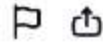




Chapter 89



The library of the Golden House had become a second battlefield.

By day and night, I poured over ancient scrolls, clay tablets, brittle parchments smelling of dust and centuries.

The greatest minds of Egypt assembled around me; priests of Thoth, scribes of Anubis, priestesses of Isis, all offering fragments of hope pieced together from myths and forbidden rites.

"The connection must be severed completely," rasped the blind priest of Thoth, his fingers tracing the cracked ink of a decaying papyrus.

His milky eyes turned toward me, though he could not see the growing despair etched on my face.

"The god has tasted her life force. He will not relinquish such a perfect vessel willingly."

Another priestess, veiled in blue linen embroidered with silver symbols of Isis, suggested ritual purification.

Other proposed amulets, ivory talismans carved with binding spells and prayers older than the pyramids themselves.

But each answer came with a silent admission: *temporary*.

None promised a permanent severance. None assured that Neferet would emerge whole.

None guaranteed her survival.

Frustration gnawed at me like rats on a granary.

The pile of rejected scrolls grew until it filled an entire table, and still I searched – bleary-eyed, unslept, sustained only by grim determination and the flickering oil lamps guttering in their stands.

It was a scholar from Alexandria. A thin, reed-like man with skin parched from desert winds, who finally brought me something different.

He approached hesitantly, clutching a narrow scroll wrapped in seals marked with Anubis's sacred jackal.

"The rites of Separation," he whispered, reverently unrolling the fragile document between us. "Practiced only when a mortal's soul and a divine force entwined too deeply."

I read quickly, each hieroglyph gouging deeper into my soul.

Painful ceremonies. Blood offerings not just from the possessed, but from another. The one who loved them most, willing to pay the gods' price for release.

"The bond between Seth and Lady Neferet *can* be broken," the scholar said, bowing low. "But the price is high. Blood must answer blood. And the ritual may claim either the vessel's life... or the one who offers love without condition."

I stared down at the faded ink, my throat tightening.

A choice with no victory. Only survival or sacrifice.

"Whatever the cost," I said hoarsely, my hand tightening around the Osiris amulet resting over my chest, "I will pay it."

But when I returned to Neferet's chambers that evening, I said nothing of what I had learned.

She needed strength, not dread.

Hope, not a death sentence whispered between kisses.

Instead, I sat beside her bed, my hand curled protectively around hers, watching her drift in and out of shallow sleep as twilight draped Thebes in copper and indigo hues.

Her breathing deepened. Her lashes fluttered. And then, at last, her beautiful green eyes opened.

"You look troubled," she murmured, a gentle touch tracing the deep furrow between my brows.

Her fingers, delicate but strong, smoothed the lines of my weariness with a tenderness that nearly broke me.

"Just tired," I lied, forcing a faint smile. "How do you feel?"

"Stronger today." She pushed back the covers and sat up, her white linen shift slipping over sun-kissed skin. "I think... strong enough to finally leave this bed."

Warily, I helped her stand, my arms braced for collapse.

She wobbled but did not fall. Instead, she leaned into my chest for support, breathing in deeply, like someone tasting the world anew.

Together, step by slow step, we walked to the balcony.

The air was fragrant with night-blooming lotus. The palace gardens stretched below us, bathed in golden firelight. Beyond them, the Nile shimmered like molten silver.

"I've missed this," Neferet whispered, her voice barely carried on the breeze. "Simple moments. Just... being."

I wrapped my arms around her from behind, resting my chin lightly on

her shoulder, breathing her in, grounding myself in her warmth.

For a moment, there was no Seth. No Duat. No looming doom.

Only us.

"Do you remember," she said after a pause, a smile playing in her voice, "the first time we stood here together?"

I laughed low in my throat. "I remember you practically jumped when I approached."

"I was terrified," she admitted, her cheeks pinkening even in the fading light. "The mighty Pharaoh, living god of Egypt, and I... only a simple new concubine."

"Not so simple," I corrected gently, my thumb brushing slow, deliberate circles against her palm.

She tilted her head at me, a spark lighting her green eyes, the same stubborn fire that had first caught my attention all those moons ago.

"I remember," she said, "how skeptical you were of our priestesses abilities and magic. You asked if I read palms like some performer hustling coins in the market."

The flash of indignation that crossed her face then, Gods, it was exactly as it had been.

Pride, tempered by wounded dignity. She was always too proud to be diminished, even by Pharaoh.

"And you told me," she countered, voice warm with laughter now, "that you were not common fortune-tellers."

I could still see it – the way she'd squared her shoulders, the fierce

passion that ignited her every word. Even then, I'd admired the way she refused to cower before kings and gods.

"Yes, I recall that," I murmured, not able to hide my amusement. "But then you showed me what exactly your magic is capable of. That was... impressive."

Her smile widened with the memory. Playful. Wicked. Tender.

"You didn't expect me to put your finger into my mouth, did you?" she teased, her voice low and coaxing.

My body remembered before my mind could catch up.

The jolt of heat that had struck me when her soft lips closed around my fingertip. The scrape of her teeth. The way the air between us had thickened instantly with something far too powerful to name.

I had barely contained the urge to claim her then and there.

"You were so eager to fetch that ornate Hittite sword afterward," she continued, laughing softly. "You practically leapt across the balcony to retrieve it, like a boy trying to impress his first love."

I laughed too, because it was true.

"I had already fallen," I admitted quietly.

The sword had been actually an excuse to move. To do something else with my hands before I lost all semblance of royal composure and show exactly what I've wanted to do with her.

Her eyes softened at my words, the teasing fading into something luminous and reverent.

"That was the first time," she whispered, "someone made me feel

desired."

"Desired, indeed," I said, brushing my thumb across her lower lip, mimicking the moment burned into my soul. "Especially when you told me your first kiss belonged to me."

She shivered at my touch, her body instinctively leaning closer.

"You seemed very pleased with that admission," she teased again, but her voice trembled slightly with the weight of the memory.

"I was," I answered simply. "Everything about you intrigued me."

Because it was the truth.

Everything about her, from her pride to her innocence and her courage, had called to something within me that no title, no divine blessing, no throne had ever reached.

Neferet reached up, her fingers cool against my fevered skin, tracing the lines of my face with infinite tenderness.

"Dance with me?" she asked suddenly, the words almost breaking with urgency.

"Here? Now?" I asked, startled by the aching vulnerability in her tone.

"Especially here. Especially now."

There was a desperation hidden beneath her smile – an unspoken plea I felt rather than heard.

"While I'm still myself. While we still can."

End *of*