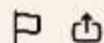




Chapter 91



I stood at the highest balcony of the palace, the sharp desert wind tugging at the hem of my cloak.

The horizon was no longer a smooth, golden line of sand. It boiled and churned with unnatural dust storms, a living wall of chaos heralding Seth's advancing army.

Not clouds, no rain would come to save us. Only death. Only ruin.

Below me, the Nile flowed sluggish and thick, the water tainted by some dark magic. It caught the dying sun's rays and shimmered blood-red.

Messengers came and went in hurried waves, delivering grim tidings: villages razed to their foundations. Crops shriveled overnight. Survivors babbling of monsters with jackal heads, serpentine torsos, and shrieks that froze the soul itself.

I absorbed each report in silence, the weight of Pharaohhood settling heavier on my shoulders with every new horror. Duty demanded I not falter, even as the world around me trembled.

Thebes' defenses were all that stood between Egypt and oblivion.

"Fortify the eastern wall," I commanded, tracing defense lines on the maps strewn across the council table. "Double the archers on the upper battlements. Secure every cistern and sacred well. We'll need every drop when the battle begins."

I dispatched couriers to outlying villages, ordering civilians to take shelter in stone temples, granaries, and palaces.

Structures that might endure when lesser homes crumbled beneath the

assault of Seth's unholy forces.

I instructed my priests to consecrate water in the name of Isis, Osiris, and Horus – the three gods Seth despised most.

Buckets, vats, and jars, carried to the walls as both weapon and blessing.

I worked without pause, without sleep, fueled only by grim determination. Yet even as I shaped the city's defenses like a sculptor with clay, my mind returned endlessly to one fragile soul within these walls.

Neferet.

Each time I glimpsed her through doorways or across the gardens, I saw the toll the approaching army exacted upon her.

She would stand very still, as if listening to a voice no one else could hear. Her hands would unconsciously clutch at her chest, fingers splayed protectively over the faint mark where Seth's influence once branded her flesh.

She startled at every harsh sound – a dropped pot, a slamming door – as if expecting at any moment to be overtaken again.

Each night, after the last council meeting adjourned and the final defensive preparations were reviewed, I returned to her side.

In our chambers, Neferet slept fitfully, tossing and murmuring against invisible nightmares.

I would draw her against my chest, cradling her like a child who had wandered too close to the fire. Shielding her with arms that could not protect her from the true enemy... the enemy within.

I kissed her hair, her temple, murmuring promises into the darkness.

Silent vows meant only for her and the gods who might still be listening.

I will free you. I will destroy Seth's claim on your soul. I will pay whatever price the ritual demands.

Even if that price was my life.

Especially if that price was my life.

For she had already given up so much. Her peace, her innocence, the very foundations of who she was just to protect me, to protect Egypt.

She had endured possession without yielding completely, defied a god with nothing but the stubborn light of her spirit.

I would not let that sacrifice be in vain.

Tonight, the city below us bristled with the signs of war.

Oil was heated in massive cauldrons. Archers practiced stringing their bows by torchlight. Priests daubed protection spells along the city gates, their prayers rising into the wind.

And still, the dust clouds on the horizon inched closer, the sky above them bruised and sullen. The beasts Seth commanded would be upon us within days, if not sooner.

Neferet stirred in her sleep beside me, a soft whimper escaping her lips. I reached for her instinctively, brushing a strand of hair from her damp forehead.

Even in sleep, her brow furrowed in distress.

"I'm here," I whispered against her temple. "Always."

Her hand, half-conscious, groped weakly for mine. I took it, pressing her trembling fingers against my chest so she could feel the steady beat of

trembling fingers against my chest so she could feel the steady beat of my heart.

She sighed then, some tension easing from her slender frame.

I lay awake long after she drifted back into uneasy dreams, staring up at the darkened canopy of our bed.

Beyond these walls, Egypt readied itself for its final defense.

Within these walls, I readied myself for a battle even more terrible – the fight for Neferet's very soul.

And this time, there could be no retreat.

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

Chapter 91



Comments

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Gifts

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