



Chapter 78



[POV Amen]

It has been four days since Neferet revealed the truth. Four days of rapid deterioration that I cannot hide much longer.

Blood has stained three royal robes this morning alone. My servants whisper when they think I cannot hear and their concern hangs in the air like incense.

One of them, a young girl, dared to ask, "Your Majesty, should I fetch the physician again?"

I shook my head, my hands trembling too much to speak firmly.

"Not yet," I said, though even I doubted my words.

The tremors in my hands have grown so severe that I barely can sign decrees. Twice yesterday, during council meetings, darkness claimed me mid-sentence.

I remember the sharp voice of my advisor demanding, "Pharaoh, you must rest."

But I refused.

"Sleep is no refuge," I told him. "It is a battlefield where memories are not my own fight for control."

Three nights ago, Meritaten and I performed the stabilizing ritual once meant to steady Osiris's fragment.

Where once her connection to Nephthys provided temporary stability for

Osiris's fragment, this time it brought only searing pain that left us both gasping on the temple floor.

"This balance is broken," she whispered, her eyes wide with fear.

Now I stand before the polished bronze mirror, staring at a stranger.

My skin has turned ashen beneath its bronze, and shadows gather beneath my eyes. The royal insignia on my chest feels heavier than ever – Egypt's future pressing down on these frail shoulders.

Still, I straighten my spine and whisper to myself, "A Pharaoh cannot show weakness, no matter what."

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The training grounds shimmer with heat, the white limestone walls reflecting sunlight with blinding intensity.

Sweat gathers at my temples before I've even begun, salt collecting in the sacred scarab amulet resting against my collarbone.

I came here perhaps in a desperate attempt to maintain my physical strength and to clear my mind, but it seems that the heat of the sun above me might drain my life forces faster than any curse.

Heket already awaits me, her lithe form silhouetted against the cloudless sky as she executes a series of precise warm-up movements.

She moves through her forms with the fluid grace of a dancer, yet each movement carries lethal potential – a testament to the rigorous training that began in her father's household.

General Ahmose had recognized his daughter's natural gifts early, ensuring she received instruction from the finest weapons masters in his command.

When she arrived at the Golden House, ostensibly as one of my concubines, I suspected her true motives lay elsewhere.

The training sessions had been her suggestion, presented with the careful diplomacy of a general's daughter who understood the value of strategic patience. What she had not said, though we both understood it, was that she sought proximity – hoped that shared combat might kindle something more intimate between us.

Though she possessed the kind of striking beauty that made lesser men stumble over their words, I never felt anything beyond appreciation for her martial prowess.

"Perhaps, you should not be here, Your Majesty," she says without turning, her voice carrying easily across the empty courtyard. "You look like you belong in the House of Death, not the training grounds."

I ignored her assessment, selecting a pair of sai blades from the weapons rack.

Their weight feels wrong in my hands – too heavy, too awkward, though I have trained with them since childhood.

"The priests have found nothing in the archives," I say, rolling my shoulders to loosen muscles that feel increasingly foreign to my command. "No precedent for separating a god from his unwilling vessel without destroying the vessel itself."

Ileket moves into position across from me, her own blades glinting like serpent fangs in the harsh light.

She has shed her usual finery for a simple training tunic that reveals the lean muscle of her arms, the countless hours of martial discipline evident in every controlled movement.

"Perhaps," she suggests with dangerous softness, "because there is no solution that preserves both parties."

Before I can respond, she strikes – a swift, elegant assault that would have been child's play to parry a month ago.

Today, I barely deflect her blade, the impact sending painful vibrations up my arm.

The second blow finds its mark, her sai scoring a shallow cut across my shoulder. Blood blooms against my skin.

"Too slow," she notes, circling like a desert jackal around wounded prey. "*This woman* is killing you, and still you refuse to see it."

The wound throbs, but already I feel the familiar warmth of accelerated healing, Osiris's gift to his vessels. Yet the sensation is wrong, muted, as if the divine energy must travel great distances to reach me.

The cut closes sluggishly, taking minutes rather than moments.

Heket notices, her sharp eyes missing nothing. "Even your divine regeneration weakens," she observes, renewing her attack with methodical precision.

I block, counter, retreat – movements that should be fluid now disjointed and desperate. Her words sting more than her blades, precisely because they contain truth.

"And your precious Neferet?" Heket continues, each word punctuated by the clash of metal. "Have you even seen how she walks the corridors at night, speaking to shadows?"

Anger flares, hot and dangerous. "Enough," I warn, but she presses on, relentless as the desert sun.

"Everyone sees it except you! She drains you like the Nile during drought, takes everything and returns nothing but lies wrapped in those wide, innocent eyes—"

Something snaps inside me – a tether of restraint, perhaps, or the last barrier between rational thought and raw emotion.

The sai blades clatter to the ground as I lunge forward, fingers closing around Heket's throat before either of us registers the movement and her weapons falling from suddenly nerveless fingers.

Her eyes widened in genuine shock. This is not the controlled Pharaoh she knows. This is something else, something wilder, darker.

Then it happens.

Energy flows from her body into mine. Life force pouring through my fingertips, racing up my arms like floodwater through parched canals. Her skin pales beneath my grip, the vitality draining from her face as my own strength returning.

The tremors in my limbs fade. The pounding in my head quiets. For one glorious moment, I feel whole again. The sensation is intoxicating.

It's better than wine, better than any pleasure, better than power itself. It is life in its purest form.

And I want more.

Horror crashes through the euphoria as I realize what's happening. This is Seth's influence.

Somehow, he's transforming the Osiris fragment's nature, corrupting divine order into something that mirrors his own parasitic hunger.

I release Heket instantly, stumbling backward as if burned.

She collapses to her knees, one hand clutching her throat where livid marks already bloom against her skin. Her chest heaves with desperate breaths, her complexion ashen.

"What was that?" she demands, her voice ragged.

I stare at my hands in horror, feeling the stolen energy already beginning to dissipate. There is no answer I can give her, no explanation that wouldn't reveal too much about the divine battle being waged within my flesh.

Without a word, I turn and flee the training grounds. Behind me, I feel Heket's gaze on my back, sharp and unrelenting.

The divine fragment pulses within me, its rhythm subtly different now – no longer the steady heartbeat of Osiris's ordered power but something more erratic, more *hungry*.

As I stagger into an empty corridor, blood begins to trickle from my nose once more, spattering the polished floor in crimson constellations.

The temporary strength stolen from Heket evaporates, leaving me weaker than before, as if the brief resurgence only accelerated my decline.

The implications are too terrible to contemplate.

If Seth can alter Osiris's fragment within me, then the corruption spreading through my body threatens more than just my life.

I press my forehead against cool stone, leaving a smear of blood like an ominous hieroglyph on the sacred symbols carved there.

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The answer stands before me, clear and terrible as desert noon – Neferet and I cannot remain connected. Every moment in each other's presence strengthens Seth's hold, accelerates Osiris's decline.

To save Egypt, to preserve the divine order, I must send away the one person who makes my existence bearable.

To save Neferet, I must lose her.

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

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Comments

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Gifts

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