



## Chapter 99



True to my promise, I rush forward, catching Meritaten as she falls backward from the altar. Her weight sags into my arms, shockingly slight, as though life has already begun to flee her body.

I kneel carefully, cradling her against my chest, my hands shaking with the enormity of what she's done for me.

"Thank you," I whisper into her hair, my voice cracking under the force of grief. "For your years of loyalty, for your unwavering devotion to Egypt. For this final, greatest gift. For your love."

The last words are the hardest to say, scraping my throat raw.

"You will be remembered, Meritaten," I swear to her. "I swear it by the gods and all the stars above."

A small smile ghosts across her lips even as blood bubbles there, staining her chin crimson.

"Remember... me..." she breathes, every word a battle. "Happy. Remember... me... choosing... this..."

Her body shudders violently once and then falls limp in my arms.

I lower her carefully to the ground, brushing a blood-matted lock of hair from her forehead with infinite tenderness. She looks peaceful now.

Peaceful. and terribly, terribly still.

Peaceful, and terribly, terribly still.

But then, from the altar, I catch a gasp that rends the air and snaps my head around.

Neferet. Gasping, struggling for air, her back arching off the stone as if life itself is being poured back into her.

I remain frozen, caught between the woman returning to life and the one who has just departed it. The terrible arithmetic of divine balance holds me paralyzed – joy and grief so perfectly matched that I cannot move toward either.

Neferet struggles to sit up, her movements uncoordinated as if she's forgotten how to control her own limbs.

The golden mask of Osiris slips from her face and clatters onto the altar with a hollow, ringing sound. Beside it, the wound at her throat – gone. Smooth, perfect skin unmarred by the blade that had taken her from me.

My heart slams against my ribs, hope surging like wildfire through my blood.

Tears blur my vision as I stagger upright, turning Meritaten's lifeless body respectfully over to two priests, who lift her with reverence and solemn grief.

I don't waste another second and rush to Neferet, reaching for her with hands that tremble so badly I can barely touch her.

"Neferet!" I cry, laughing through tears that fall unchecked down my cheeks. "My sweet lotus flower... you've come back to me!"

Her eyes flutter open, beautiful green, clear and vibrant, locked onto mine. Recognition dawns there, confusion giving way to something brighter, something fiercely alive.

She reaches for me, and we collide with desperate, gasping sobs. Clutching each other so tightly it's as if we could merge into one being.

I fall to my knees again, holding her against my chest, burying my face in her hair. Inhaling the scent of lotus and blood and the sharp tang of tears.

"How?" she whispers, hoarse but gloriously alive. "I was... I was in darkness. Cold. Moving toward something vast and terrible."

"Meritaten," I choke out, pressing my forehead to hers. "She gave her life for yours."

We cling to each other, stunned by the enormity of what has happened – too overwhelmed to speak, to move.

Simply breathing each other's presence as if afraid the gods might snatch this moment away.

"You were gone," I say simply, the words inadequate to express the devastation of those hours. "*You left me...*"

Tears fill her eyes, spilling down her cheeks. "I thought it was the only way; to free us both from the curses. To absorb it all with my essence and let it go. *To save you.*"

"Never again," I whisper fiercely, pressing her palm to my lips. "Never make that choice for me again!"

Neferet's other hand rises to my face, her thumb brushing away

Neferet's other hand rises to my face, her thumb brushing away tears.

"I'm here," she says softly. "Somehow, I'm here."

"It's over," I whispered, pressing my forehead against hers, breathing in the scent of her skin "Seth's influence, Osiris's curse... We're both finally free. Just as you dreamed."

A smile bloomed across her face with tears streaming down her cheeks.

She pulled me closer, her arms wrapping around me with desperate relief, and I buried my face against the curve of her neck.

For a moment, one perfect, crystalline moment, we were simply two souls reunited. Holding each other as if we could merge into one being and never again face separation.

Her pulse thrummed beneath my lips as I pressed kisses to her throat – proof of life restored, proof that miracles could still bloom in this world of gods and curses.

But as I opened my eyes, still cradling her against me, my gaze fell upon details that sent ice crawling through my veins.

Over her shoulder, I could see the altar where she had lain in death's embrace and the golden mask of Osiris that bore a crack splitting it precisely down the middle.

Exactly as in the prophetic visions.

More alarming still – the ceremonial dagger that Meritaten had used for her sacrifice was nowhere to be seen among the ritual

implements scattered across the altar's surface.

A chill unfurls through my spine, stealing the breath from my lungs.

Neferet's body suddenly stiffened in my arms. Her grip, initially tender as morning light, became painfully tight.

Fingers digging into my back with bone-crushing strength.

"Neferet?" I whisper, alarmed, trying to pull away enough to see her face.

She doesn't loosen her grip and shakes with a soundless, shuddering laughter I can feel in my bones.

With growing dread, I managed to create enough space between us to look into her face, and what I saw there turned my blood to liquid fear.

The green irises I had been so relieved to see were rapidly darkening.

Blood-red spread from her pupils outward in stains until her eyes glowed with the malevolent crimson I knew too well.

"No," I whisper, shaking my head. "No. It can't be—"

*"Oh, but it is,"* replies her mouth.

Her voice, but layered beneath it, dark and guttural.

*Unmistakably Seth's.*

*"You've outdone yourself this time, young Pharaoh,"* Seth purrs, using Neferet's beautiful face like a mask. *"What a touching*

using Neferet's beautiful face like a mask. *"What a touching display of sacrifice. Such a reverent hope."*

Before I can react, Neferet drives her hand forward with blinding speed.

Pain exploded through my body as the blade pierced my chest, sliding between ribs to find my heart with the precision of divine malice.

*"Did you truly think death would free her from me?"* Seth sneers, twisting the dagger in my chest with sadistic glee. *"Death is merely a doorway. And I am the master of many thresholds."*

Blood filled my mouth, copper-sweet and warm, as I stared in horror at the face I loved above all others.

Each feature remained perfect, beloved, achingly familiar, yet all were corrupted by the god that gazed out through crimson eyes.

I choke, my hands fumbling at the dagger's hilt, but it's already too late.

I can feel my life pouring out, feel the strength draining from my limbs, the world narrowing around me.

*"How foolish you mortals are,"* Seth observed, tilting Neferet's head with predatory grace as he looked down at my failing form. *"So easily led by love. So desperate to believe you can defy gods with your petty, short lives."*

Blood runs freely from my lips. I struggle to speak but cannot. My vision tilts and darkens.

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Blood runs freely from my lips. I struggle to speak but cannot.  
My vision tilts and darkens.

Yet even as death approached on silent wings, I could not look  
away from her face.

Her beloved features twisted into a mockery by Seth's triumph,  
her mouth stretching into a grin not her own.

The last thing I hear is her voice – *his voice* – mocking,  
laughing, victorious; right before darkness takes me.

## End of *The* Chapter

Chapter 99



Comments

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Gifts

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