



Chapter 12



Back in my chambers, my hands trembled as I changed into the clothes Amen had arranged.

The garments are plain—linen dyed in soft ochre and faded blue, nothing like the luxurious silks and gold-threaded robes of the harem.

"Where did these come from?" I ask, lifting the tunic, noting how it lacks the insignia of nobility.

"I had them prepared," he says simply, already stripping away his own layers of finery.

I turn quickly, heat rising to my cheeks, but not before catching the sight of bare skin as his robe slips from his shoulders.

Goddesses.

I force my hands to steady as I remove my own dress, letting the light material pool at my feet. The simpler tunic feels foreign against my skin, as though with it, I am shedding something more than just clothing.

"Perfect," Amen said from behind me. I turned to find him transformed as well, his royal regalia replaced by the clothes of a common merchant.

"You look..." He pauses, a smirk playing at his lips. "Very different without the silks and jewels."

I lift my chin. "As do you, Pharaoh."

His smirk deepens, but he says nothing.

"How often do you do this?" I asked, watching him adjust his shawl to partially cover his face. "Slip away from being Pharaoh?"

His smile held a touch of sadness. "Not as often as I'd like. The crown is heavy, Neferet. Sometimes I need to remember what it feels like to be just... me."

Then he moves toward the window, unlatching the shutters with a practiced hand.

Cool night air rushes in, carrying the scent of the city—the spice of incense, the distant laughter of merchants still finishing their work, the ever-present whisper of the Nile.

I step forward, hesitating only once before accepting the hand he offers.

And then we are gone, slipping into the night like figures from a dream.

The night air hit my face like freedom as we emerged into the city. Thebes was different after dark - mysterious and alive in ways I'd never noticed before.

"Where are we going?" I whispered as Amen led me through the winding streets.

"First," he said, his eyes glinting with something between mischief and reverence, "I thought you might want to visit an old friend."

My breath caught as we rounded a corner and the Temple of Isis rose before us, silver in the moonlight. But instead of using the main entrance, Amen guided me to a small side door I'd never noticed in all my years of service.

"How did you-"

"I know every temple in Thebes," he said softly. "Every secret way in and out. It's part of being Pharaoh - though some passages I discovered long before taking the crown."

Inside, the temple was different at night. Shadows danced in corners where incense smoke usually curled, and the statue of Isis seemed more alive somehow, her stone eyes watching us with ancient wisdom.

I knelt before her, feeling tears prick at my eyes. "I've missed this," I whispered. "The peace here, the connection..."

Amen's hand settled on my shoulder, warm and steady. "She hasn't abandoned you, you know. Your gift proves that."

"Sometimes I wonder." I touched the ankh birthmark through my dress. "If this is truly her blessing, why does it feel so much like a curse?"

"Because the greatest gifts often come disguised as burdens." He knelt beside me, his presence both comforting and electric. "But I have something else to show you - something that might help you understand."

Outside again, I found two horses waiting in a shadowed alcove. Amen helped me mount before swinging up onto his own steed with practiced grace.

We rode into the desert, leaving the sleeping city behind. The moon painted the dunes silver, and the night air grew cooler as we traveled further from the Nile's embrace.

Just when I thought we must be lost, I saw it - dark shapes rising from the sand like the bones of some ancient beast.

"What is this place?" I asked as we dismounted. The abandoned temple before us felt old - older than any I'd seen before.

"The Temple of Seth," Amen said, his voice carrying a strange mix of reverence and sorrow. "Forgotten by most, feared by those who remember."

A chill ran down my spine despite the desert heat. "Seth? The betrayer?"

"The protector," Amen corrected, leading me inside. "Before he became the god of chaos, Seth was Ra's strongest defender. He stood at the prow of the sun god's boat each night, fighting off the serpent of darkness - Apep." His fingers traced faded hieroglyphs on the wall. "Until jealousy poisoned his heart, and he murdered his brother Osiris."

The story was familiar, but something in Amen's voice made it feel new. "You've been here before."

"Many times." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I discovered it as a child, when the weight of my destiny first began to show itself. Something about this place called to me - perhaps because I understood what it meant to be both blessed and cursed."

I watch him, the way his eyes soften as he speaks, the way his fingers linger against the ancient words.

For the first time, I see the boy beneath the Pharaoh.

"You loved these stories," I realized aloud. His lips curve, though there is something wistful in his expression.

"I did." He exhales, glancing at the horizon where the first hints of dawn begin to bloom. "I think... I have always feared that I am more like Seth than Osiris."

The admission stirs something deep within me. He turns, looking at me fully now.

"You asked me about the curse," he says softly. "Perhaps this is part of it. Perhaps I am not meant to be a ruler of peace, but of war. Perhaps I am destined for betrayal, as Seth."

I shake my head. "No."

His brow lifts.

"You are not Seth," I whisper fiercely. "You are not his mistakes. His fate does not have to be yours."

For a long moment, he says nothing. Then, with careful slowness, he reaches for me. His fingers brush my cheek, his thumb ghosting over my lips as if memorizing the shape of them.

"I would like to believe you, Neferet," he murmurs, his voice barely more than a breath.

"Then let me help you believe," I say.

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