, he has greatly underestimated the priestess of Isis.

I rise slowly, moving to my writing table where a polished bronze mirror sits among my cosmetics. I study my reflection carefully – the same green eyes, the same bronze skin, the same features I've always known.

Yet something lurks behind my gaze now, something ancient and hungry that does not belong to me.

"I will fight you," I whisper to that foreign presence. "With every breath, with every heartbeat. I will not be your puppet!"

A soft chuckle echoes in my mind. *"Strong words from a vessel already half-filled."*

I ignore him, turning instead to consider what I've learned.

If Seth seeks to harm Amen through me, through our connection – then there is only one solution.

The thought brings such pain that I nearly double over, pressing my fist against my mouth to stifle a sob. To lose Amen, my love, my anchor, my destiny, is unthinkable.

And yet, to be the instrument of his destruction is far worse.

End *of*