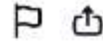




Chapter 96



For a long, paralyzed moment, I do nothing but stare at her, unable to comprehend what my eyes see but my heart refuses to accept.

And then a raw, inhuman sound tore from my chest – half agony, half rage.

It echoed through the empty corridors, through the heavens, across the very bones of the earth.

The scent of iron and lotus fills the chamber. One the perfume of death, the other the memory of life.

And I cannot tell them apart now.

I clutch her body closer, pressing my hand desperately against her throat, trying to stem the pulsing flow that slicks my fingers.

"Please, Neferet, don't," I whisper fiercely, lowering my head so our foreheads touch. Her skin is already cooling. "Please, don't leave me, my love. Not ever, not like this..."

Her eyelids flutter weakly, but no words form on her lips, only a faint, wet gasp that shudders through her. Her chest rises once... falters... rises again.

Panic threatens to drown me, but I force it back. "No. Not now."

Shifting her gently against my body, cradling her as though I could shield her from death itself, I close my eyes and reach

inward.

Toward the divine fragment of Osiris that has been my curse
and my weapon since birth.

I have never used its healing powers on another person before.

I had always assumed the connection was too selfish, too
anchored to my own flesh. But surely – *surely* – with enough
will, with enough love, I can channel it into her.

It must.

So I summon everything within me.

"By the name of Osiris, by the ancient blood, by the sacred ties
of Pharaoh and Horus, heal!"

I thrust the force of my soul outward, willing the divine energy
into her broken body... but nothing happens.

A tremor of confusion breaks through my terror.

I draw deeper – past pain, past exhaustion, reaching for the
endless ocean of power I have always known would answer me.

Still nothing.

And that's when I understand.

For the first time in my life – the weight I had borne since
childhood – the constant, silent pull of Osiris's fragment
against my soul... It was gone.

Not lessened. Not muted. *Gone.*

The pressure I have lived with my entire life, the ever-

present ache in my chest, the divine heaviness of god, is now completely gone. Vanished.

I can feel it now as clearly as one feels the loss of a limb.

The divine fragment, the curse itself has been torn away... and with it, all the power I might have used to save her.

A broken sob tears from my throat.

"What have you done, Neferet..." I whisper, rocking her limp body. "What have you done, my love?"

The door crashes open behind me. Sandaled feet skid to a halt on blood-slick tiles.

"Help her!" I shout, my voice cracking with helpless fury.
"Fetch the physicians! The priests! Now!"

Someone runs. Others remain frozen at the threshold.

Uncertain whether to approach the man who was supposed to be a god, now kneeling, bloodstained and broken, over the woman who had been his heart.

I press harder against her wound, frantic.

"Don't leave me," I plead, pressing kiss after kiss against her cooling brow. "Stay. I beg you, stay with me. Please."

Neferet stirs in my arms and her eyes – gods, those eyes – open slightly.

The green of them, though dulled, finds me, focuses on me with staggering effort.

Her lips part and I lean closer, straining to catch any words she might give me. But no sound comes, only a soft exhale against my cheek.

The lightest whisper of last breath.

And then nothing. Her body slackens fully, weight collapsing against me in complete surrender.

"No," I whispered. "No, no!" I cry out again, louder, half a command, half a prayer. "Neferet, no!"

I rock her gently, then harder, my hands trembling as I lift her face to mine.

Her head lolls, unresisting. The beautiful, fierce, stubborn spirit that had filled these halls and my own heart with life is gone, leaving behind only fragile, empty flesh.

Footsteps approach behind me, cautious, uncertain. I don't look up even at a soft gasp, and then a female voice.

I hear her intake of breath, the horror in it, and feel her stop just beyond reach.

"Your Majesty..." Meritaten whispers, her voice thick with grief.

But I cannot answer. Cannot move.

I remain there, cradling Neferet to my chest, rocking back and forth like a madman, tears blinding me, blood soaking me to the bone.

It should have been me... *It should have been me!*

It should have been me... *It should have been me!*

Through the roaring in my ears, I hear Meritaten quietly ordering servants to clear the room. To bring linens, to prepare rites for the dead.

But I cannot let her go.

I cling to Neferet as if I could drag her soul back by sheer force of love, my cheek pressed to her damp hair, breathing in the scent of her even as it fades.

"You promised we'd find the way together... that we'll be together in any lifetime," I whisper, my voice broken beyond recognition. "You promised me, my lotus flower."

I squeeze my eyes shut, as if darkness could make this nightmare unreal. Yet it doesn't.

She is still in my arms. Still silent. Still gone.

I hold the only woman I have ever truly loved, and know that I would have surrendered my throne, my life, my very soul if it could have kept her breathing.

But fate has spoken. Balance has been claimed.

And I, Pharaoh of Egypt, master of lands and gods, am powerless before it.

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

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