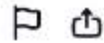




## Chapter 80



[POV Amen]

The royal council chamber feels hollow without its usual occupants.

I have dismissed my advisors, needing solitude as I review the architectural plans for the upcoming festival of Horus. Or rather, as I pretend to.

The papyrus before me remains largely unexamined, my thoughts circling endlessly around more pressing concerns – Neferet's increasing instability, my own deterioration, and the looming shadow of Seth's influence spreading through the palace like poisoned wine.

Werel's death three days ago marked a turning point.

The maid's broken body in the courtyard, Neferet's blood-stained hands, the witnesses who saw everything – these are not matters that can be hidden behind royal decree.

The whispers have become shouts, the fear has become certainty.

My beloved is no longer simply suspected of carrying darkness within her – she has become its instrument.

I dip my reed pen into the inkwell, watching black liquid cling to its tip before dropping back into the obsidian container. The tremor in my hand has worsened; I can no longer sign decrees without assistance.

Blood has dried in the corner of my eye where a vessel burst during this morning's council meeting. I did not acknowledge it then, and I do not wipe it away now.

Let it be a visible reminder of what is at stake.

A soft knock at the cedar doors draws my attention. Before I can respond, they swing open to reveal Meritaten, her slender form silhouetted against the corridor's flickering torchlight.

She glides into the chamber with the liquid grace that has marked her movements since childhood, her linen dress whispering against the polished floor.

"My Pharaoh," she says, bowing her head with practiced deference. "I came to inquire after your health."

The formal excuse hangs between us, transparent as glass.

We both know why she is here – to measure the extent of my decline, to gauge how much longer Egypt's divine king can maintain the façade of strength.

What she does not know is that I have been waiting for her.

"Join me," I say, gesturing to the cushioned seat across from mine. When she settles, I study her with new interest.

As a vessel for Nephthys's blessing, Meritaten possesses knowledge that might prove invaluable.

While our stabilizing rituals have long since ceased to be effective, her connection to the goddess of mourning, of endings and transitions, might offer insight I desperately need.

The silence stretches between us, comfortable as an old cloak. We have known each other since we were children playing in these same palace gardens, long before divine fragments and royal duties complicated our existence.

Perhaps this shared history is why I can speak directly now, without courtly evasions.

"Tell me about your connection to your goddess," I say, watching her reaction carefully.

The request is unusual and intimate, not something a Pharaoh typically asks of his concubines.

"Have you ever felt her presence more strongly in certain places? During certain rituals?"

Surprise flickers across her features, brief as desert lightning.

But there is something else there too – a flash of understanding, as if she has suspected all along that Neferet's condition and my illness are connected to something beyond mortal understanding.

"Nephthys speaks strongest in places of transition," she answers carefully, her fingers tracing the edge of her armrest. "Where life meets death."

She hesitates, her gaze turning inward as if consulting some inner wisdom.

When she speaks again, her voice carries the subtle resonance that indicates her goddess's influence flowing through her words.

"I've felt her most powerfully in the Chamber of Rebirth beneath the old temple of Osiris. The one where the waters of the Nile flow directly beneath the altar."

The information clicks into place in my mind like the final piece of a temple relief.

Of course. The Chamber of Rebirth. A sacred space designed for the rare instances when a pharaoh needed to renew his divine connection.

If any place in Egypt could serve as the setting for our desperate attempt to separate Seth from Neferet, it would be there – where the boundary between mortal and divine thins to transparency.

Where Osiris's power runs strongest through the lifeblood of Egypt itself.

I rise, moving to the window where the afternoon sun casts long shadows across the courtyard.

They do not know that their Pharaoh contemplates a ritual far more dangerous than any public ceremony.

"Thank you," I said quietly, my back still turned to Meritaten. "Your insight is... valuable."

I hear the rustle of linen as she stands and approaches me, stopping just beyond arm's reach.

The contrast is stark. Her unblemished beauty against my increasingly haggard appearance. Health beside decay.

"Whatever you're planning, Enhotep," she says quietly, her voice barely disturbing the chamber's stillness, "remember that divine power follows certain laws. Balance must be maintained. Something given for something taken."

Our eyes meet and I see knowledge there that she should not possess – wisdom beyond her years, beyond mortal understanding.

In this moment, it is not merely Meritaten who watches me, but Nephthys herself, the divine sister of Isis, aunt to Horus, wife to Seth before his fall into chaos.

before his fall into chaos.

She knows what I intend to do. Perhaps she has always known, from the moment Neferet entered the Golden House carrying Isis's mark upon her breast.

"I see," I reply, my voice steady despite the weight her warning adds to my already burdened shoulders.

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

Chapter 80



Comments

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Gifts

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