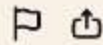




## Chapter 70



[POV Amen]

Thebes stretched before me, bathed in molten gold as the sun sank beyond the horizon. I stood near the open balcony, the warm breeze stirring the edges of my cloak, the scent of river water and distant incense heavy in the air.

Behind me, silence.

Neferet sat motionless on the edge of my bed, her hands clenched tightly together in her lap, knuckles bloodless with the force of it.

Her head was bowed, the coppery sheen of her hair dulled by exhaustion, fear... and something darker that neither of us dared to name aloud.

The sound of her voice broke the stillness at last – small, raw, barely more than a breath. "I need to be confined," she said.

I closed my eyes against the ache those words stirred in me.

"Somewhere I cannot harm anyone," she continued, each syllable thick with sorrow. "Somewhere I cannot harm *you*."

For a long moment, I remained silent, letting the twilight seep into my bones, steadying myself against the tide of grief rising inside me.

"When I visited Ptepsps today..." Her voice catches. "I saw my future. The blackouts are becoming more frequent. There are long moments where I'm not myself, where something else moves within me."

My hands gripped the stone of the balcony rail until my knuckles ached, but still I said nothing, letting her pour out the poison festering inside

her.

I close my eyes, remembering the night she first tried to strangle me during the ritual.

The way her green eyes had darkened until they were almost black. The inhuman strength in her delicate hands.

"There are... gaps," she whispered. "Hours I can't account for. I wake up with blood under my nails, bruises on my skin. And one night—"

Her voice cracked, and I turned then, unwilling to let her shoulder the burden alone. Studying the woman who holds my heart, my very soul.

She raised her head, and the anguish in her green eyes nearly undid me.

"One night, I woke up standing over you while you slept," she continued, each word seeming to pain her, "with a dagger in my hand. I don't remember taking it. I don't remember walking to your chambers. I only remember the voice urging me to plunge it into your heart."

A tremor passed through her, violent enough that she nearly doubled over from it.

Her skin is paler than it should be, her cheekbones now even sharper beneath it than before. The green of her eyes is clouded with fear, her slender hands clasped so tightly in her lap that her knuckles shine white.

"I don't know how I got there," she whispered. "I don't know what I meant to do. But I was so close... so close—"

I crossed the room in two strides, falling to my knees before her.

Gently, I reached up and cupped her face in my hands, feeling the shivering tension that rippled through her body.

She flinched at my touch, as if expecting rejection, revulsion. But I held her steady, forcing her to meet my gaze. What she found there must have surprised her, because she inhaled sharply – a sound caught halfway between a sob and a gasp.

There was no agreement in my eyes. No surrender. Only fierce, unwavering resolve.

"No," I said softly, the word heavy with meaning. "I won't lock you away like some dangerous animal."

Tears welled in her eyes, overflowing before she could blink them back.

"But I *am* dangerous," she protests, tears gathering at the corners of those remarkable eyes. "What if next time I cannot stop myself? What if next time—"

I press a finger to her lips, silencing the fear spilling from them. "Then I will be there to bring you back. Each time. Always."

Her mouth quivered under my touch, her resistance crumbling moment by moment.

"I will watch over you by myself, day and night if I must," I vowed, brushing the tears from her cheeks, smoothing a tangled strand of hair behind her ear. "I will not abandon you to this."

Her resistance crumbles visibly, her shoulders sagging beneath an invisible weight. With a broken sound – half sob, half surrender – she collapses against my chest, her fingers clutching at my robes as though I am the only anchor in a rising flood.

I held her tightly, feeling the rapid beat of her heart against my chest, the tremors wracking her body.

"I'm so afraid," she whispered against my skin, her tears soaking into my robe. "Not for myself, but for you... for what I might do to you."

I gather her closer, pressing my lips to her hair, her temple, the corner of her eye. She smells of fear and desperation, but beneath it all, she smells of *Neferet*.

My priestess. My goddess. My love. My salvation.

"Know this, my sweet lotus flower," I murmur, tilting her face up to mine, my thumb tracing the curve of her cheekbone. "I would sacrifice anything – my throne, my kingdom, even my life – if it meant we could be fully happy together again."

Her eyes widened, the full weight of my words sinking in.

"I am yours, Neferet," I said fiercely, the promise burning between us. "As you are mine. No gods, no curse, no destiny will change that. Ever."

For a heartbeat, the darkness lurking behind her gaze seemed to recoil, to falter.

Something shifts in her eyes, the smallest flicker of hope breaking through despair. For a moment, I glimpse the woman who commanded spirits in dreams, who defied the court, who faced down death without flinching.

When I lower my mouth to hers, she tastes of salt and sorrow, but there is sweetness too, the memory of what we have been, the promise of what we might still become.

Her body softens against me, trusting despite everything. Her mouth was soft and yielding at first, then urgent, devouring, answering the need she had tried so long to smother.

had tried so long to smother.

I deepened the kiss, pouring every ounce of love, of defiance, of life into it, willing her to feel it in her very blood, her very bones.

This is why I will not lock her away. This is why I cannot surrender her to priests or guards or cold stone cells.

Because even with chaos raging inside her, there are moments like this, pure and perfect, where we are simply Amen and Neferet.

Two souls bound by something greater than curse or prophecy.

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

Chapter 70



Comments

5



Gifts

1034