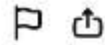




## Chapter 69



[POV Neferet]

I cannot recall destroying my own chambers.

This terrifies me more than the destruction itself – the splintered furniture, the shredded linens, the gouges in the wood paneling that no human nails could have made.

I stand amid the wreckage, my hands bandaged where they had bled from wounds I don't remember receiving, and feel the cold tendrils of fear wrapping around my spine.

The servants found me in the gardens at dawn, barefoot and vacant-eyed. Werel said I fought when they tried to bring me inside, that I spoke in a language none of them recognized.

She said my strength was not that of a mortal woman.

*And I remember none of it.*

These gaps in my memory have been growing more frequent, more extensive. I am losing myself piece by piece, like a clay figurine eroding in the Nile's endless flow.

The moment Amen comes to see me again after our last encounter, his face carefully composed to hide his concern, I make my request without preamble.

"I want to see Petepses." His expression shifts, surprise briefly overcoming his royal control.

Few speak that name in the palace anymore – the broken former

concubine, the woman driven to madness by the very ritual that marked me with Seth's symbol.

"Why?" he asks, settling beside me.

"Because she may have answers," I reply, though in truth, I seek something simpler... the comfort of knowing I am not alone in this descent into darkness.

Amen studies me for a long moment, weighing his duty as Pharaoh against his love for me. Finally, he nods.

"I will take you myself," he says softly.

Two days later, we departed at dawn, accompanied by a complement of guards who kept a careful distance from me.

The journey to Petepses' sanctuary is not long in distance but feels eternal. We travel in silence, Amen riding slightly ahead, his broad shoulders tense beneath his royal mantle.

Occasionally he glances back at me, his expression unreadable.

The isolated palace rises before us like a mirage, beautiful yet somehow wrong, as if the proportions are slightly askew.

A small contingent of servants maintains the palace.

They bow deeply as we enter, their eyes downcast as they guide us through cool, shadowed corridors to an inner courtyard where, they tell us, Petepses spends most of her days.

I don't know what I expected – a ravaged creature, perhaps, with wild eyes and unkempt hair, chained to prevent her from harming herself.

The reality is far more unsettling.

Petepses sits in a shaft of sunlight, her back straight with perfect posture. Her black hair falls in a glossy curtain down her back, adorned with simple jasmine blossoms. Her features are composed in an expression of serene concentration as her fingers move deftly through bright threads.

She is beautiful, ethereally so, and shows no outward sign of the madness that supposedly consumes her.

"I will wait here," Amen says quietly, gesturing for me to approach her alone. His reluctance is evident, but he does not stop me.

My sandals whisper against the stone as I cross to where Petepses sits. She seems unaware of my presence, humming softly to herself, her fingers never pausing in their intricate work.

"Petepses," I say gently.

She looks up sharply. Her eyes, a startling amber flecked with gold, widen not in recognition of me but at something within me. Something she sees that others cannot

*"Sutekh comes on the night wind," she says in a language I should not understand but somehow do. "Red sands follow his footsteps. The black land trembles."*

I find myself responding in the same tongue, the syllables unfamiliar yet flowing from my lips with practiced ease. *"The storm approaches. The waters rise red."*

Amen shifts uncomfortably behind me. He cannot understand our exchange, can only witness the unnatural fluidity with which we communicate in this forgotten language.

Petepses and I continue our eerie dialogue. She speaks in verse, confusing names and timelines, yet within the seeming nonsense, I sense fragments of truth buried like jewels in river silt.

Then, without warning, she shifts back to our common tongue.

"He's found a new home, I see," she says, her voice surprisingly clear and melodious.

Confused, I step closer, drawn by the sudden lucidity in her gaze. "What do you mean?"

Petepses laughs, the sound both beautiful and chilling.

"He tried to take me once too, you know. But I wasn't strong enough to bear him." She returns to her weaving, adding casually, "You are, though. Very strong and capable to become his perfect vessel."

My throat constricts. "Seth..." I whisper.

She nods without looking up, her fingers working the threads with mesmerizing precision.

"I was too weak. My body rejected his essence." Her hands still momentarily. "But you, your blood carries the old magic. The goddess's gift, divine spark."

"How do I stop it?" I ask desperately. "How do I drive him out?"

"Drive him out?" She looks genuinely perplexed. "Why would you want that? Don't you understand what power you could wield?"

"I don't want any of his power. I want to be myself again."

"Poor child." She studies me with something like pity. "There is no 'yourself' anymore. There is only what you are becoming."

I reach for her arm, needing to make her understand. "Please, if you know how to fight this—"

The moment my fingers touch her skin, Petepses stiffens, her entire body going rigid.

The weaving falls forgotten from her lap, threads scattering across the stone floor like dropped jewels.

Her head snaps back as her spine arching unnaturally. When she speaks again, her voice has changed.

It was deeper, masculine, horribly familiar to me from my dreams.

*"Tell my brother I'm coming for what's mine,"* her lips moving in ways that seem wrong on her delicate face. *"Tell him I'll take everything he loves before I take him."*

Then, just as suddenly, she collapses, her body going limp as a cut marionette. She crumples to the floor, unconscious, her limbs splayed at unnatural angles.

Guards rush in at the commotion, their expressions taut with alarm. Amen pushes past them, calling for physicians, his commands sharp with urgency.

But I barely notice any of it.

I stare in horror at Petepses's prone form, at the woman who held Seth's essence before me. The woman whose mind shattered under the weight of a god's presence.

Is this my fate? To be consumed entirely until nothing remains of 'Neferet' but an empty vessel for a vengeful deity?

'Neferet' but an empty vessel for a vengeful deity?

Slowly, I turn to face Amen, tears streaming down my cheeks.

His face has gone pale, his eyes wide with the realization of what we've just witnessed. He heard Seth's voice too, using Petepses as a mouthpiece to deliver his threat.

The message wasn't meant for me at all. It was meant for him.

For Osiris's vessel.

For my beloved, whom Seth has sworn to destroy using me as his instrument.

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

Chapter 69



Comments

5



Gifts

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