

The Pharaoh's Favorite

Chapter 7

The palace swallows me whole, its grandeur a gilded cage. Every surface glimmers with wealth and power, a tribute to the gods and the mortal who claims their favor.

My family's goodbye fades from my thoughts like morning mist: Mother's carefully staged tears, Father's self-satisfied proclamations about honor, and Kiya's smirk, sharp as a dagger. Their words mean nothing here.

The palace is a different world, one I am not prepared to enter.

Golden light floods the great hall where we gather, its radiance casting long shadows on the polished floors. Two dozen girls stand beside me, each adorned in gauzy linens that float like river foam.

"Smile," a girl beside me whispers, her voice tight with forced cheer. "Today could change your life forever."

Her words send a chill down my spine, but I force a faint smile, my hands clenching the fabric of my dress.

Jewels catch the sunlight, winking like fallen stars. We are a collection of treasures on display, waiting to be appraised and claimed. My own fine dress clings to my skin, an unwelcome reminder of my place among them.

I feel naked.

Exposed.

At the far end of the hall, the throne sits draped in light silks, its occupant hidden from view. The sheer fabric stirs faintly in the breeze, teasing with glimpses of the man who will decide our fates. My heart pounds against my ribs, frantic and wild. I pray silently to the gods for release.

Please, let me trip.

Let me fall.

Let me prove myself unworthy to him.

A steward steps forward, his voice rising over the quiet hum of the room.

“Today, on the Pharaoh’s sacred birthday, he will choose a new concubine for the Golden House among the finest daughters of great Egypt.” His words ripple through the hall, each syllable steeped in formality.

Music begins to swell, filling the vast chamber with sound. The low beat of drums echoes my racing pulse, while flutes rise in delicate harmony, weaving melodies as light as incense smoke.

The other girls move gracefully, their bodies flowing with the rhythm, telling ancient stories of seduction and submission.

I follow the steps as I have been taught, but my movements feel stiff, mechanical. My thoughts drift far from the dance.

I think of Amen. His smile, mysterious and teasing. His words, carefully measured and full of half-truths. His promise – We will meet again.

The memory of him lingers like a shadow, impossible to ignore.

The music fades, leaving the hall in expectant silence. We kneel as one, our heads bowed in submission.

My breath catches in my throat, the stillness pressing down on me like a weight. Moments pass, each one stretching longer than the last, until finally, the steward’s voice cuts through the quiet.

And then...

“The green-eyed one.”

No.

Please, no.

Ice floods my veins. I lift my head in disbelief, but before I can process the words, hands grip my arms, pulling me to my feet.

My legs wobble beneath me as I’m led forward, past the rows of kneeling girls. I don’t dare look at them, but I can feel their stares, their envy as sharp as daggers. If only they knew. I would trade places with any of them in an instant.

The journey to the harem quarters passes in a blur. The air grows heavier with the scents of lotus and myrrh as I’m ushered through a maze of luxurious corridors. Silk cushions line the floors, golden braziers glow softly, and the whispers of servants fill the space.

I am led to a bathing chamber, where they strip away the layers of linen and jewelry, leaving me bare. Warm water laps at my skin as they scrub me with fragrant oils, their hands impersonal and efficient.

“Keep your eyes down,” one of them instructs as they dry me and weave my hair into intricate braids adorned with golden beads. “Speak only when spoken to.” Their hands weave gold through my hair, draping jewels around my neck.

Another paints my lips a deep crimson, her touch precise and practiced. “You belong to Pharaoh now,” she says, fastening a necklace heavy with jewels around my neck.

Belong.

I am no longer a person, no longer Neferet. I am a possession, a prize for a man I have never met.

My stomach churns. The man behind those veiled throne coverings owns me like a pretty trinket.

Will he be cruel? Kind? Old? Young?

Stories about the new Pharaoh conflict – some say he’s a living god, others whisper he’s touched by darkness.

The preparations are endless, but the moment arrives all too soon. I find myself standing before a pair of massive cedar doors inlaid with gold, their grandeur as daunting as the fate that lies beyond them.

My hands tremble at my sides, my breath shallow and uneven. One of the attendants knocks softly, and the voice that answers sends a shiver down my spine.

“Enter.”

The voice sends shivers down my spine – familiar in a way I can’t place.

The doors swing open, and I step inside on trembling legs. The chamber beyond is vast and opulent, every detail designed to inspire awe.

Golden lamps cast a warm glow over the polished marble floors, and the walls are adorned with mosaics depicting the gods in their eternal glory.

A tall figure stands at the balcony, back turned to me. Moonlight silvers the edges of his fine linen robes.

I stare too long, captivated by something I can’t name. When I realize my mistake, I drop my gaze to the floor, pulse thundering in my ears.

My heart is pounding so loudly I'm certain he can hear it. The soft rustle of his robes accompanies his movements as he pours wine into two golden goblets.

His motions are deliberate, almost leisurely, as if he has all the time in the world. When he turns, I catch a glimpse of his silhouette, but I quickly drop my eyes again, unwilling to risk his displeasure.

Soft footsteps approach. A goblet appears in my line of vision, held by a hand adorned with a single golden ring.

My breath catches as recognition floods me.

That ring.

I know that ring.

My head snaps up without permission, green eyes meeting dark ones I've seen in dreams and stolen moments. A sly smile curves lips I've already kissed.

"Welcome, my sweet lotus flower." Amen stands before me in all his royal glory. "I told you we would meet again."

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