



Chapter 68



[POV Amen]

For days, Neferet slipped through my grasp like a shadow fleeing the light.

She no longer attended our shared meals, no longer answered my summons with the easy grace I had grown used to. Instead, she sent excuses – polite but hollow.

"I am unwell, my beloved Pharaoh, excuse me," her notes would read.

Or: *"I fear disturbing your rest, my Divine One. I will return as soon as I am stronger to make my company pleasant for you."*

The absence of her weighs on me like a physical thing – a stone lodged beneath my ribs, pressing against my lungs with each breath.

For days now, Neferet has been a ghost in her own place, present yet unreachable, drifting through corridors moments before I arrive, leaving rooms just as I enter them.

Even my chambers have been abandoned, as she retreated to her old one in the Golden House, claiming she sleeps poorly and wouldn't wish to disturb me.

I want to respect the distance she creates, though it pains me a lot.

I am still the Pharaoh, and the palace has many eyes that answer to me alone.

The reports arrive daily: Neferet spends hours in the temple archives. She consults ancient scrolls, texts so old their edges crumble at a touch.

She speaks to no one. She eats little.

Sometimes she simply stares at the walls, her lips moving in conversations with someone unseen.

From the balcony overlooking the eastern gardens, I watch her now. She walks with measured steps along the reflecting pool, one hand trailing over the stone edge to steady herself.

Even from this distance, I can see the change in her – the once-graceful movements now hesitant, the proud shoulders slightly stooped, the vibrant presence diminished.

She pauses near a lotus blossom, bending to examine it. For a moment, her composure slips. Her hand trembles violently, and she clutches it to her chest as if in pain.

When she straightens, her eyes fill with unshed tears as she gazes toward the palace – toward my chambers.

She believes herself unobserved and the raw anguish on her face steals my breath.

This is not the detachment of indifference. This is the distance of sacrifice.

Five more days pass before I corner her in the garden pavilion where we once spoke of destiny and divine connection.

The late afternoon sun casts long shadows across the intricate tile mosaic depicting Isis gathering the scattered pieces of Osiris. Neferet stands with her back to me, her shoulders tensed at the sound of my approach.

"I thought I might find you here," I say, keeping my voice gentle, neutral.

When she turns, I struggle to mask my shock.

Dark shadows circle her eyes like bruises, stark against skin that has lost its healthy bronze glow. The fine bones of her face stand out too prominently – she has lost weight she could ill afford to lose.

But most disturbing is the constant tremor in her hands, which she tries to hide by clasping them tightly before her.

"My Pharaoh," she acknowledges with a formal bow, her voice flat. "I was just leaving."

"Were you?" I step closer, blocking her path to the garden exit. "How fortunate that I arrived in time to speak with you."

Her eyes darted past me, seeking escape. "I have duties to attend to..."

"No," I counter softly. "You don't. I've cleared your obligations for the day."

Something flashes in her gaze – irritation, perhaps, or fear. "That was unnecessary."

"Was it?" I gesture to the stone bench beside the reflecting pool. "Sit with me, Neferet. Please."

She hesitates, then complies with obvious reluctance, perching on the edge of the bench as if prepared to flee at any moment.

I sit beside her, careful to leave space between us, though every instinct urges me to pull her into my arms.

"You've been avoiding me," I say simply.

"I've been busy."

"With what?"

Her fingers twist together in her lap. "Research. Personal matters."

"In the forbidden archives? Among scrolls of ancient magic no one has consulted in generations?"

I keep my tone mild, but her head snaps up, eyes widening slightly at the revelation that I know precisely where she's been spending her time.

"You're having me watched," Neferet accuses, her voice brittle, too thin to carry the sharpness she clearly intends.

I take a breath, steadying my heart, wishing I could erase the fear in her eyes with a touch.

"I'm concerned about you," I say quietly, willing her to understand. Willing her to see my heart laid bare before her.

"Don't be," she snaps, rising to her feet, the movement sharp and defensive. "I'm simply tired."

I can't let her retreat behind those lies. Not again.

I catch her wrist, gently and reverently, as if even the fragile beat of her pulse beneath my fingers could shatter with one wrong move.

The warmth of her skin is still there, but it feels distant, as if a veil separates her from me.

"Don't lie to me," I say, keeping my voice soft despite the intensity of my gaze. "Please. Not after everything we've shared."

Something breaks in her expression, a crack in the careful mask she's constructed. For a moment, her eyes fill with tears and her guard falls away completely.

"I can't explain it," she chokes out, the words trembling like reeds caught

in a violent wind. "Sometimes I... I'm not myself. I do things, say things and later, I can't even remember..."

Her voice cracks. A sound so fragile, so broken, it feels like the gods themselves must have fallen silent to listen.

"I'm afraid, Amen," she whispers, shaking as if the admission costs her everything. "Afraid of what's happening to me. What it might cause you."

I move instinctively, my arms opening, needing to hold her, needing to shield her from the nightmare closing around her – but she recoils.

Stagger back with a gasp, her body slamming against the marble column of the pavilion.

"No!" The word rips from her lips like a wounded animal's cry. "Don't touch me. It's not safe."

I freeze, my hands outstretched, aching to gather her into my arms and crush this distance between us. But I do not move. I simply stand there, heart breaking open inside my chest, letting her see the devastation in my eyes.

"Let me help you," I plead, my voice rough with the love that is tearing me apart. "Whatever this is... we'll face it. Together. As we always have."

She shakes her head, tears streaming down her face, leaving silvery tracks against her too-pale skin.

The vulnerability in her expression is absolute, devastating in its honesty.

For one precious moment, I glimpse the true Neferet – *my Neferet* – fighting through whatever darkness claiming her.

Then, like a cloud passing over the sun, her expression changes.

Then, like a cloud passing over the sun, her expression changes.

The vulnerability vanishes, replaced by cold anger that transforms her features into something hard and unfamiliar. Her spine straightens, her shoulders square, and although nothing physically changes, she suddenly seems taller, more imposing.

"Stop following me," she snaps, her voice pitched lower than her natural tone. "Stop questioning me. You have a kingdom to rule, do you not? Focus on that instead of inventing problems where none exist."

Before I can respond to this sudden transformation, she brushes past me, her movements now fluid and confident, nothing like the trembling woman of moments before.

The contradiction is jarring, unnatural.

"Neferet, wait—"

But she's already gone, striding toward the palace with purpose, leaving me staring after her, my heart heavy with the confirmation of my worst fears.

End *of* The Chapter

Chapter 68



Comments

0



Gifts

1033

Commented [Ma1]:

Commented [Ma2R1]: