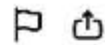




## Chapter 75



[POV Neferet]

I awaken in darkness, my mind fractured like a woman drowning, struggling toward the surface. Sensations return before thought, the soft linen against my skin, the faint fragrance of sacred oils and lotus blossoms filling the air.

Though my eyes remain closed, I know I am in Amen's chambers, I can feel it. The mingled scents of myrrh and cedarwood on his belongings are as familiar to me as my own heartbeat.

My body feels impossibly heavy, limbs weighted as if the stones of a temple rest upon them. Each breath requires deliberate effort, my chest rising and falling with painful slowness.

I have known illness before, but this... this feels like death narrowly averted, like returning from the threshold of Duat itself.

When I finally gather strength to lift my eyelids, the effort monumental as raising an obelisk, I find Amen beside me.

He sits motionless as a temple statue, his fingers entwined with mine, his expression carved with exhaustion and sorrow. Dark shadows hang beneath his eyes, his hair unbound and disheveled as I've rarely seen it.

Even his royal collar sits askew against his collarbone.

"How long?" The question emerges as barely more than breath, my voice rough as desert sand, unfamiliar to my own ears.

Amen's head snaps up, relief washing over his face like the Nile's first flood waters over parched earth.

"Nearly two days," he answers, his thumb tracing circles against my palm.

Two days lost to darkness. Two days surrendered to the void.

He helps me sit, one arm supporting my back while the other brings a golden cup to my parched lips. The water tastes impossibly sweet, cool rivulets escaping to trace patterns down my neck.

As I drink, flashes of memory return – disjointed images that refuse to form a coherent whole.

The temple of Seth rising from desert sands. Stone beneath my fingertips, hieroglyphs familiar yet unknown. Pain erupting from my chest, radiating outward like fire.

Then... nothing. A vast emptiness where recollection should be.

"What happened?" I ask, dreading the answer yet needing it as desperately as breath. "At the temple. I remember going there, and then..."

Amen's expression darkens, shadows gathering in the hollows of his face. His hand trembles slightly against mine, the only visible crack in his carefully maintained composure.

"Seth took control," he says finally, each word measured, careful. "He spoke through you."

The simple statement lands with the devastating weight of temple stones.

My free hand rises instinctively to my chest, fingers splaying over the twisted birthmark that was once Isis's ankh, now Seth's was-scepter.

"What did he say?" I whisper.

Amen's reluctance is palpable, hanging between us like incense smoke. But he does not shield me from truth – not with everything that happens right now.

"He revealed that he has been possessing you rather than blessing you," he begins, his voice steady despite the pain evident in his eyes.

"He targeted you specifically because you already carried Isis's mark, creating divine pathways he could exploit."

Each revelation strikes like a physical blow, confirming suspicions I have harbored but could never fully articulate. But it is his next words that shatter what remains of my composure.

"Seth entered your soul that night at his temple," Amen continues, "when I brought you there..."

Understanding dawns with terrible clarity.

The mysterious connection I've felt to that place, the half-remembered dreams of crimson eyes watching me from shadows, the subtle changes that began afterwards – all of it falls into place like the final piece of a temple fresco.

My face crumples, grief overwhelming me like flood waters breaching a dam. "All this time... he was already inside me, wasn't he? From that very first night."

Amen nods grimly. "So it seems."

I close my eyes against this terrible knowledge.

All these weeks, I had believed Seth's possession began with the ritual, with the transformation of my birthmark. But in truth, he had already been there.

Watching, waiting, seeds of chaos planted long before they bloomed into visible corruption.

When I open my eyes again, I find Amen's composure has broken entirely.

His head is bowed, shoulders slumped beneath an invisible weight, his face a mask of shame so profound it transforms his features.

"I didn't know," he says, voice cracking. "I swear to you, Neferet, I had no idea what that place truly was, what it would do to you... I thought it was just an abandoned temple, a beautiful place to watch the sunrise together."

His fingers tighten around mine with bruising intensity.

"This is my fault. All of it. I delivered you right into his hands."

The raw anguish in his voice stirs something deep inside me, not the foreign presence of Seth but something more basic and real. Despite everything, I cannot bear to see him suffer like this and I won't let him carry blame meant for forces beyond mortal understanding.

I reach out with trembling fingers to touch his face, lifting his chin until our eyes meet. His skin feels unnaturally warm beneath my touch, as though fever burns through him.

"You couldn't have known..." I whisper. "Neither of us could."

"I should have," he insists, self-loathing evident in every syllable. "I am Pharaoh, keeper of divine knowledge. I carry Osiris's fragment. I should have sensed Seth's presence there..."

"And I am... was... a priestess of Isis. Or rather, supposed to become one." I counter. "If anyone should have sensed the danger, it was me."

Watching, waiting, seeds of chaos planted long before they bloomed into visible corruption.

When I open my eyes again, I find Amen's composure has broken entirely.

His head is bowed, shoulders slumped beneath an invisible weight, his face a mask of shame so profound it transforms his features.

"I didn't know," he says, voice cracking. "I swear to you, Neferet, I had no idea what that place truly was, what it would do to you... I thought it was just an abandoned temple, a beautiful place to watch the sunrise together."

His fingers tighten around mine with bruising intensity.

"This is my fault. All of it. I delivered you right into his hands."

The raw anguish in his voice stirs something deep inside me, not the foreign presence of Seth but something more basic and real. Despite everything, I cannot bear to see him suffer like this and I won't let him carry blame meant for forces beyond mortal understanding.

I reach out with trembling fingers to touch his face, lifting his chin until our eyes meet. His skin feels unnaturally warm beneath my touch, as though fever burns through him.

"You couldn't have known..." I whisper. "Neither of us could."

"I should have," he insists, self-loathing evident in every syllable. "I am Pharaoh, keeper of divine knowledge. I carry Osiris's fragment. I should have sensed Seth's presence there..."

"And I am... was... a priestess of Isis. Or rather, supposed to become one." I counter. "If anyone should have sensed the danger, it was me."

The irony does not escape either of us that we, two vessels touched by god's power, were blind to the trap closing around us.

Perhaps that was Seth's greatest victory – using our love and human weakness to bypass our divine protections.

For a long moment, we simply look at each other, united in our grief and guilt, in the knowledge that we have been but pieces on a senet board, moved by immortal hands toward an end game we're only beginning to comprehend.

Amen takes my face in his hands, touch is firm and sure despite the uncertainty in his eyes.

"I swear to you," he says, each word weighted with the authority of Pharaoh, "by everything I am, by every power I possess, I will find a way to free you from him. No matter what."

I smile sadly, not entirely convinced but touched by his devotion. His love for me burns with the intensity of Ra's noon chariot, unwavering despite all we have suffered.

It is beautiful. It is terrible. It may destroy us both.

"What if there is no way?" I ask softly, giving voice to the fear that has haunted me since I first felt Seth's presence stirring within me. "What if this possession is permanent? What if I am already lost?"

Amen leans forward, pressing his forehead against mine, his breath warm against my lips.

"Then we are lost together," he whispers. "For I will not abandon you. Not to Seth, not to fate, not to the gods themselves."

**End**