

The Pharaoh's Favorite

Chapter 5

“Neferet, please.” He reached for my hands when I stepped back. His voice was hesitant as he stepped closer. “Please speak to me”

The next morning brings Sahety to my door.

His presence was a reminder of everything I wanted to forget. He looked the same as he always had: beautifully brutal, tall, broad-shouldered, his features strong and commanding. But now, his face carried a shadow of guilt that dulled the confidence I had once admired.

“What is there to say, Sahety?” I asked, my tone cold. “You’ve already said enough with your actions.”

He flinched, but pressed on. “I know I’ve hurt you, and I’ll never forgive myself for it. But what happened with Kiya... it was a mistake. A moment of weakness.”

“A mistake?” I repeated, my voice rising. “You call betraying me with my own sister was a mistake? You’ve humiliated me, shamed our families, and now you expect me to listen to your excuses?”

“Please, Neferet,” he said, taking another step closer. “I still love you. I want to make things right. I want to be your husband.”

I laughed bitterly, the sound harsh even to my own ears. “You think love excuses what you’ve done? You think I could ever trust you again, knowing how easily you were swayed?”

“But that is the truth, you’re the only one I’ve ever loved.”

Laughter bubbles up, bitter as poison. “You call that love?”

“We can still have everything we planned.” His voice drops, honeyed with false promises. “I’ll refuse to marry Kiya. We’ll tell your father – ”

“Tell him what? That you’d rather have the sister you didn’t rut with in the sacred reeds?” The words taste like ashes. “That you love me so much you couldn’t wait one day to bed my sister?”

“Neferet – ”

“No.” My voice comes out stronger than I feel. “You made your choice. Now we all live with it.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but I held up a hand, cutting him off. “Whatever you’re about to say next doesn’t matter anymore. And wouldn’t change either. Father has already made his decision. You will marry Kiya, and I... I will be sent to the Golden House.”

Sahety’s eyes widened in shock. “The harem? Neferet, you can’t...”

“I have no choice, I said, my voice trembling. “None of us do. Father has made sure of that.”

And Kiya as well.

Father announces their engagement the next day. Set the wedding date close – too close, perhaps. Everyone knows why, though no one speaks about it. If Kiya’s already carrying Sahety’s child, the timing will hide their shame.

I watch it all like a shadow, drifting through preparations for my own fate. The Golden House – the Pharaoh’s harem – was no longer an abstract concept but a reality I was hurtling toward. Its mysteries haunted me, darker than the spaces between stars.

The lessons began immediately.

My days were consumed by the intricate rituals of beauty and grace. Servants bathed me in perfumed oils, braided my hair into elaborate styles, and painted my face with kohl and ochre until I scarcely recognized the reflection staring back at me.

They draped me in sheer linens embroidered with gold, and my wrists jingled with jeweled bangles that felt like shackles. They taught me how to walk, to move, to speak in the presence of the Pharaoh. Every step, every gesture was choreographed to perfection.

Through it all, Kiya’s presence was a constant thorn.

She was the picture of charm and sweetness around others, offering smiles that could melt the sternest hearts. But in private, her mask slipped to reveal the venom beneath.

She constantly interrupted my lessons, knocking over ink pots, scattering carefully laid-out scrolls, and loudly mocking the instructors until their patience frayed.

She spilled oils onto my ceremonial linens and once loosened the threads of my sandals so that I tripped during a walking exercise.

The worst came one night when I sat in my room, trying to focus on a scroll under the dim light of a flickering oil lamp. The door creaked open, and Kiya stepped inside, a knife glinting in her hand. My heart stopped.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, rising to my feet.

“Just a precaution.” Her smile was chilling, her voice a venomous whisper. “After all, you’ve ruined my plans. Why shouldn’t I ruin yours?”

“Your plans?” I repeated, incredulous. “You think this is about you? You’re the one who destroyed everything, Kiya. You’ve brought this upon yourself.”

Her grip on the knife tightened, her knuckles white.

“Do you think I wanted this?” she hissed. “To be tied to Sahety, to have Father dictate my every move? You were supposed to take the blame, Neferet. You were supposed to be the perfect daughter, the obedient one. Instead, you’ve dragged me down with you.”

My blood boiled. “You’re delusional.” I snapped. “You’ve done this to yourself, Kiya. You and Sahety deserve each other.”

Her eyes narrowed, and for a terrifying moment, I thought she might lash out. But then she laughed, a sound devoid of warmth.

“Deserve each other? Perhaps. But at least I won’t be sold off like cattle to the Pharaoh.”

I stared at her, my chest heaving. “You’re pathetic,” I said finally. “And no matter how hard you try to sabotage me, you’ll never be free of your own selfishness.”

Her smile faltered, and for a brief moment, I thought I saw something like regret in her eyes. But then she turned and left, the knife still clutched in her hand.

I sank back onto the cushions, my hands trembling. Kiya’s hatred burned brighter than I had realized, and the threat she posed felt more real than ever.

Yet, my dreams... gods, the dreams were worse.

There is no more beautiful stranger that used to cover me in his gentle kisses and touches. No more joy or other desires with ease.

Dreams become nightmares.

Every night now, the Nile runs red with blood. Amen stands in its crimson waters, reaching for me as shadows gather behind him.

Sometimes he dissolves into the bloody river. Sometimes creatures drag him under while I scream. Sometimes he simply shatters like pottery, leaving me alone in the dark.

I wake gasping, sheets soaked with sweat, the nightmare clinging like cobwebs. All day through other lessons, teaching and preparations I couldn't get thoughts about these – visions perhaps – away from my head.

They're trying to tell me something. The gods are warning me – but of what? That Amen is in danger? That I'm meant to save him? Who is he, truly?

Tonight is my last at the temple of Isis. Father barely allowed this final visit, and only with strict orders to return before dark. I kneel before the goddess's statue, pressing my forehead to the cool stone.

"Goddess," I murmured, my voice trembling. "Grant me clarity, grant me strength. I do not know what lies ahead, but I offer myself to your will. Protect me, guide me... please."

The quiet sanctity of the temple filled me with a bittersweet peace, knowing this would be my last visit. I stayed longer than I should have, unwilling to leave the only place where I truly felt close to the divine.

"Show me the way," I whisper. "Help me understand."

"Perhaps I can help with that."

My heart stops. That voice. I know that voice.

"Amen," I breathed, his name escaping my lips before I could think.

He stepped into the light, his tall frame silhouetted against the night. His braid, sleek and neat, gleamed like a ribbon of ink, and his deep brown eyes caught mine with an intensity that made my breath catch.

"I wanted to come earlier." He stepped closer, moonlight catching the sharp planes of his face. "But there was no way."

The space between us crackled with unspoken things. I could still feel the ghost of his touch from our last night here, could still taste the forbidden sweetness of dawn-kissed promises.

"I can't..." My voice caught. "I can't be late again. Father barely let me come tonight."

Understanding darkened his eyes. "I'm sorry if I caused trouble before."

“You should be.” The words came out sharper than intended, edged with all the fear and longing I couldn’t afford to feel.

He steps closer. “Let me walk you home, at least.”

Something flashes in his eyes – pain? Fear? Before I can read it, it’s gone.

I should say no. Should run far and fast from this man who haunts both my waking hours and my dreams.

But when he offers his arm, I take it.
