

The Pharaoh's Favorite Ch 1

Chapter 1

This dream claims me again tonight, as real as the Nile's waters against sun-warmed skin.

He stands there as always – this beautiful stranger who haunts my nights from time to time. Moonlight catches in the folds of his translucent linen robes, making him glow like a living god, water quietly lapping at his ankles. His eyes hold mine with an intensity that steals my breath – dark, knowing, filled with promises I don't yet understand.

My bare feet carry me forward without hesitation, drawn by something deeper than desire. The sacred waters of the Nile swirl around my ankles, cool against my heated skin. He extends his hand, fingers graceful yet strong, and my heart thunders against my ribs as I reach for him.

This time, I think.

This time I'll see his face clearly.

His grip is sure as he captures both my wrists in his one hand, drawing them behind my back. The position brings me closer, chest nearly touching his. His other hand slides up to cover my eyes, the touch feather-light yet commanding. Each breath brings his scent – river's blossoms and something darker, more otherworldly.

"My sweet lotus flower," he whispers against my ear, his voice rich as honey wine. "So beautiful... so innocent... so destined."

Each praise is punctuated with a kiss – temple, cheek, the corner of my mouth. My skin burns wherever his lips touch. The final kiss claims my mouth fully, and despite the dream's familiarity, I'm lost in the sensation.

His kisses are light at first, teasing, and then deepen, pulling me into a place where only joy and pleasure exist. I strain against his hold, desperate to touch him, to finally trace the features that slip from my memory like water through my hands.

Yet it always ends the same as well.

Just as I try to touch him, to hold him, he dissolves into the water, merging with the Nile and leaving me reaching into the emptiness.

I jolt awake, my linen nightgown clinging to sweat-dampened skin. Dawn's first light filters through the wooden shutters, painting strips of gold across my chamber floor. The

dream feels branded into my mind, more vivid than ever before. But I can't dwell on phantom kisses today – the festival of Isis approaches, and I have duties to attend.

Rising on shaky legs, I catch my reflection in the polished mirror. My deep green eyes, unusual among our people, stare back at me. Mother claims they mark me as blessed by Isis herself, chosen by the goddess of magic and wisdom. Sometimes, in quiet moments like this, I wonder if that's why the dreams feel so prophetic, so real.

A familiar ankh birthmark peeks above the neckline of my gown, dark against my bronze skin. I trace its outline with trembling fingers, remembering the priests' whispers when they first saw it.

A sign, they said. But of what, they never revealed.

The morning air already shimmers with heat as I make my way to the temple, my arms laden with offerings. Thebes comes alive around me – merchants arranging their wares, children weaving flower garlands, incense smoke curling through the streets like ethereal serpents. The festival brings out the city's beauty, every corner adorned to honor Isis.

"Lady Neferet!" A young temple servant nearly collides with my carefully arranged basket of lotus blossoms, his eyes wide with excitement. "Word from the northern gates – Commander Sahety has returned early from campaign!"

My heart leaps painfully against my ribs.

Sahety.

My betrothed. My love. My future, solid and real, nothing like the mysterious figure from my dreams. Without thinking, I press the offerings into the servant's hands.

"Take these to High Priestess Merneith. Tell her I'll return shortly."

I gather my linen skirts and run toward our secret meeting place by the Nile, where the reeds grow thick enough to shield lovers from prying eyes. Three years I've loved him, since that first glimpse during the festival of Amun. I remember the way my breath caught when I saw him performing the ritual dance, his warrior's body moving with unexpected grace through the sacred forms.

That very night, I asked Father if Sahety might be a suitable match for me. His answer still echoes in my memory: "The young man must prove himself in battle first. Then, perhaps, we'll speak of marriage."

So I waited.

Through every campaign, every battle, I prayed to all of the gods to keep him safe. Each return brought relief so profound it felt like drowning. And now, finally, Father has agreed to our engagement.

Tomorrow, it will be announced before all of Thebes.

I spot him through the reeds, still in his travel-stained military gear, and my heart swells. He stands tall and proud, exactly as I remembered.

“Neferet,” he greeted me with a smile that made my worries vanish.

I ran to him, throwing my arms around his neck. His embrace was warm and familiar, and for a moment, I felt whole. I reached up, eager to kiss him, but he pulled back, chuckling softly.

“Patience, my love,” he said, his tone light. “Tomorrow, we will announce our engagement. Let’s not rush what will soon be ours to celebrate.”

His eyes sparkle with amusement, but something else flickers there too – something that makes my stomach tighten uncertainty. “Though I do have something for you.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment at my boldness, but then he’s pressing something cool into my palm – a ring, set with a deep red ruby. His favorite stone catches the sunlight like a drop of blood.

“Wear it to the festival?” he asks, and I nod, already sliding it onto my finger. The metal feels strangely heavy, almost restrictive. The ruby sparkled in the sunlight, and I couldn’t contain my joy.

“It’s beautiful, Sahety. Thank you.” I promised to wear it proudly. Taking his hand, I urged him to come with me. “Come,” I say, pushing away the unsettling thought. “We need to get ready. And we must collect Kiya – she’s been impossible lately, refusing to prepare for her presentation to the Golden House.”

The mention of my younger sister brings a shadow across Sahety’s face, so quick I almost miss it.

We walk back toward the city, my heart at war between joy and an inexplicable unease. Everything is falling into place exactly as I’ve dreamed – well, not those dreams, the other ones.

The normal ones, of marriage and family in service to Isis.

That’s when I see them.

Two black scorpions, frozen in my path, their stingers raised in perfect synchronicity. I jerk to a stop, my blood turning to ice water in my veins. Any priestess of Isis well aware of this bad omen – a warning from the gods themselves, evidence of a curse.

“Neferet?” Sahety’s voice seems to come from far away, through water. “What’s wrong?”

I can’t tell him. Can’t voice the sudden dread that’s coiling in my stomach like a cobra ready to strike. Instead, I force a smile and step carefully around the scorpions.

“Nothing. Just... watching my step.”

But as we continue toward my family’s home, the image of those raised stingers burns in my mind. And somewhere, in the deepest corners of my heart, I hear the echo of that dream-voice: “My sweet lotus flower...”

The words carry a promise that feels more like a threat.
