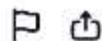




Chapter 90



The days slipped by like pearls on a string.

Beautiful and luminous, but each one brings us closer to the inevitable fraying.

Despite the shadow that loomed over us, Neferet's laughter returned little by little, like the cautious unfolding of a lotus at dawn.

Each morning, we wandered through the palace gardens hand-in-hand, her steps growing stronger as her spirit rekindled itself.

Today, she kneels beside the pool's edge, her fingers trailing in the cool water as Apep – her small black hound – bounds through the carefully tended flower beds with the boundless energy of youth.

The puppy has grown considerably since I first placed him in her arms, his sleek coat gleaming like polished obsidian in the afternoon sun.

"Apep, no!" she laughs, rising to chase him away from a particularly prized bed of blue lotus blossoms. "Those are sacred to Isis, you little demon."

The sound of her unguarded joy strikes something deep within my chest.

Here, in this moment of perfect simplicity, she is entirely herself – not a vessel for divine power, not a weapon in the gods' eternal war, but simply Neferet.

The woman who captured my heart in a crowded marketplace, who challenged me with her intelligence.

The woman who loved me despite the burden of divinity I carry.

She catches Apep mid-leap, gathering him into her arms as he wriggles and attempts to lick her face. Her head tilts back with delighted laughter, the sound echoing off the garden walls like temple bells.

The afternoon light catches the silver threads in her black hair, transforming them into The Nile water under the moonlight.

Something shifts inside me – a resolution forming with crystalline clarity.

As if the gods themselves have whispered their approval.

"Someone say dogs judge character better than men," I observe, settling onto the marble bench beside the fountain. "Apep chose you from the moment we met."

She turns toward me, still cradling the squirming puppy, her eyes bright with mirth. "Oh, did he? And what does that say about my character?"

"That you're worthy of unconditional loyalty," I reply, my voice carrying weight she doesn't yet recognize. "That you inspire devotion without demanding it."

Something in my tone makes her pause.

She sets Apep down, and he immediately bounds away toward a butterfly that has the audacity to land on his favorite stick.

Her attention, however, remains fixed on me, head tilted with curiosity.

"You're being unusually philosophical today," she says, settling beside me on the bench. "Are you—"

"Marry me."

The words emerge without preamble, cutting through her question like a

blade through silk. She freezes, her lips parted around whatever she had been about to say, her green eyes widening with shock.

"What did you say?"

"Marry me," I repeat, turning to face her fully. "I want you to be my queen. My equal in all things."

She stares at me as if I've suddenly sprouted wings, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

"Amen, you can't be serious. I'm not... I was possessed by Seth. I murdered innocent people. The court would never—"

"The court will accept what I decree," I interrupt, reaching for her hands.

They tremble within my grasp, warm and alive and entirely mortal.

"And I decree that you are the woman I choose to stand beside me for whatever time the gods grant us."

Tears gather in her eyes, threatening to spill. "You don't understand what you're asking. The political ramifications—"

"I understand perfectly." I lift one hand to cup her face, my thumb brushing away a tear that has escaped. "I understand that I have loved you since the moment I saw you, long before I knew your name or your power. I understand that every breath I take is sweeter because you exist. And I understand that if we face an uncertain future, I want to face it with you as my wife."

Her composure crumbles entirely. Tears stream down her cheeks as she covers my hand with both of hers, pressing it more firmly against her face.

"Yes," she whispers, her voice breaking on the word. "Yes, of course, yes."

The relief that floods through me is overwhelming. I pull her into my arms, crushing her against my chest as if I can somehow absorb her into myself.

Make her the main part of my very soul.

She clings to me with equal desperation, her tears soaking through my tunic.

"I love you," I murmured against her hair. "I love you beyond reason, beyond duty, beyond the demands of gods and kingdoms."

She pulls back just enough to meet my eyes, her face radiant despite the tears. "And I love you. More than my own life, more than my own soul."

The space between us disappears.

Our lips meet in a kiss that tastes of salt and promise, of joy and desperate need. She responds with fierce hunger, her hands fisting in my hair as I deepen the kiss, pouring all of longing and fear and hope into the connection between us.

My hands roam her back, pulling her closer until there's no space left between us.

She makes a soft sound against my mouth that sends fire racing through my veins, her body molding to mine as if we were crafted by the gods to fit together perfectly.

"My queen," I breathe against her lips, and she gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders.

"My king," she whispers back, and the word undoes me completely.

I'm reaching for the ties of her dress when hurried footsteps and frantic voices echoed across the garden stones.

We break apart, breathless and flushed, as a palace guard approaches with barely concealed urgency.

"Forgive the intrusion, Your Majesty," he says, his gaze carefully fixed on a point somewhere above our heads. "There is a request for your immediate presence in the council chamber. There's been... a development."

My stomach clenched, a cold dread settling deep in my bones.

Yet every fiber of my being rebels against leaving this moment – this perfect instant where nothing exists but Neferet's tear-bright eyes and the promise we've just made.

My hands frame her face, thumbs tracing the delicate arch of her cheekbones as if I can memorize her through touch alone.

"Whatever this crisis is, I'll handle it quickly and return to you."

She nods, but I can see the shadow of old fears creeping back into her gaze – the haunted look of someone who has learned that happiness is often the prelude to catastrophe.

I force myself to step back, to turn away from the woman who has just agreed to share my throne, my life, my uncertain future.

The last thing I see, before the garden walls swallow her from view, is Neferet settling back onto the marble bench, Apep bounding toward her with a stick clutched in his jaws.

The picture of domestic tranquility that I pray we'll have the chance to build together.

build together.

* * *

Maps lay unfurled across the cedar table, weighed down with bronze tokens marking the sightings.

"They're not advancing directly toward us," my commander observed grimly, tracing a path with his scarred fingertip. "They're moving parallel to the Nile."

It was wrong. Conquest would drive them straight to Thebes. This... this was something worse.

A gathering.

I saw it all at once, the way a falcon sees the desert from the sky, the circular pattern of their movement.

The slow, inexorable closing of the noose.

"They're returning to their master..." I said, the words tasting like ashes on my tongue.

His face, already wrinkled by time, seemed to fold deeper in on itself as he began to explain.

"The creatures were not destroyed at Sobek's temple... they only scattered," An old priest of Anubis said.

His face, already wrinkled by time, seemed to fold deeper in on itself as he added, "They are extensions of Seth's will. Where he remains, they are drawn."

My blood ran cold.

As night fell, I returned to my and Neferet's chambers.

She stood on the balcony, her white sleeping gown billowing like a ghostly banner in the cool desert breeze.

She didn't turn at my approach, her gaze fixed on the horizon where faint plumes of dust rose like the breath of approaching doom.

"I can feel them," she said quietly, her voice stripped of all pretense. "They pull at something inside me... like threads being gathered."

I saw her hands clutching at her chest, her slender fingers pressing desperately as if she could physically hold something within her ribcage.

As if she could refuse the summons tugging at her soul.

Slowly, she turned.

Her eyes – those eyes I knew as well as my own – flickered with a flash of crimson before clearing into deep, steady green once more.

The sight sent a blade of ice through my spine. The brief flash confirmed what I feared most: Seth's hold was not broken.

Only weakened.

Without hesitation, I crossed the balcony and pulled her into my arms.

She came willingly, her body trembling despite the outward calm she projected. Her face burrowed into my chest, seeking whatever comfort my battered soul could offer.

Over her shoulder, I watched the desert beyond the city walls. Dust clouds grew nearer by the hour.

They were coming. And the real battle had only just begun.

End of