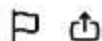




Chapter 86



When dawn breaks, twenty of Egypt's finest warriors accompany me – men and women who volunteered despite knowing the odds against their return. Copper light spills across the eastern desert as we march toward the crumbling Temple of Sobek.

Their faces are calm, showing quiet acceptance. They know the risks but move forward without fear.

Heket rides beside me, her posture steady, eyes fixed ahead. Though worry shadows her gaze, her loyalty is clear. She fights for Egypt now.

The temple looms ahead, broken columns like ribs, crumbling walls like torn skin, doorways yawning like hungry mouths. Ancient statues, worn smooth by time, watch us with blank faces.

We dismount, securing our horses behind rocks. The animals shift uneasily, sensing the temple's unnatural weight. The air feels thick, as if the world itself holds its breath.

Only the wind whispers through cracked stone. No birds fly, no insects buzz. Silence waits.

"She knows we're here," Heket whispers beside me, her voice carrying an undertone of satisfaction, as if this confrontation is precisely what she has been waiting for.

I notice her checking the blade at her hip, her fingers caressing the hilt with unusual familiarity. The gesture seems almost intimate, a warrior's touch for a trusted companion.

Another reminder that there is more to Heket than the concubine role

she has played at court.

"Remember our purpose," I say quietly, watching my warriors spread into formation with practiced efficiency. "We're here to free Neferet from Seth's control, not to—"

"Free her?" Heket interrupts, a bitter smile twisting her lips. Her voice drops lower, intended only for my ears. "I've watched that woman for months, My Pharaoh. I warned you she couldn't be trusted. This possession isn't a coincidence. Seth chose a vessel already corrupted."

She steps closer, the scent of hibiscus oil and leather armor mingling as she lowers her voice further.

"I've always known what she truly is. This merely confirms what I've suspected since she first entered your court." Her eyes gleam with the vindication of someone whose warnings were ignored. "Now we have the chance to end this threat permanently."

The vehemence in her tone catches me off guard. I open my mouth to respond, to speak of the woman I love who still fights Seth's control. But before I can, inhuman shrieks split the air.

The temple entrance darkens.

Creatures pour out, twisted things from temple warnings, not the waking world. The stench hits first, thick with decay and something older. My warriors flinch, then steady themselves.

The divine fragment within me pulses. It knows what approaches.

At their head stands Neferet.

Her beautiful robes have been replaced with black and crimson wraps that whip around her slender frame like shadows. Massive golden basaltes encircle her limbs, their surfaces overwritten with Seth's

symbols in dark pigment.

Even her hair streaks with crimson that catches the morning light like fresh-spilled blood.

The most disturbing thing is how she moves.

She no longer glides, she hunts. The grace of a priestess is gone, replaced by the precision of a seasoned fighter.

Twin khopesh blades spin in her hands, fluid and deadly, as if they're part of her now. Seth's centuries of battle experience flows through every step she takes. Her eyes burn red.

And she is coming straight for us

My warriors engage the creatures of Duat, their blessed weapons finding purchase in unholy flesh. Screams, both human and monstrous, fill the air as the battle erupts across the temple grounds.

Bronze flashes in the morning sun as my soldiers fight with the desperate courage of those defending not just their lives but their souls.

"At last!" Heket cries beside me, her voice rising above the chaos with almost ecstatic fervor.

Before I can react, she breaks formation, abandoning her protective position near me to charge directly toward Neferet.

Her staff remains sheathed at her back as she draws her blade instead, a weapon I have rarely seen her use despite knowing of her training.

"Your mask falls today, demon!" she shouts, her face transformed by hatred into something I barely recognize.

"Heket, no!" I call after her, recognizing the danger in her reckless

charge, but my voice is lost in the chaos of battle.

She either cannot hear or chooses not to listen, her focus entirely on Neferet as she cuts through lesser creatures with frightening efficiency.

I reach deep within myself, drawing upon the power granted by the fragment of Osiris.

Water answers my call, rising from hidden underground springs that have survived beneath the desert for centuries. It bursts through sand and stone in glistening arcs, forming barriers against the advancing horde.

The creatures hiss and recoil from the pure water, their Duat-born essence vulnerable to its cleansing properties.

Maintaining these defenses divides my attention from the greater danger unfolding before me, Heket's personal vendetta colliding with our mission.

I watch in horror as she closes distance with Neferet, her training evident in every step but her technique compromised by the emotional fury driving her forward.

Heket intercepts Neferet, blade meeting khopesh in a clash that sends sparks into the desert air. The metallic ring echoes across the battlefield, drawing the attention of both sides briefly before the chaos resumes.

"I've waited too long for this moment," Heket snarls, her normally composed demeanor replaced with raw hatred that contorts her features.

Her blade flashes in complicated patterns that speak of years of dedicated training beyond what even I had suspected.

For the briefest moment, confusion flickers across Neferet's face – recognition, perhaps, struggling against Seth's control.

A flash of green momentarily eclipses the crimson glow of her eyes.

My heart leaps at the sight, hope kindling that Neferet still fights within.

But the moment passes too quickly, replaced by cold determination as Seth reasserts dominance. The crimson glow returns, brighter and more malevolent than before.

"The fierce, forgotten concubine," Neferet responds, her dual-toned voice mocking as she parries Heket's next strike with effortless grace. *"Always watching, always suspicious, always... jealous."*

The blades dance between them, neither gaining advantage.

"You played your role properly, warrior girl. Your hatred sustained her, your jealousy gave her something to focus on besides her own suffering. To not mention my influence for long enough."

The words seem to strike Heket deeper than any physical blow could. She attacks more furiously, months of restrained suspicion exploding into combat.

Her military upbringing shows in every calculated movement, though her technique is increasingly compromised by emotional rage.

"He cast me aside for you!" she cries, each word punctuated by a strike that Neferet deflects with growing ease. "I was to be his queen until you bewitched him with your false devotion! He was blind to your nature, but I saw through you from the beginning!"

The revelation freezes me momentarily.

Heket's feelings toward me had always been complex, her loyalty and criticism equally fierce, but I had never suspected the depth of her attachment, or her resentment of Neferet.

With horrifying efficiency, Neferet's blade sweeps upward, finding the opening in Heket's emotional assault.

The khopesh cut Heket's head away from her shoulders in one fluid motion, a smooth arc of bronze followed by a spray of crimson.

Time slows as I watch her fall.

Her body crumples like discarded linen, blood soaking into the thirsty sand beneath her. Her head lands separately, the final expression frozen in a mask of hatred and vindication.

"No!" My anguished cry echoes across the battlefield, raw with disbelief.

The water constructs I've maintained falter, some dissolving completely as my concentration shatters.

Neferet turns to me, Heket's blood dripping from her blade in steady crimson droplets.

Her lovely face – the face I have kissed countless times, have watched in sleep, have held between my palms – twists into Seth's cruel smile of satisfaction.

The god's triumph shines through her eyes as she steps over Heket's corpse without a second glance, adjusting her grip on the bloodied khopesh.

"Your turn, lover," she taunts, advancing through the carnage between us with predatory grace.