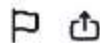




Chapter 85



The voices of my council fade to a distant drone, like insects buzzing at the edge of consciousness.

"...cannot possibly defend the eastern villages—"

"...must evacuate the temple districts first—"

"...Pharaoh should remain protected within the inner palace—"

"Enough." The word falls from my lips without force, yet slices through the chamber's chaos like a blade through papyrus.

Silence descends, immediate and absolute, as all eyes turn toward me.

"While we debate, Seth's army grows." I turn from the window, sunlight at my back casting my shadow long across the floor. "The chaos god works through Neferet, but he still remains vulnerable in mortal form."

The plan takes shape as I speak it aloud, born not of careful strategy but of instinct and the divine power that courses through my veins.

"I will not hide behind Thebes' walls while a god uses the woman I love as his vessel to bring war to my people."

Chief General Ahmose steps forward, his weathered face a map of battles won and comrades lost. The gray-streaked beard framing his jaw cannot disguise the concern etched into the lines around his mouth.

"My Pharaoh," he begins, voice steady despite the protest in his eyes, "with all respect, a frontal assault against a god is suicide. Our scouts report dozens of creatures already gathered at Sobek's temple, with more arriving daily."

I move to the map table, feeling the familiar texture of papyrus beneath

my fingertips as I trace the route to the abandoned temple.

The ink renders rivers and mountains in simplified form, but I see beyond these markers to the land itself – land that has sustained Egypt since time immemorial and now threatened by chaos incarnate.

"Not a frontal assault," I corrected him. "A targeted strike, with a small force of our most skilled warriors. While Seth builds his army, he remains focused on quantity rather than security."

I look up, meeting the uncertain gazes of my council. "He does not expect us to bring the battle to him."

Reluctance settles over the room, heavy and dense like incense smoke during temple ceremonies. I watch as understanding begins to flicker in their eyes, not acceptance, not yet, but the first hint of resignation.

They know me well enough to recognize when my mind is made up.

As the council disperses to prepare the selected force, I remain at the window, gazing toward the horizon.

The setting sun bleeds crimson across the sky, staining clouds the color of fresh-spilled blood.

An omen, perhaps. But for which side?

Hours later, I reviewed final preparations in my private chambers, mentally rehearsing each stage of our approach to Sobek's temple. Calculating how many warriors we might lose with each potential contingency.

A knock at the door interrupts my concentration.

"Enter," I called, expecting another report from my commanders.

Instead, Heket strides into the room with purposeful steps, carries herself with the unmistakable confidence of someone raised in the arts of war despite her official role as a concubine.

Her eyes, sharp and determined, meet mine without the customary deference others show.

"My Pharaoh, please let me join your expedition to Sobek's temple," she asks without preamble, her words direct as a spear thrust.

The request catches me off-guard, irritation flaring beneath my composed exterior.

"Who told you of our plans?" I demand, though I already suspect the answer.

"My father," she admits without hesitation, her posture unflinching. "He believes your mission is suicide, but he respects your right to choose Egypt's path." A hint of steel enters her voice. "I, however, believe I can help ensure it's not a one-way journey."

"This isn't your concern, Heket," I say, dismissal evident in my tone.

"Your father may have raised you with warrior's training, but he'll never permit you to join actual combat."

She steps closer, undaunted.

"I bear Sekhmet's blessing, if it needs to be reminded," she counters, revealing the lioness amulet partially hidden beneath her robes. "The goddess of warfare has marked me as her own since childhood. Against creatures of Duat, divine blessing may prove more valuable than conventional military experience."

The revelation gives me pause. Sekhmet's chosen are rare and formidable.

Yet doubt remains, shadowed by months spent watching Heket's barely hidden hatred for the woman I now strive to save.

"And what of Neferet?" I challenged her, my voice sharpening. "You've made your suspicions of her clear since she first arrived at court. How do I know your eagerness doesn't stem from a desire to eliminate her?"

Something flickers in Heket's eyes, an emotion I cannot quite identify, gone before I can name it.

"My personal feelings are irrelevant," she responds with careful control. "What matters is defeating Seth and protecting Egypt. If that means saving this little priestess in the process, so be it."

I turn away, annoyed by her presumption and the complications her presence would introduce.

"Your father has coddled you, Heket. Training in the palace courtyard isn't the same as facing creatures from the realm of the dead."

"My father," she replies with quiet intensity that draws my gaze back to her, "trained me precisely because he knew the day might come when Egypt needed every capable defender."

Her chin lifts slightly, a subtle challenge. "And even the greatest general cannot refuse when Pharaoh commands my presence on this mission."

I study her face, searching for weakness or uncertainty and finding none.

Despite my irritation, I cannot deny the strategic advantage her presence might offer.

"You understand we go to face Seth himself, wearing the body of someone I care deeply about," I say finally, my tone softening slightly.

The admission costs me something – a piece of pride, perhaps, or the facade of detachment I have tried to maintain in public discussions of Neferet.

"This isn't a border skirmish or palace intrigue. If you falter at a crucial moment—"

"I won't," she interrupts with absolute conviction. "Whatever happens, whatever we face, my loyalty is to Egypt and its Pharaoh, Your Majesty. Nothing else matters."

After a long moment of consideration, weighing the potential benefits against the risks, I nod once.

"Report to Commander Nakht at dawn. He'll provide you with appropriate armor and weapons."

"I have my own," she responds, inclining her head in acknowledgment before turning to leave.

"Heket," I call as she reaches the door.

She pauses, looking back over her shoulder, her profile sharp against the dimly lit corridor beyond.

"If your father objects, you'll answer to him, not me."

A genuine smile flashes across her face, the first I've seen from her I've ever seen.

"He won't object, my Pharaoh. He was the one who suggested I volunteer."

End *of*