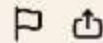




Chapter 81



[POV Neferet]

I watch the sun sink beneath the horizon, painting the sky in bloody hues that reflect upon the Nile like a portent. Shadows stretch across my chamber floor, elongating into grotesque shapes that seem to mock my solitude.

The evening air should carry the scent of lotus blossoms and night jasmine, but my senses detect only the acrid tang of ash and decay – scents that exist not in the physical world, but in the corrupted landscape of my mind.

He has grown stronger today. I felt his presence swelling within me after what happened with Werel.

Her terrified eyes. Her broken body as I cast her aside like discarded pottery. The memory brings bile to my throat.

That wasn't me.

But it was *my* hands that struck her. *My* voice that uttered those cruel words. And with each passing hour, the distinction between *his* will and *mine* blurs further, like kohl smudged by tears.

Seth's whispers have become a constant chorus, no longer confined to dreams or moments of weakness. They reverberate inside my skull, a persistent hum beneath my thoughts.

'You're mine now, sweet lotus.'

I close my eyes, gathering what remains of my strength to push back

against his presence. The effort leaves me gasping, a sheen of cold sweat coating my skin.

These battles grow more exhausting each time, and I am being steadily forced into smaller corners of my own consciousness.

The door creaks open, interrupting my struggle. A young servant girl – not Werel's replacement, but another whose name I cannot recall – enters with my evening meal.

Her hands tremble so violently that the wine sloshes over the rim of the goblet, staining the alabaster tray with crimson droplets.

"You can set it there," I manage, my voice hoarse.

She does not look at me directly, keeping her gaze fixed on the floor as she places the tray on the low table. I catch her glancing at my fingers – checking for signs of Seth's dark magic, no doubt.

The moment the tray touches the surface, she retreats, backing toward the door with the hurried steps of prey escaping a predator's den.

The fear in her eyes cuts deeper than any blade.

Not long ago, I was respected, even appreciated. Now I am a thing to be feared – a corrupted vessel for an ancient evil.

I stare at the untouched food, the aroma of roasted duck and honeyed figs failing to stir my appetite.

What use is sustenance when my very self is being consumed from within?

"Your body still requires nourishment, even if your spirit wanes."

The voice, both inside my head and audibly in the chamber, sends a chill

down my spine. Across the table, the chair that stood empty moments before now holds *his* form.

Seth appears more solid than in previous visitations.

No longer a wraith-like apparition or dream fragment, he sits across from me with all the presence of flesh and bone. The wooden chair creaks beneath his weight as he leans forward, crimson eyes studying me with the detached curiosity of a physician examining a terminal patient.

His dark red hair falls past broad shoulders, framing a face both beautiful and terrible in its perfection.

"Why continue this pointless struggle?" he asks, one elegant finger tracing patterns on the table's surface. *"You cannot win. You already know this."*

I refuse to meet his gaze, focusing instead on the fruit knife beside my plate. "As long as I draw breath, I will fight you."

His laughter resonates through the chamber, vibrating in my bones. It sounds like breaking glass and crumbling stone, like destruction made audible.

"Admirable, but futile," he says, amusement dripping from each syllable. *"Soon, you won't draw breath at all. At least, not as Neferet anymore."*

He leans forward, his presence compelling my gaze until I am forced to look at him.

"I've been patient with you," he continues. *"I could have taken complete control months ago, but I allowed you these moments of autonomy. Do you know why?"*

The silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken horrors.

"Watching you and your young Pharaoh struggle has been... quite entertaining."

His smile is a cruel slash across perfect features.

"Those desperate attempts of yours to help him that in fact were ensuring his destruction, I've already told you about. His determination to save you, blind to the fact that every moment in each other's arms only weakens him further."

Seth raises one hand, elegant fingers tracing symbols in the air. The space between us shimmers, reality folding back upon itself to reveal visions that tear at my soul.

Thebes burns beneath a blood-red sky. Palace walls crumble as shadowy figures stalk through streets littered with corpses. People flee in terror, their screams a discordant symphony beneath the crackle of flames.

And everywhere – death. Indiscriminate, merciless, absolute.

"While chaos reigns," Seth whispers, his voice caressing each terrible image, "you will confront your precious Amen. And with your single touch, I will consume what remains of Osiris's fragment within him."

Horror washes over me, cold and absolute. The pieces align with devastating clarity.

"This was never just about defeating Osiris, is it?" I whisper, my voice a fragile thing in the face of such malevolence. "You want to destroy Egypt itself."

Seth's smile is terrible to behold – ancient and patient as the desert itself.

"Egypt rejected me," he says, millennia of rage burning in his crimson

gaze. *"Turned me from protector to villain, from respected god to filthy demon. Now they will learn the cost of such betrayal."*

The vision fades, reality reasserting itself in its place.

Seth's physical manifestation begins to dissolve, his form becoming translucent, then ghostly, as he returns to his dwelling place within my consciousness.

But before he vanishes completely, he leaves me with one final, devastating truth:

"Your love for Amen was never an accident, Neferet." His voice is tender now, almost pitying. "I orchestrated your meeting, ensured your paths would cross. Every 'chance' encounter was my design. Even your precious feelings were manipulated – intensified by my influence to create the perfect conduit between vessels."

My world shatters, fragments of memory rearranging themselves into a pattern I can no longer deny. The market, the temple, the bathing pool – all carefully arranged stages of what I thought was the beginning of my own story.

Even our love, the one pure thing I believed was truly mine, had been Seth's creation all along.

Tears stream down my face, hot and bitter as desert salt.

What remains to fight for if everything I cherished was merely an illusion?

The last walls of my resistance begin to crumble, the foundations of my will eroded by this final betrayal. In this moment of absolute despair, Seth surges forward within my consciousness.

Territory I no longer has the strength to defend falls to him, swallowed

The last walls of my resistance begin to crumble, the foundations of my will eroded by this final betrayal. In this moment of absolute despair, Seth surges forward within my consciousness.

Territory I no longer has the strength to defend falls to him, swallowed by the expanding darkness of his presence.

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

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Comments

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Gifts

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