



Chapter 98



The Chamber of Rebirth hasn't been used in generations.

Pale torches flicker against the walls, making the painted images of gods and spirits seem almost to shift and breathe.

I carry Neferet in my arms, following Meritaten's sure, solemn steps. Behind us, two priests trail silently, bearing the ritual items between them – the golden mask of Osiris, a ceremonial dagger and sacred oils.

"Quickly now," Meritaten urges, her composure fraying just slightly at the edges. "Place her at the altar."

My steps falter only for a breath and then I move forward.

With infinite gentleness, I lower Neferet's body onto the sacred stone.

Her skin is almost translucent under the chamber's strange light, her hair falling around her shoulders like spilled ink, her throat – a cruel gash of red against her pale flesh.

The priests hurry forward, arranging the sacred items with methodical precision, whispering prayers under their breath.

I take a few dazed steps backward, feeling hollow, feeling sick.

Meritaten stands nearby, her hands folded before her. Every inch a noble daughter of Egypt, though her eyes, glistening with restrained tears, betray the storm beneath.

I cross the space between us and take her hand.

"Thank you," I say, meaning it with every battered fiber of my soul. "If you succeed, *if we succeed*, you may ask for anything. Any price, any reward, and you'll have it. I'm giving you my word."

She turned to face me then, and her smile carried such profound sadness that it nearly brought me to my knees before she shook her head.

"The one thing I ever truly wanted," she said softly, "you would not be able to give to me under any condition anyway. Now I see and understand that fully."

I frown, not understanding.

Tears shimmer in her eyes, but she holds herself with regal pride.

"I was always eager for your hear, Enhotep," she confesses, voice scarcely above a whisper. "I thought if I was patient... if I was perfect... someday it would be mine."

Pain twists in my chest as I open my mouth to answer, but she raises a hand to silence me.

"It's not your fault," she says gently. "Your heart was never mine to claim anyway. It was always *hers*."

She glances toward Neferet's still form on the altar.

"And that's alright," she adds, her smile strengthening. "I have made peace with this truth, Enhotep. I find purpose in helping secure your wellbeing and happiness, even if it lies with another."

Before I could fully process this confession, this final, gentle closing of a door that had stood ajar for so many years, Meritaten revealed what I had dreaded to hear.

"You need to know that such magic follows fundamental laws," she explained, lowering her eyes briefly before meeting my gaze with quiet dignity. "Balance must be maintained in *all* things..."

My stomach drops waiting for her words as terrifying thoughts circling in my head.

She lowers her eyes briefly, as if gathering strength, then lifts them again to meet mine squarely.

"And one soul cannot return without an exchange of another," she finished quietly

Understanding slams into me like a hammer blow.

"A life for a life," I whisper while fresh tears threaten to blind me.

Meritaten nodded once, her expression resolute as carved stone.

"I'll do it," I declared without hesitation, stepping forward. "I will trade places with her."

Meritaten's hand shoots out to stop me.

"No," she says firmly. "Egypt needs its Pharaoh, especially now. You are more than yourself, Enhotep. You *are* Egypt."

"Then who?" I demand, my voice hoarse with grief and frustration.

Her steady gaze held mine without flinching.

"It must be someone with a blessing that resonates with the powers we seek to manipulate." She drew a deep breath, as if gathering courage. "Someone like me."

For a long, stunned moment, I just stare at her. "You?"

Disbelief, confusion, and terrible understanding warred within my chest.

"Why would you do this?" The question emerged fractured, desperate. "After everything—"

"Not for her," Meritaten answers quietly but sharply. *"For you."*

The words fall between us like a stone in a still pond.

"Merita..."

She shook her head with infinite gentleness, stopping whatever protest might have spilled from my lips.

"We've known each other since childhood, Enhotep" she says, her voice gentle. "I've seen you carry burdens no mortal should. I've seen you fight against a fate you never asked for."

She steps closer to me, lifting her hand to cup my cheek. Her touch is cool, reverent and I leaned to it slightly.

"And I've seen how *she* changed you – brought light back into your eyes, gave you purpose beyond mere survival."

Her gaze drifted to Neferet's still form upon the altar, and something ineffably tender softened her features.

"I may not have always understood what you saw in her, but I

see what *she* was ready to go through for you and what her loss has done to *you*."

She turned away with fluid grace, carrying herself like the queen she had been born to become.

"And I find I cannot bear to witness it when I have the power to change it."

Fresh tears sting my eyes. "I can't ask this of you..." I say, voice thick.

"You have no need," Meritaten reminded me. "I am offering it freely."

The question that had been clawing at my throat finally escaped, raw and desperate.

"Why?" It encompassed everything.

Why this sacrifice, why now, why for a man who could never love her as she deserved.

Why for a woman who had unwittingly claimed the heart that should have been hers by right of years and devotion.

Meritaten turned back toward me, with a bittersweet smile.

"Because everyone deserves to be loved the way you love her."

Tears rolled down my cheeks unchecked and Meritaten smiled – a beautiful, sorrowful smile.

"Hold me," she asked softly, and now her tears did fall too.

"When the moment comes, when I draw my final breath – hold me as... you held her. Give me that comfort in the very end, at least. That's my wish."

The plea in her eyes broke something vital in my chest.

I nodded once, unable to speak around the tightness that had seized my throat like an iron fist.

The ritual began with the priests chanting invocations to Nephthys, their voices echoing in the chamber's perfect acoustics with haunting resonance.

Meritaten stepped to the altar with movements that held the fluid grace of ritual dance.

She positioned herself at Neferet's head, her hands steady as she lifted the golden mask of Osiris and placed it gently over Neferet's face.

Raising her arms toward the shadows that crowned the chamber, Meritaten began her own incantation. The blessing of Nephthys manifested around her like visible flame, casting her silhouette in aureate light.

Then, with infinite grace, Meritaten lifts the ceremonial dagger to her own throat.

The blade caught the strange illumination for one crystalline moment and with a swift, practiced motion, she drew it across her own flesh in a perfect echo of Neferet's fatal wound.

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

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