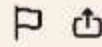




Chapter 73



[POV Amen]

Dawn's first light creeps across Neferet's skin, gilding her with the same golden radiance that touches the distant pyramids each morning.

I watch her sleeping form with the reverence of a priest before his goddess – cataloging each rise and fall of her chest, the flutter of her eyelids as she dreams, the slight parting of her lips with each exhale.

Last night's connection still lingers in me like the fading echo. I felt her completely, more deeply than I ever have with anyone else. For those moments, we were more than just flesh.

We were beyond the reach of any gods.

I trace the curve of her shoulder barely touching her, unwilling to disturb her peace.

Sleep has smoothed away the constant worry that has become her companion, restoring something of the woman I first saw in the marketplace.

My hand hovers over the mark on her chest – the twisted was-scepter that replaced her ankh birthmark. Even like that, I can feel the heat it gives off, like embers beneath her skin.

Her eyes open suddenly, green as lotus leaves and startlingly clear.

"Take me to the temple of Seth," she says without preamble, her voice carrying the same urgency as a royal decree. No greeting, no soft or shy words about our last intimacy. "The one in the desert where you first

brought me, remember?"

The request strikes me like a physical blow.

"Why would you want to go there?" I ask carefully, my hand finally settling on her shoulder, thumb brushing across her collarbone. "After everything that's happened?"

She sits up, the sheet falling away to reveal the loving marks of my devotion still visible on her neck, her breasts, all over her beautiful body.

The contrast between these signs of passion and the coldness of her request unsettles me.

"I need to understand what's happening to me," she says, her voice softening as she reaches for my hand. "And it felt like there, I could finally find the answers."

Her fingers twine with mine, warm and alive.

I study her face intently, seeking any foreign presence behind those remarkable eyes. But I find only Neferet looking back at me – determined, afraid, but wholly herself in this moment.

The fragment of Osiris stirs within my chest, responding to something unspoken between us. A warning? A recognition? I cannot tell.

"Please," she adds, her thumb tracing circles against my palm. "While I'm still myself. While I can still choose."

How can I deny her this?

After everything she has endured, everything she has sacrificed, how can I refuse her the chance to understand the divine curse that threatens to consume her?

"We'll leave at midday," I say finally, bringing her hand to my lips.

* * *

The temple rises from the sand like the spine of some ancient, half-buried beast. Columns carved with forgotten symbols stand tall under the sky, their bright paint now faded and barely visible.

This is Seth's forgotten shrine, abandoned centuries ago when his worship fell from favor, when his name became synonymous with evil instead of power.

I dismiss our minimal escort at the perimeter with a sharp gesture.

"We will return before sunset," I tell the captain, my tone brooking no argument. "Wait here."

Neferet walks slightly ahead of me, her light linen dress billowing in the desert wind, her unbound hair catching copper highlights in the afternoon sun.

From behind, she could be any priestess approaching a sacred site. But this is no ordinary temple visit.

The air itself seems to vibrate around us, charged with an energy that makes the fine hairs on my arms stand erect. The sand moves under our feet, not because of the wind, but because of something deeper.

As if the earth itself knows we're coming.

"This is where we sat," she says, pointing to a spot near the ruined altar. "When we watched the sunrise."

I nod, the memory vivid despite the months that have passed. "You said it was the most beautiful thing you'd ever seen."

A flicker of a smile crosses her face – a glimpse of the woman who existed before Seth's mark, before the ritual that changed everything.

She moves forward with unexpected confidence, her fingers tracing the weathered hieroglyphs that adorn the altar with the familiarity of a scribe reading his own handwriting.

Something cold settles in my stomach as I watch her.

She has never been here before except for that one night with me. She cannot read these particular ancient scripts – they predate the conventional writing taught even to high priestesses.

Yet her fingers move across them with understanding, with recognition.

The tension in the air thickens, becoming almost unbearable. The fragment of Osiris pulses within me, responding to something unseen, something powerful.

Suddenly, Neferet gasps. Her body doubles over as if struck, her knees hitting the stone floor with a sound that echoes through the empty temple and a scream tears from her throat.

It was raw, agonized, not entirely human.

I rush to her side, gathering her trembling form in my arms. Her skin burns like fire beneath my touch, her body convulsing with some invisible torment.

"Neferet," I call, my voice commanding yet desperate. "Come back to me. Fight this."

When she raises her head, everything within me goes still.

Her eyes glow crimson, like embers in the heart of a forge, like blood spilled on sacred stone. Her face – my Neferet's beautiful, beloved face –

spilled on sacred stone. Her face – my Neferet's beautiful, beloved face – contorts into a smile I have never seen her wear.

Cruel, ancient and knowing.

"At last," says a voice that is not hers. It was deeper, resonant with power that predates the pyramids themselves. *"The perfect venue for our proper introduction."*

I tighten my grip on her shoulders, though I know the gesture is futile. Still, I cannot bring myself to release her, to surrender her body to this entity that has no right to it.

"Who are you?" I demand, though I already know the answer.

Hatred makes my voice hard, makes the fragment of Osiris pulse violently within my chest.

The thing wearing Neferet's face laughs – a harsh sound like grinding stones or desert winds howling as it strips flesh from bone.

"I am the son of Geb and Nut," it answers with Neferet's mouth, the foreign voice resonating through the temple. *"A patron of the eleventh nome of Upper Egypt. The lord of the desert, foreign lands, eclipses and earthquakes, master of storms, disorder and warfare."*

Her head tilts at an impossible angle, the smile widening until it seems her face might split from its force.

"But you, young Pharaoh," the god continues, *"can call me Seth."*

End *of* The Chapter