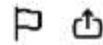




## Chapter 97



For a moment, Meritaten kept simply standing there.

Frozen, one hand pressed tightly to her mouth. Then she moves, slowly and deliberately. She kneels beside me, heedless of the blood soaking through her fine linen robes.

She reached out with a hand so cautious, so tender it almost undoes me completely.

"My Pharaoh," she says, her voice soft as the distant wind.

Her fingers brush my shoulder, a featherlight touch, but I barely register it.

I cannot look at her. I cannot look away from Neferet.

I continue to rock her body in my arms, helpless against the instinct to shield, to cradle, to breathe life back into her broken form.

Her blood is sticky against my skin. The scent of lotus blossoms clings to her hair, now mingled horribly with the iron stench of death.

Around us, the chamber fills with noise – physicians babbling urgent orders, priests chanting prayers to soothe the soul of the departed. Advisors shouting for guards, for sacred relics, for embalming oils.

Their voices are meaningless. Like insects buzzing in my ears.

The mighty Pharaoh, the Son of the Sun, ruler of the Two

Lands, is now just a man.

A man who has lost everything.

"Anything," I whisper fiercely to the silent gods above.

"Anything you ask – *my life, my throne, my soul* – take anything, just bring her back to me!"

But the heavens remain silent.

The gods, if they hear me at all, turn their backs. Neferet stays limp and heavy in my arms, her blood cooling rapidly against my chest.

Without a word, Meritaten rises to her feet and turns to face the babbling horde at the door.

"Leave us. Now," she commands, her voice sharper than any blade.

When a priest protests about funeral rites, she silences him with a single, imperious gesture. "The embalmers can wait," she says coldly. "The gods will understand. Now go."

One by one, they obey her.

Even the high priest of Anubis himself bows his head and retreats, leaving me alone with Neferet... and Meritaten.

As the heavy doors close behind the last servant, the room falls into a sacred, aching silence. I hardly notice when Meritaten kneels beside me once again.

She looks down at Neferet, her face full of sorrow. Then she looks at me, at the ruin grief has made of me.

"Enhotep," she says, using my childhood name as only she ever dared to speak.

The name cuts through the fog. Barely. But I don't respond. I can't.

"Please..." I kept begging in a raw, trembling voice. "Please come back... Please don't leave me..."

I brush her blood-matted hair back from her forehead. My fingertips are so gentle, as if she might flinch if I pressed too hard.

"Isis, hear me," I murmur. "Osiris, if any spark of your favor still remains within me... please. Grant me this one mercy. *Only one.*"

Meritaten lays her hand on my shoulder again, this time I feel it and don't pull away. Instead, a shudder passes through me, a breath that is almost a sob breaks from my throat.

"She's gone," I manage to whisper.

Speaking the words aloud feels like breaking my own ribs.

"I should have stopped her," I mutter, self-loathing a burning brand inside me. "I should have seen what she planned."

"You couldn't have known..." Meritaten says gently.

Her words, meant to comfort, fall useless into the pit of my despair.

"I was supposed to protect her," I rasp. "From Seth. From all of it. And now..."

I look down at the terrible wound across Neferet's delicate throat.

The darkness of the dried blood, the unnatural stillness of her body.

"Now she's beyond even my reach." I close my eyes against the burning flood of helpless rage and grief.

But then Meritaten speaks again – words so unexpected, so blasphemous, they snap my head up.

"Perhaps not."

I stare at her, blinking through tears. "What did you say?"

She lifts her chin slightly, as if steeling herself for what she is about to reveal.

"Last night," she says carefully, "the goddess Nephthys came to me. In a dream."

The goddesses' name strikes me like a blow. Nephthys, sister to Isis. Protector of the dead and wife of Seth.

I narrow my gaze, my battered mind clinging desperately to her words.

"What did she want?" My voice is rough, hollow.

"To deliver her will," Meritaten says. "Seth's recent actions, possessing a mortal, unleashing creatures from Duat to attack Egypt, have broken ancient divine laws. Nephthys cannot condone what he has done."

Something, hope, fear, disbelief, stirs sluggishly in my chest.

"And?" I demand, desperate for something, anything.

Meritaten leans closer, lowering her voice.

"She offered a path to redemption," she whispers. "Through my connection to her... and the blessing she gave me... there may be a way to call Neferet's soul back. I think I am capable of this."

I almost can't breathe and clutch Neferet closer to me, as if afraid she might vanish altogether if I loosen my grip.

"That's impossible," I say, but the denial is weak even to my own ears.

Meritaten shakes her head.

"Normally, yes. A soul, once severed, belongs to Duat. But Neferet is everything but that, isn't it? She carries Isis's blessing, she bears Seth's power and stands at the crossroads of light and darkness. If we act quickly, before her Ka journeys too far, there is a chance."

Hope flares, bright, blinding and dangerous. I want to believe her so badly it physically hurts. "What must be done?"

Meritaten's eyes are solemn, brimming with the terrible knowledge she carries.

"We must perform a ritual," she says. "One that demands sacrifice... great sacrifice. And immense risk."

Her gaze drops to Neferet.

"The gods demand balance. If we call her soul back, something must be offered in exchange."

"The gods demand balance. If we call her soul back, something must be offered in exchange."

I nod, tightening my arms around Neferet's lifeless form.

"Anything," I swear. "Anything they ask."

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

Chapter 97



Comments

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Gifts

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