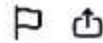




Chapter 92



Soldiers' shouts and the low rumble of war drums echoed from the outer courtyards, but inside my chambers, it was the rising pitch of our voices that filled the space like clashing blades.

"You don't understand!" Neferet finally snapped.

She was pacing furiously before the balcony doors, her linen dress whipping about her ankles with each stormy turn.

"I caused this, Amen! These monsters, this devastation, they're here because I wasn't strong enough to resist him!"

I reached for her, but she pulled away, a lioness cornered, her spirit too fierce to be soothed with platitudes.

"Neferet," I said firmly, "this is exactly what Seth wants. To draw you into the open where he can reclaim you fully."

She whirled on me, her eyes flashing – green still, thank the gods, but filled with a wild desperation that scared me more than any army.

"And what do you expect me to do? Sit here like some helpless ornament while others fight and die because of what I brought upon them?"

Her voice cracked on the last word, and the sound shattered something inside me. I crossed the room in two strides, seizing her hands in mine.

They were trembling.

"You are not helpless," I said, my voice low and urgent. "You fought him longer and harder than anyone could have. You survived him."

I pressed her hands against my chest, feeling the frantic beat of my heart beneath her palms.

"But if you step outside these walls now, you'll give him exactly what he needs."

Neferet shook her head fiercely, tears brimming in her lashes.

"I can feel him, Amen. Every hour, he's growing stronger. His presence pressing against the back of my mind, whispering... pulling..."

She clenched her fists, as if she could physically tear Seth's influence from her own soul.

"I would rather die fighting than be consumed fully by him again."

I cupped her face between my hands, forcing her to meet my gaze.

Her skin was hot beneath my palms, her pulse a wild, terrified thing fluttering beneath her jaw.

"If you go out there," I said hoarsely, "I won't be able to fight. I'll be watching for you. Afraid for you. And if I lose focus, even for a moment..."

My voice broke. "I cannot lose you again."

The vulnerability in my voice seemed to reach her where reason could not. Neferet swayed toward me, her hands sliding

up to grip the front of my tunic.

Her forehead rested against mine, her breath ragged.

"I don't want to lose you either," she whispered, and her words undid me.

I kissed her then with a desperation that bordered on violence – pouring every fear, every hope, every unspoken promise into that single contact.

Her lips were soft and warm against mine, tasting faintly of lotus and salt. Her arms locked around my neck, pulling me closer as if she could fuse our bodies together and make us whole again.

When we finally broke apart, both breathing hard, I rested my forehead against hers.

"Stay inside the palace," I said again. "Please."

She closed her eyes and nodded, a tear slipping down her cheek.

I held her tightly for a long moment, committing the feel of her body against mine to memory.

The way her hair smelled of myrrh and lotus oil. The small tremor that ran through her when she fought back her tears.

The steady thud of her heart against my chest.

When at last I pulled away, I summoned my captain of the guard with a silent signal.

As Neferet sat by the balcony, staring out at the approaching dust clouds with haunted eyes, I whispered orders the guards

would not dare disobey:

No one, not even Neferet herself, was to be allowed beyond the palace walls.

If she tried to leave, they were to stop her by any means necessary.

It wasn't just to protect her. It was to protect Egypt and my own heart.

Later, in the armory, I donned my ceremonial armor, the armor of Pharaoh, blessed by the priests of Osiris before every battle. Its gold and lapis scales shimmered in the torchlight, heavy with sacred inscriptions.

Over my heart gleamed the amulet of Osiris, the ancient symbol of rebirth and kingship.

As the final strap was tightened by my attendants, I dismissed them with a nod and strode alone toward the temple of Osiris.

The great bronze doors loomed before me, carved with the stories of creation, destruction, and renewal. They swung open at my approach, the priests bowing low but saying nothing.

Inside, the air was cool and heavy with the scent of frankincense. The statues of the gods lined the walls, but it was to the central altar that I made my way.

I knelt before the massive stone slab, feeling the pulse of divine energy thrumming in the very foundation of the temple.

Reaching into my robe, I withdrew the blooded dagger I had used in our earliest rituals, the blade that had once drawn Neferet's sacred blood and connected us.

I laid it on the altar, a silent offering.

"Osiris," I whispered, bowing my head until it touched the cold stone. "I carry your fragment. I carry your burden. And I swear now by your name and by the breath in my body, I will face Seth not as a mortal man, but as your vessel. I will end this war. Even if it ends me."

The amulet at my throat burned suddenly with a fierce, scaring heat, and for a moment, I saw it.

A vision of green fields, of a river running clear and sweet, of Neferet smiling in sunlight untainted by shadow.

Hope. A glimpse of what could be, if we prevailed.

I rose slowly, gathering the strength of that vision into my heart. The soldiers awaited me beyond these sacred walls, ready to follow their Pharaoh into hell itself if need be.

And waiting somewhere beyond the city, beyond the river of blood and dust and fear, was the woman I loved.

The woman I would fight the gods themselves to save.

I adjusted the amulet once more against my chest, feeling its comforting weight.

Then I turned and strode out to meet my destiny.

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

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