

# CATALINA DUBOIS

*TWO STAR-CROSSED LOVERS. ONE ANCIENT CURSE...*



# INFINITY

The Fifth Bride of Pharaoh

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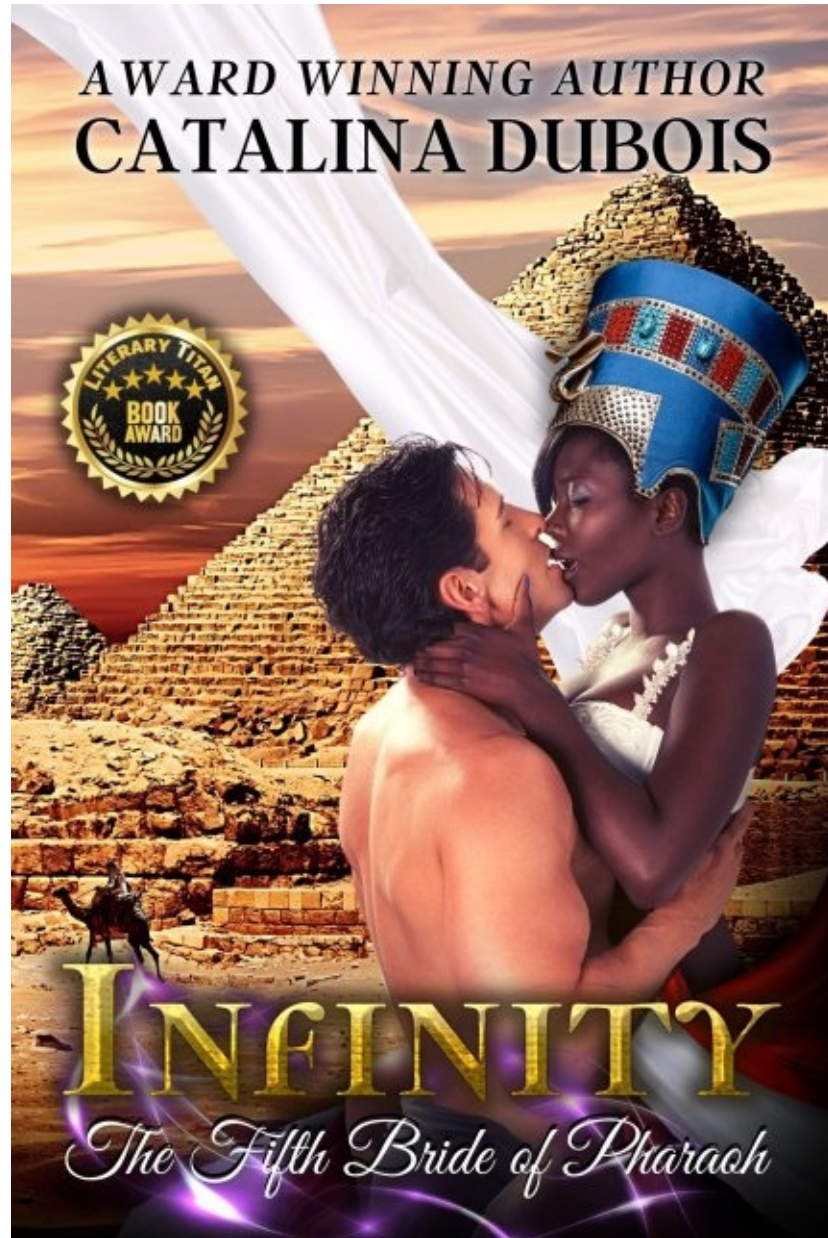
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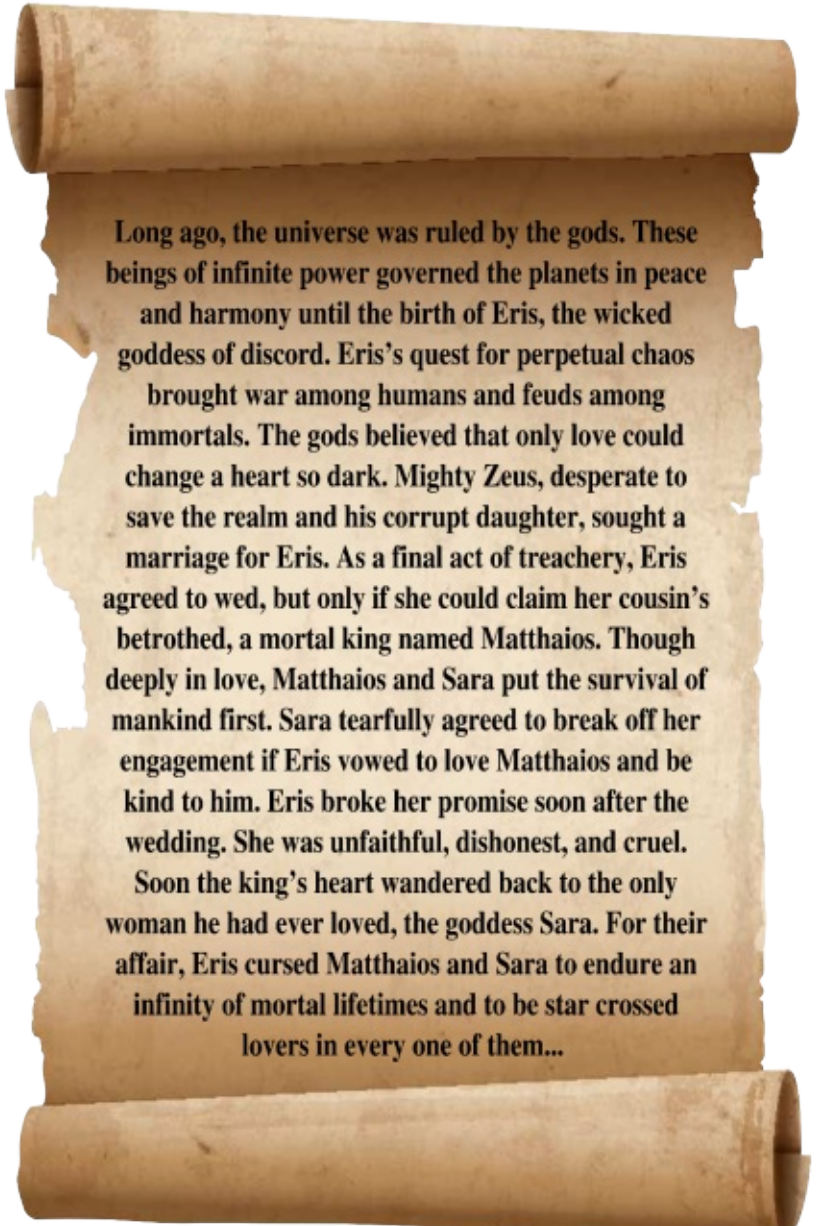
The Fifth Bride of Pharaoh



CATALINA DUBOIS

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A scroll of aged parchment is shown, partially unrolled to reveal a central text block. The parchment is a light tan color with some darker spots and a slightly textured appearance. The text is centered and reads:

Long ago, the universe was ruled by the gods. These beings of infinite power governed the planets in peace and harmony until the birth of Eris, the wicked goddess of discord. Eris's quest for perpetual chaos brought war among humans and feuds among immortals. The gods believed that only love could change a heart so dark. Mighty Zeus, desperate to save the realm and his corrupt daughter, sought a marriage for Eris. As a final act of treachery, Eris agreed to wed, but only if she could claim her cousin's betrothed, a mortal king named Matthaïos. Though deeply in love, Matthaïos and Sara put the survival of mankind first. Sara tearfully agreed to break off her engagement if Eris vowed to love Matthaïos and be kind to him. Eris broke her promise soon after the wedding. She was unfaithful, dishonest, and cruel. Soon the king's heart wandered back to the only woman he had ever loved, the goddess Sara. For their affair, Eris cursed Matthaïos and Sara to endure an infinity of mortal lifetimes and to be star crossed lovers in every one of them...

## Critics are saying...

“This is an adventurous story of forbidden love that will set the hearts of readers racing as the romance between a slave and a princess unfolds. This story of two star-crossed lovers and one curse will keep readers glued to the pages until the very end. It is definitely a story for romantics out there.”

*-Readers' Favorite Reviews*

“If you can imagine my big cartoon eyes in heart shape, that is exactly how I looked while reading this book. It is every romantic girl’s fantasy. It’s been ages since I’ve read something like this. It’s a dark fairy tale with a twist; a true love-conquers-all kind of novel that is so captivating. It’s a perfect romance novel with the perfect plot, perfect setting, perfect set of characters, and perfect ending. There is absolutely no dull moment in this story!”

*-Shey Saints Reviews*

“DuBois has changed a lifelong habit of mine. I have never been a fan of the prologue. More times than not, I skim the prologue to get the gist of what is to come. DuBois, however, has written a prologue so gripping, so detailed and vivid, that it hooked me within the first paragraphs. *The Fifth Bride of Pharaoh* gives readers the best of both worlds. DuBois combines romance and history with an added layer of mystery. Readers are kept guessing as to the identity of Sara and Matthaïos’s evil shadow, and the ultimate reveal is breathtaking.”

*-Literary Titan*

# Prologue:

## The Final Plea

*Ancient Egypt, 1806 B.C.*

Matthaios clutched his handkerchief with a shaky hand. He used the cloth to dab at the spot of blood at the corner of his mouth. He sucked in sharply through his teeth as pain seared across his face. A raw taste flooded his mouth and Matthaios spat out a bit of blood on the floor of his grimy prison cell.

In his many years as Pharaoh's faithful servant, Matthaios had experienced many of the ruler's personalities. He'd seen bratty Pharaoh, noble Pharaoh, fearless warrior Pharaoh, but never had Matthaios experienced the monster who'd captured and imprisoned him.

The emperor's eyes bore a perilous mixture of fury and disbelief as his fist collided with Matthaios's jaw in one swift punch. Pharaoh ordered the arrest of the servant who'd betrayed him. Of all the women in the world, why did Matthaios have to go for that one?

Matthaios glanced around the torchlit dungeon. The fires glowed against the inky night that poured in through barred windows. He went back to dabbing his tender and busted lip until realizing that his efforts were for naught. He threw the bloodstained rag across the cell. What was the point of fixing his lip just for his neck to be severed at dawn?

Pharaoh strode into the dungeon with a retinue of henchmen. The noisy prison suddenly quieted, as if falling under an enchantment. Pharaoh had not come into Matthaios's field of view, but the slave boy knew every time his ruler was near. The air would still around Matthaios as if the world was rearranging itself to accommodate Pharaoh. Matthaios preemptively took a knee, and as suspected, Pharaoh appeared.

"Your majesty," Matthaios respectfully greeted the emperor, who had vowed to claim his head.

Pharaoh snapped his fingers and a guard ran forward with a chair. Pharaoh addressed his soldiers, "Leave me with the traitor."

"Yes, Pharaoh," the guards replied in unison and filed out of the prison.

Pharaoh took a seat before the bars of Matthaios's prison cell. Matthaios dropped from his knee to sit flat on the floor, careful to remain lower than his

sovereign, as was the custom.

Matthaios asked cautiously, "Did you read my plea to spare Sara?"

"Yes, and I have denied it."

Matthaios's heart sank into his stomach and tears welled up in his eyes. "You don't have to kill her. You are the all-powerful Pharaoh of Egypt. Squash any rumors of her running away with me and carry on with your life together."

"To what end?" Pharaoh shook his head. "I cannot have a wife who might be putting any man's bastards upon my throne. If I can't trust her to remain loyal to me, how can I trust her to remain loyal to Egypt? Do you have the faintest clue of the bind you have put me in?"

"I know, my lord," Matthaios spoke humbly with a tone of defeat.

"I'm going to have to kill you," Pharaoh spoke without emotion as if taking a life was as simple as deciding how to dress in the morning.

"I know, my lord."

"You have left me no choice."

"I know, my lord."

"THEN WHY!" Pharaoh shouted in a voice that could quake heaven and earth.

Matthaios's eyes lowered in shame. "You demand to know how I could betray my emperor, why I would sentence myself to death over a woman. I would tell you if I had an answer. All I know is from the moment I met her I suddenly became aware of my blood being pulled in and out of my heart, the way the moon directs the tide. I tried to catch my breath, but the more I inhaled, the more I felt consumed..."



# CHAPTER 1:

## Impending Doom

*Months ago...*

Sara, princess of Nubia, gawked at the shadow on a sundial. She urgently informed her friend, “We must be going. It’s getting late.”

“I implore you, just one more vendor,” cried the spirited Princess Sobek, sister of the Egyptian pharaoh.

“Just one more,” Sara agreed, not that she had much of a choice.

Sobek would have never let it rest. She towed Sara through the sea of elated faces. This friend of Sara’s was nothing like what she’d expected of a princess of Egypt. Sobek had only been in Nubia one night when she convinced Sara they should disguise themselves as commoners, sneak out of the palace, and attend a festival in the lower village.

The sun made its glorious descent below the horizon, bathing the joyous festival in magnificent twilight. There were magic shows, puppeteers, acrobats, and jugglers. Vendors and merchants filled the streets, as far as the eye could see. They sold food, spices, livestock, and fabrics. The scent of sweet desserts and salty meats wafted throughout the kingdom. You could practically taste the air.

Some structures in Nubia were humble. Others soared clear to the heavens, with mighty pillars, and statues of the gods. All were swarming with elated figures, drunk on beer, love, and happiness.

This festival was held to celebrate Wepet Renpet, also known as the opening of the year, marked by the Nile’s annual flood. This Egyptian New Year also served as an assembly period for the Counsel of African Kings. Pharaoh Amenemhat, a former rival of Nubia, would be in attendance this year. Nubia offered a warm welcome to Egypt, a symbol of peace between two nations.

“Why are you in such a rush to leave,” Sobek questioned as she moved her body to the beat of African drums. “This festival is incredible!”

“Believe me, you will want to be gone when the Wepet Renpet bells sound. The closest boy in your vicinity is going to kiss you, whether you know him or not!”

Sobek laughed at Sara's paranoia. "I forgot... I will fall down and die if a man kisses me. I should miss the best celebration ever because I'm at risk of a boy kissing me. Egyptian lands are at risk of war, famine, disease, and drought but the worst plague of all is a boy's kiss."

Sara had a good laugh at herself. "When you put it that way, I sound prudish and fearful."

"You are."

"You're not even a little concerned? We have our reputations to protect."

"No one will recognize us, and bystanders will be too occupied with kisses of their own to notice with whom we are engaged."

Princess Sara had skin of smooth mahogany, as was common for a Nubian. Princess Sobek was tanned, like the golden sands of Egypt. Both girls possessed raven hair and eyes of sparkling obsidian. Their beauty earned them lusty gazes as they explored the celebration.

Sara was surprised and a little unnerved at how differently men perceived her when they were unaware of her title. Sobek, on the other hand, soaked up the attention with the consistency of a sponge, a sign that this was not the first time she'd pulled a charade like this.

It was urgent for Sara to leave soon. Her uncle, Myron, King of Nubia, was loaning their castle to every eligible prince of Africa. Sara knew that she should be home entertaining; one of these royals would likely be her future husband, but Sobek was a terrible influence.

"Isn't this the most amazing thing you've ever smelled?" Sara said as she held an exotic spice up to Sobek's nose.

"It is remarkable. What is it called?" Sobek asked with a grin.

The merchant spoke up from behind his stand, "This is a spice known as cinnamon, my lady. The one next to it is called nutmeg."

"I'll take both," Sara said as the enchanting festival whirled around them.

If nothing else, Sobek knew how to have fun and Gods only knew how much Sara needed that in her life.

Sara closed her eyes and turned her face to the moonlight, breathing in the spicy air. She enjoyed the sensation of a warm breeze as it fluttered the colorful silks of her gown. Sara's eyes drifted open as the shopkeeper placed the bag in her hand.

"Thank you," Sara said politely and he told her the same.

"All right we've gone to our last stand," Sara reminded Sobek. "It's time to leave. I'm hosting a party."

"I haven't even purchased fabrics."

“Sobek!” Sara shouted with glee as her mischievous friend towed her throughout the celebration.



The royalty of Egypt traveled by camel and chariot, but their hapless slaves were forced to make the entire journey on foot. Pharaoh’s servants were just outside of Nubia. The exhausted slaves took a much-needed respite on the side of the road, while guards doled out soup and beer. Luxuries like beef and wine were reserved for the wealthy.

Matthaios aimlessly picked his food. He kept lifting a spoonful of soup and allowing it to fall back into the bowl in a series of splats. He had no appetite. All he felt was a pull like magnetism calling his soul away from this place, and the harsh iron shackles keeping his body from following his spirit.

He could envision the city ahead, alive with festivity, funny men, and beautiful women. He could taste the tanginess of the wine, the sweetness, and warmth of a freshly baked pie.

The wind shifted and blew dirt into the open wounds on his feet. It stung bitterly. The leather straps of his sandals had chafed his feet bloody. Heavy manacles had scoured his wrists raw.

Despite these harsh conditions, Matthaios counted his blessings. *I’m more fortunate than those who labor in the sun building the pyramids of Egypt. Builder slaves fall victim to the lash, malnutrition, treacherous falls, and the desert sun. They don’t live very long. I’ll be in Nubia shortly, treated to a bath, and serving the brides of Pharaoh.*



The echo of persistent clanging caused Sara to spin abruptly.  
She collided with a man, much fairer skinned than her.  
His shackled arms launched out to catch her.

Once steady, her eyes trailed up to his face, which bore a half-smirk of a smile. It was the most beautiful smile she'd ever seen.

There was beer pouring from the rooftops like rain. Drunkards were gallivanting. Fistfights were springing up like daisies. The cover of night had transformed a lighthearted festival into chaos, but as Sara gazed into the face of this peculiar slave all seemed perfect.

He removed his rough sword calloused hands from the smooth black skin of her shoulders. He bent to retrieve her sandal. She felt herself exhale as he held her ankle to slip on her shoe.

He rose with her fallen bag of spices. "My lady."

"Thank you," she spoke, nearly breathless as he passed her the bag.

"No, thank you," he insisted. His eyes traced the curves of her face as if trying to brand her image upon his mind.

"For what may I ask?"

"For being the most amazing thing I'll ever get to touch."

"You are entirely too bold, slave," her tone was reprimanding but her smile gave her away.

"Apologies, my lady."

His full glorious smile came out and Sara could feel her stomach flipflop. Her life had been spinning out of control, but in this one perfect moment, all was calm. For the first time in her existence, she knew she was in just the right place at just the right time.

A thunderous BING, BING, BING, echoed throughout the celebration. The bells were ringing. Tradition demanded a kiss between them.

His smoothness went out the window and he rambled awkwardly, "We don't have to... I wasn't expecting..." Matthaios drew in a deep breath and gathered his wits. "Sorry, I get flustered when I'm nervous."

"Ancient lovers believed a kiss would literally unite their souls because the spirit was said to be carried in one's breath." Sara took a deep breath to calm herself. "Sorry, I spout trivia when I'm nervous."

They chuckled at the absurdity of it all.

Matthaios shook his head with amusement. *What's one kiss between strangers in the night? The awkward conversation we're carrying on has lasted longer than the kiss would have.*

Sara just stood there with a bashful smirk. *It's one kiss of my own volition before being forced into a lifetime of mandatory embraces. I doubt I'll know my future husband any better than I know this slave.*

Matthaios convinced that no beautiful woman would kiss a man in shackles, politely nodded, "Goodnight, my lady."

“Goodnight.” Her hope was snuffed out like a suddenly extinguished candle.

They had bid farewell and yet no one moved. They stood in silence, waiting for the other person to walk away. Gazing into his eyes was like falling into the stars, causing Sara to feel weightless and disoriented.

Matthaios looked deeply into her eyes, searching for signs of rejection. When he found that her desire mirrored his own he leaned forward and kissed her softly, a chaste press of his lips to hers, with an answering push of hers to his. This simple embrace was like being hit by a tidal wave. It bore the power of an earthquake and the heat of a volcano. They parted with a slow exhale.

Life carried on around them, but they were trapped in a different moment than the other people in the crowded festival.

Matthaios was violently struck in the face with the heavy handle of a whip.

It was a painful unexpected end to a wonderful encounter.

Sara shrieked in horror.

“I apologize, my lady,” spoke a slave driver with a patch over one eye, a sadistic tyrant known as Osiris. “These slaves are savages. He asked that we stop for a moment, so he may smell the pies, and he rewards my leniency by harassing a young woman.”

“This was my fault,” Sara spoke hurriedly. Her hands were shaking and her mind was flustered. “I bumped into him. He merely caught me from falling and being trampled by drunkards... and then the bells went off. The servant was only trying to help.”

Sara made certain to pull her hood forward and cast her face in shadow when she addressed the slave driver.

She could not believe it when Matthaios mouthed the words, “I’m all right.”

He was the one who’d been abused and still he was comforting her. She’d never known a man who would place her needs above his own. Now the one time she met a fellow of such caliber they lived in parallel universes. When his silent words failed to wipe the concern from her face a subtle nod and wink did the trick.

“Very well,” Osiris nodded. “Sorry for the inconvenience, my lady.”

Osiris signaled his guards and they led the single file of slaves away.

Sara stood mesmerized, her mouth slightly parted in a smile. She silently urged Matthaios. *Look back... glance back just once so I can recall your likeness in my dreams.* And just as if he’d done the impossible and heard her silent plea, he glanced over his shoulder with a smile.



Matthaios was drawn from his beautiful memory by the sound of a metal plate skidding across the floor of his prison cell. The joyous festival music faded into the tortured cries of sick and dying prisoners. Beauty and décor transformed into dreary gray walls and iron bars. Sara's delightful scent was replaced by the foul odor of urine and rat droppings.

He stared at the food with disgust. *It's a stewed rat or some other diseased rodent with a loaf of moldy bread.* Knowing the food might give him more sickness than strength, Matthaios ignored his growling belly and pushed the plate aside. *Perhaps I should have eaten it, might have given me a better death than decapitation by the sword of an executioner.*

The furious Pharaoh, sitting just beyond the bars growled with contempt, "What happened next?"

Matthaios confessed, "I walked away on that wonderful night, completely unaware that I had started down a path from which there was no return and the impending doom that would follow. All I knew was from the moment I kissed her half of my heart sang and the other half recognized that I would never be the same again..."

## Chapter 2:

# The Fifth Bride of Pharaoh

Sara dreaded turning around as Sobek came out of hiding. Sara could already see the impish grin on the unruly royal's face.

"What was that about?" Sobek could barely wait to question Sara about the forbidden encounter.

"Nothing," Sara spoke quietly as she continued to watch the handsome stranger shrink into the distance.

As the niece of a king, Sara lived as little more than a pawn in a game of politics. Soon she would be wed, not for love, but for sake of Gods and country. Sara could only hope her future husband would stir up a modicum of the passion the slave did in one twinkle of his chestnut eyes.

Sobek giggled. "I hid from my brother's slaves to keep from being recognized, and I find you batting your eyelashes at one."

Sara felt a sudden rush of embarrassment over her unladylike behavior. "I did no such thing. I merely showed respect for a timeless tradition."

Sobek teased, "Out of all the banquets, balls, and gatherings I've never seen you look at any man the way you looked at that servant."

"He is a slave and likely a eunuch," Sara sternly reminded her. "My fleeting glances were from pity, not passion. Men being mutilated and forced to work without wages sickens me."

Sobek pointed with a toothy grin. "That slave boy is marching to your palace. At last, I agree with you. We should be getting back."

Sara's mind raced and her mouth went dry at the thought. *He was in chains. I assumed he was going to the auction, not my home! I was never supposed to see him again.*

It seemed Qetesh, Goddess of sacred pleasures, had cast an enchantment over the love-struck kingdom of Nubia. Lovers were kissing and caressing at every turn.

Sara felt guilt at the erotic tingle that swept through her as she made her way back to her palace. Royal ladies were supposed to be stoic and reserved... weren't they? At the very least, a proper lady should be fearful right now, but for some reason, Sara was unafraid as she weaved a staggered line through the

lovefest. For the first time in ages, she felt human. Deep down she knew her brief meeting with the gorgeous slave was to blame for this. She unconsciously searched for Matthaios amidst the intertwining bodies and scolded herself promptly for doing so.

“Oh, my Gods!” Sobek shrieked and quickened her pace.

Sara laughed. “Serves you right for insisting upon staying at the celebration this late. I warned you about the drunkards, and the fights, and the debauchery.”

“Did you see...”

“Yes,” Sara chuckled.

“And the...”

“Yes, I saw that too.” Sara assured the traumatized princess, “We’re almost there.”

No one bothered Sara and Sobek. It was clear they didn’t want to be a part of this insanity, but Sara had to admit, if only to herself, that the presence of her fellow adolescents running wild was stimulating on a primal level. She kept picturing herself waiting in a darkened alcove for the slave boy and the sins they would commit in each other’s arms.



Matthaios and his slave brethren reached the bathhouse at the center of Nubia. Matthaios hesitantly entered the steaming chamber. He felt shy and self-conscious in front of the female bath attendants.

His bather, a quirky young woman, assured him, “It’s all right. I’ve seen it all.”

Matthaios was undressed and checked for lice, before being thoroughly bathed and groomed. The attendants left the slaves to soak. The girls would return when it was time to rub oil and eyeliner on Pharaoh’s houseboys. Matthaios enjoyed the steaming bath. During his travel, he was only provided a bowl of water, a washcloth, and a sliver of soap. This was no match for the desert sun. Matthaios lathered his locks with soap and rubbed bubbles all over his body.

His thoughts drifted to the lovely and peculiar girl at the festival. Tonight, he’d met a woman who showed genuine concern for him and not only that but interest too. This woman made him feel human again. He hadn’t been permitted to bathe in weeks and she didn’t flinch away or show disgust. *I removed my*



*hands from her, not just out of duty, but embarrassment of the condition I was in, mortification of what Pharaoh reduced me to. I, a filthy slave, rightfully took my hands from her and rather than relief, her eyes shone with a glint of disappointment. He laid his head back on the rim of the tub with a fleeting irrational hope that she worked in the palace that he was visiting. What a wonderful world it would be if we served under the same roof for just a week.*



Music enchanted every corner of the party. Delicious spicy aromas swam throughout the grand ballroom. Serving girls with trays of food and pitchers of wine whirled around the palace doting on Africa's elite.

The only royal not in attendance was Sara's cousin, Adrion, Crown Prince of Nubia. She wasn't surprised by his absence. Adrion was a battle-hardened warrior with no interest in politics.

Sara sat at the long banquet table at the right hand of King Myron. The finest fabrics wrapped her curves like a hug, and she sparkled with expensive jewels. King Myron, brother of Sara's departed father, was a man of great stature. A crown of gold and precious gems sat atop his shaved head.

Myron sternly whispered, "For heaven's sake, would it kill you to smile, girl?"

Sara replied with the same melancholy stare, "Would you smile if you were being sold to the highest bidder?"

His hand instinctively flinched to hit her. It wouldn't have been the first time, but several nobles were watching. The party was far too loud for their conversation to be overheard, but Myron was still reluctant to prove his niece's insolence in front of the very men he yearned to wed her to. Sara sighed as his hand gently caressed her cheek.

"Do you think I'm that stupid," Myron whispered with a cunning grin.

"Yes," Sara smirked.

"You are trying to bait me into striking you so that you appear too strong-willed and insolent to beguile your suitors. You will be married for the good of Nubia."

"And what of love? Uncle Myron, I'm your blood."

Myron rolled his eyes. "I'll shed my blood and more for the glory of Nubia."

Sara rose from her elegant armchair at the right hand of the king. With a grit of her teeth, she walked out on the balcony to visit her pet falcon. Sara pulled a flute from her waistband and played a melody. The notes called to the predatory bird. She slipped on a sturdy leather glove that extended to her elbow. The falcon swooped in on swift wings, shrieking as it flew. With grace and precision, it landed on her gloved arm.

As Sara doted on the stunning creature, her mind drifted to the boy she had encountered at the festival. *Perhaps Sobek was merely teasing when she said the servant belonged to her brother. The slave's destination must have been elsewhere. I haven't seen him here.* Her chest fluttered with a confusing mixture of relief and disappointment.

Sara's skin crawled at the sensation of a man's hands upon her. She spun in his arms, not surprised to find the bane of her existence.

Sara backed away with her bird. "Pharaoh Amenemhat, as long as this palace is my home and you are a guest here I will thank you not to touch me."

He reluctantly pulled his hands back, amused and intrigued by the tone she had taken with him. "As you wish, fair princess. I recall a time when you were positively smitten with me."

"That was before you had four wives," Sara dutifully reminded him.

Pharaoh Amenemhat was a tanned skin, mountain of muscles, wearing a very ornate kilt. His limbs and neck were adorned with shiny gold accents. The most extravagant part of his wardrobe was his striped nemes headdress. It had two large flaps, which hung down behind the ears and in front of both shoulders. This cloth was held fast by a band of solid gold, the fierce head of a cobra jutting off the front of it.

Sara had never been so forceful with a man, especially one of his rank, but it seemed every time Pharaoh was in her presence he would find a way to grope her or rub against her. He expected to be able to snap his fingers and watch her drape herself across his lap.

The hawk shrieked and caught Pharaoh's attention. "My word, is that a genuine African attack bird? They are next to impossible to come by."

Sara assured him with a pleasant smile, "Sasha was given to me by my father. Unless you yearn to know what she's capable of you should take your hand off me."

Pharaoh removed his palm from her posterior. He thought he'd be able to distract her with talk of predatory birds and loosen her up with flattery but it seemed no amount of boasting about his riches, his power, or even the size of his... weapon was going to woo this stubborn princess of Nubia. She would have

to be broken. The only woman who had ever denied him became his greatest obsession.

Pharaoh bid her farewell and rejoined King Myron and other men of power. They discussed politics, war, and territories.

Sara made her escape to the other side of the party. She stood next to Sobek, who was like the sister Sara always wished she had. Sobek nabbed two goblets of wine from a circling servant.

She passed one to Sara and whispered, "to your left."

Sara lowered the wine chalice from her lips and gazed across the floor. There stood Matthaios dotting on a bride of Pharaoh. Sara ordered her eyes to look away but they betrayed her, greedily drinking up the vision of him. His homespun breeches hung dangerously low on his hips. The amber of his eyes captivated her, and those lips... my Gods those lips that were full and pouty for a man and possessed the soft pink of a spring bud.

Sara realized that Osiris must have taken the slaves to the city bathhouse first, and that's what took them so long to arrive. In the enchanting light of the ballroom, Matthaios's skin glowed milky white. He was definitely from some foreign land, most likely taken as a child like so many others.

The color drained from Matthaios's face as he locked eyes with Sara. His palms grew moist and his heart pounded against his ribcage. *She is dressed in formal attire, a high ranking noble, likely a princess! This is not what I had in mind when I wished for her to have a position here! I'll be lucky if I'm not lashed for my earlier actions!*

Sobek smirked, as she witnessed the awkward horrified stare between them. "Matthaios is a magnificent specimen. Isn't he?"

"What... I um... I hadn't noticed," Sara stammered.

Sobek gave her a disbelieving look. "He can't stop gazing at you."

"Well I wish he would stop," Sara said, a little embarrassed.

Sobek wasn't a simpleton. She could tell her friend was captivated by the slave boy and he was equally smitten with her. "You are sacrificing everything for Myron and Nubia."

Sara gave the respectable political response, "It is my duty and an honor."

"It's unfair," Sobek protested. "How many pieces of yourself will you allow Emperor Myron to rip from you? Do you want the only man you share your company with to be the arrogant pig Myron barter you to? If this slave fascinates you then talk to him."

"Sobek!" Sara whisper/yelled.

Sobek, as usual, was out of line but her words stung with undeniable truth.

Sara quietly whispered before exiting, "I think it would be best if I avoid this Matthaïos for the remainder of your stay."

Sara fled like the room was on fire.

She was charging back to her chamber when trumpets sounded at the banquet. This signified a major announcement was to be made. King Myron beckoned Sara, who dutifully hastened to his side.

Scattered conversations filtered to a hush as King Myron stood before the crowd to make his speech. "After much consideration, I have chosen a match for my niece, Sara, Princess of Nubia. I am elated to inform you she will secure our alliance with Egypt by becoming the fifth bride of Pharaoh Amenemhat."

Sara's jaw dropped. She felt like she'd been punched in the stomach. He'd knocked the wind out of her.

"Sara," Myron whispered sternly. "Clap. You're embarrassing me."

Sara couldn't breathe let alone clap. When at last she caught her breath, she willed her petrified arms to move in feeble applause.

Myron continued talking about an alliance between the kingdoms as well as disputed lands and other things, but Sara couldn't hear a word of it. She watched his lips move but it was as if they made no sound. She was in a trance. The only words repeating in her disbelieving mind:

"Betrothal..."

"Betrothal..."

"Betrothal..."

At last, Myron finished the wedding announcements and the crowd congregated over wine and finger foods with subtle music playing in the background.

"One moment please," Sara said.

"Of course," Myron released her without complaint.

Sara fled her uncle's presence, unable to believe what was happening.

The sale was complete. There was no turning back.

She had been bartered to an emperor with a collection of women.

Sobek, equally horrified, thought about going after Sara but knew it would make matters worse.

Sara stormed in Pharaoh's direction. She weaved through the party on a mission.

It was inappropriate, even deadly, to approach an emperor without first being summoned or announced. At the moment Sara didn't give a damn about formalities and court etiquette.

Egyptian guards drew weapons, ready to strike her down.

Nubian guards took up arms to defend their princess.

A union forged in the name of peace, now teetered on the brink of war and bloodshed...

## CHAPTER 3:

### A Snake in the Shadows

Warriors from opposing countries faced off at a crowded banquet. Candlelight glinted off a hundred raised swords as they awaited a signal to slice each other to ribbons.

“It’s fine,” Pharaoh called off his henchmen.

His guards sheathed their swords and parted way. The Nubian guards followed suit. Sara breathed a sigh of relief. She yearned not for war and carnage, but for a peaceful resolution to her forced betrothal.

“Princess Sara.” Pharaoh smiled as she stood before him, undaunted.

“May I have a word, my lord?”

“Absolutely”

Sara whispered to her regal betrothed, “My father married for love and chose a peasant. I only possess half royal blood. Surely a ruler of your stature...”

“I know exactly what you are and what you are not. Myron gave a full disclosure of your lineage,” Pharaoh interrupted.

“I feel duty bound to inform your grace that I have been in the company of several princesses who are seeking such a union.”

“All the more reason you should be grateful.”

“With all due respect, my place is here, but Princess Imani fancies you, Princess Asha is completely besotted, and Princess Zoya...”

Pharaoh silenced her. “There is nothing you can say to dissuade me. You will be a princess of Egypt and that is final. Now choose an Egyptian servant and get acquainted.”

“I’m not allowed to bring my own?” she asked with tears in her eyes at the thought of leaving everything and everyone she knew behind.

“Do you think I would be stupid enough to allow Myron to install one of his spies in my court?” Pharaoh clapped his hands twice.

There was a sudden clatter of footsteps. The Egyptian servants gathered and fell into a staunch formation, like an army.

Sara refused to live under the magnifying glass of one of Pharaoh’s spies. “I will choose none.”

“Have it your way.”

Pharaoh was about to choose one at random until a breathtaking woman walked forward. It was Ruptah, queen of the western territories, and the older sister of Sobek and Pharaoh. Queen Ruptah was the only one capable of silencing Pharaoh, the only one he truly listened to.

Ruptah shook her head at him. “A harem boy is more than just a slave; he serves as a constant companion to your bride. Put thought into whom you choose.”

“Perhaps you should choose,” Pharaoh suggested.

Ruptah carefully considered each one. She pointed at the ivory face that stood out in a sea of tan-skinned slaves. “I am familiar with that one. He is kind and loyal.”

“Matthaios,” Pharaoh called with a snap of his fingers. “Become acquainted with your charge.”

Sara fled the celebration, her vision blurred by streaming tears.

She felt as insignificant as a grain of sand being carried by the breeze. She detested her power-hungry uncle and his lecherous nobles. She was not going to miss the unwanted advances of those arrogant pigs who felt they should own the world. However, a marriage to Pharaoh wouldn't be any better; he was the worst of them all.

Sara paced the floor of her elaborate chamber struggling to understand how so much could go wrong in a single moment. She felt relief at the sound of a knock on the door. She flung it open in hope of finding her friend, but Sobek was not the one at the threshold.

“I will understand if I am the last person you wish to see right now,” Queen Ruptah assured her.

“Not at all. Please come in, your majesty.” Sara fought back tears and offered her guest a seat.

Sara wasn't shocked that Sobek would run to her big sister. Queen Ruptah was the one with poise and wisdom. Egypt lost its greatest treasure when Ruptah was sent west to marry a king.

It would have been customary to entertain a royal visitor on a lounge, with servants fawning over them the entire time, but Sara was too tired to stand on ceremony and too devastated to care what anyone thought of her. Sara plopped down on the bed and Ruptah followed suit.

Queen Ruptah removed a necklace with a large diamond pendant and placed it in Sara's palm.

“I couldn't.” Sara tried to give it back.

Ruptah refused to take it. “I insist. On the night of my engagement, I felt much like you do. I was given this necklace by my mother, not for its value, but

for its strength.”

Sara appeared confused. “I don’t understand, your majesty.”

“A diamond is the most beautiful and resilient thing on earth,” Queen Ruptah explained, “but much like women, the diamond is often underestimated. People are too distracted by its beauty to notice its strength. Intense pressure and heat will destroy most things, but you are a diamond, Sara. Pressure only makes you that much stronger. Heat makes you shine that much brighter.”

“I don’t know if I can do this alone.”

“Sobek will be there, and I promise to stay in Egypt for as long as you need me.”

“Am I to say goodbye to happiness forever?”

“Some people were born to be happy, and others were born to be great. Marry my brother and bring out the good man that is buried inside of him. Bless these lands with peace and prosperity. Be a diamond.”

Sara smiled through her tears. “Thank you, your majesty.”

Queen Ruptah hugged her tight and tucked her into bed. For the briefest of moments, Sara remembered what it felt like to have a mom. Ruptah let herself out, while Sara fought to focus on the duty of this marriage rather than the man. She was suffocating, drowning in an ocean of heavy feelings when a second knock snatched her to the surface.

Sara flung open the double doors.

It was Matthaïos.

She shrieked and slammed the doors shut. *How could I have been so rude!* She berated herself, drew in a calming breath, and then cracked just one of the doors.

Surprisingly, Matthaïos wasn’t offended by her reaction, just amused. He was smiling his amazing smile and Sara found it hard to keep her wits about her.

She had to look away from Matthaïos as she told Osiris, “I wish not for an Egyptian slave.”

“I’ll have to inform Pharaoh,” Osiris sternly warned her.

“As you wish,” she spoke to the floor. “Sorry to have wasted your time.”

“Very well.” Osiris ordered the armed guards who’d escorted them, “String Matthaïos up. Twenty lashes should suffice.”

Matthaïos fought against the brutes as they drug him away, soon to rip his flesh open with a whip.

It wasn’t fair, but slaves were often blamed and punished for things that weren’t their fault.

Sara screamed, “What are you doing!”



“Seeing the slave punished, my lady,” Osiris answered. “He’s obviously offended you in some manner.”

“No, no he hasn’t,” Sara swore. “I was just afraid of losing everything I know.”

Matthaios breathed an enormous sigh of relief as Sara opened the door further and snatched him in.

“Good evening, my lady.” Osiris bowed slightly.

She politely nodded and closed the door, encasing herself and the slave in an awkward silence that seemed to span an eternity. He took two steps forward to lessen the distance between them. She took two steps back, restoring the gap.

Matthaios took the initiative to speak first, “If you don’t want me, you are welcome to choose another. I was out of line when I addressed you in the lower village. I knew not of your station.”

This was the most awkward moment of Sara’s life, but after nearly getting him flogged she knew he deserved an explanation. “You’ve done nothing wrong. I’m just overwhelmed.”

Matthaios nodded understandably, “This betrothal came as a surprise.”

“To say the least.” Sara laughed, despite the tears in her eyes.

“I can see why you would believe I am little more than a spy for Pharaoh, but it is you I serve above all others. It’s the oath we take as harem boys, to never betray a lady’s secrets,” Matthaios assured her while taking a few more steps forward, happy that she took steps forward too.

He reached out to her. She placed her trembling hands in his waiting palms. A sudden jolt of electricity surged through them at the feel of each other’s warmth, and the air between them sizzled.

He looked away in shame. “I know I made a mess of things, but is it possible for us to start over?”

“Don’t apologize for the way we met. No one has ever made me feel the way you do.”

Her honesty ceased his breath. His heart swelled to twice its size. His chest could barely contain it. Out of loyalty to Egypt, Matthaios willed himself to release her hands. Sara’s eyes darkened with disappointment.

“What do you want to do?” Matthaios sweetly enquired.

Sara was shocked. She hadn’t been asked what she wanted since her parents were alive.

She remained dumbfounded for so long that Matthaios repeated the question, “Is there something you would prefer to do other than stand here, my lady?”

“Something we can’t,” she sighed, defeated.

“What makes you certain of that? We can do whatever you desire.”

Sara answered in a melancholy tone, “I wish I could go out with you. I want to see my city before I am forced to leave it, but I’ve become Pharaoh’s political hostage. Would he even allow it?”

“You should probably grab your shawl. It’s starting to cool off.”

Her eyes brightened with glee. “It isn’t against the rules?”

“No,” Matthaios shook his head. “Pharaoh demanded that we get acquainted. He never specified where.”

“I want to see the Ruins.”

Matthaios was stunned by Sara’s choice of destination. Of all the places in the world, why would she choose the Ruins?

“Isn’t that place cursed?”

“According to legend,” Sara smirked. “We don’t have to go if you’re not up to it.”

He grinned with intrigue as his curious nature got the best of him. “After you, my lady.”

Sara and Matthaios embarked on a legendary night, unaware that the worst kind of person had witnessed a kiss between the princess and the slave.

A malicious serpent lurked in the shadows, waiting for the opportune moment to strike...

## Chapter 4:

# A Legendary Night

Sara stood firmly on a chariot that was trimmed in solid gold. Matthaïos boarded behind her. A cool wind blew in their direction and she nuzzled against him for warmth. He closed his eyes as he breathed her in, allowing her sweet jasmine scent to envelope him. Sara couldn't believe he was passing her the reins.

She enquired with excitement, "Are you sure about this?"

"You said you wanted to learn," he reminded her with a charming grin.

Men had promised Sara many things, but they never kept their word. Suitors would pledge to cut their mother's heads off if they believed it would land them a girl with a hefty dowry. Matthaïos was different. He honored his promises.

One of his hands gripped a rail to anchor them. His other hand wrapped around her waist. Gooseflesh rose on her skin and her heart skipped a beat. It was difficult to convince herself that his embrace wasn't intimate, that it was merely for sake of her safety.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. They looked in each other's eyes for a warm tender moment, before he helped her snap the reins.

The horses took off like bolts of powerful lightning.

The chariot raced down the deserted roads, opposite the festival.

Sara's braids whipped wildly in the breeze. Matthaïos smiled with delight at her squeals of joy. He reached down to help her steer.

His hands felt like warm cocoons around hers, as the horses galloped through the city.

Sara and Matthaïos could see the Ruins coming into view. They were breathtaking, even at this time of night. Toppled pillars lay covered in a soft blanket of moss and vines. Crumbling monuments and temples sprawled about a lush green landscape. Vines grew up the walls of an ancient castle, weaving in and out of its stone windows. The pleasant scent of flowers wafted in the air. Enchanting fireflies lit up the night, as they floated around the ancient Ruins.

The horses slowed to a trot as they came closer. Matthaïos and Sara rolled to a stop as they reached their destination. He helped her down from the chariot. Still, under the intrinsic high of their chariot ride, Sara felt an urge she hadn't since childhood.

She picked up her skirts and ran ecstatically through the labyrinth of towering trees and ruined buildings.

Matthaios chased her lovely fleeing form, like two nymphs in the garden of paradise.

Her shoes slipped from her feet and she left them abandoned; they'd been killing her feet all night, another thing in her life putting restrictions on her and she yearned to be free at this moment, free with him.

He ceased and looked around after losing sight of her. A firefly illuminated her smiling face as she peeked around a tree.

Sara beckoned him before running off again.

He laughed and pursued her until she was his captive.

She stood wrapped in Matthaios's arms, her bosom heaving from their joyful frolic.

A tingle swept through him and his gaze lingered for an inappropriate length of time. He could not deny that her sheer presence stirred all of his senses. She could find neither the will nor the want to push him away. He was a penniless commoner and she was betrothed to another, still, the yearning was no less. He yearned to kiss her so badly but he could never have a girl like this. Sara was forbidden fruit.

She whispered in the darkness, "Go ahead. It wouldn't be the first time."

"I... I can't. I'm sorry." With heavy sadness, he let her go.

Her heart sank. "It's different when you know who I am."

"It's different when I know what you are. To truly know who you are would take a lifetime, one I am most willing to devote, as your humble servant." He bent low to kiss her knuckles.

Sara caressed his cheek. "For all our hardships the fates have given us this beautiful night and I am grateful for even that."

His downtrodden expression lifted with the warmth of her touch. "I am grateful if only to serve you, to be calmed by the serenity of your voice, counseled by your wisdom, and gaze upon your beauty."

Her heart pounded as she stood before him speechless. No man had ever talked to her this way. It felt incredible to have a man look at her as more than a breeder of sons or a provider of dowered lands.

Matthaios and Sara explored the Ruins in comfortable silence until they found a place that spoke to them. It wasn't the biggest structure, nor was it the most beautiful, but it beguiled them to enter.

They crossed the threshold. Only the walls and fireplace remained. The floor had become a bed of grass and the ceiling was no more. They started a cozy little fire in the hearth and rested together on a blanket. Sara's head rested upon the

cradle of his shoulder and he wrapped one arm around her. They gazed up at the heavens counting stars and admiring the constellations.

Sara couldn't help but ask, "When I bumped into you, the slave driver said you had asked to smell the pies, not eat them, but smell them, why?"

"I would rather not say," Matthaios shook his head with an awkward smile. "You'll think I'm pathetic."

"I will not judge you. I promise."

They rolled onto their sides to face one another.

Matthaios confessed, "I had a family once. Each year my memories of them grow fuzzier. Many philosophers are beginning to say that scent is the closest sense to memory. When I smell a freshly baked pie I recall having an older brother who doted on me. He worked hard but was never too busy to take me fishing or carve a toy for me. I remember my father's hearty laughter, and how I was his greatest joy in life. Just a whiff of a pie helps me recall the kindness in my mother's eyes. I can hear her angelic voice singing me awake in the morning and putting me to sleep at night. I remember that if only for a brief time I mattered to someone. Please tell me of your family, your highness."

"My mother was no royal, just a village medicine woman, who captured the heart of a king. The nobles had assured my father that he would find a respectable wife and that women were lined up across the continent seeking his proposal. The king had attempted courtships with noblewomen and even a few princesses. It never amounted to a thing, despite the fact that he and these women had many things in common. For my father, there was nothing more boring than perfect."

Matthaios was confused. "Wouldn't a king yearn for a queen he had everything in common with?"

"Gods no," Sara chuckled as the fire sent dancing shadows over her face. "That is pleasing at first but..."

"At some point, you grow tired of courting yourself," Matthaios concluded. "It's not a relationship that goes the distance."

"My father asked the council how can you grow as a king or even a man if the woman you wed holds conversations about things you already know and politics you already agree with?"

Matthaios nodded. "Your father was a brilliant king. Had he married a mold of himself there would have been no check and balance, no contrast."

"Precisely," Sara said. "He didn't need a woman who saw eye to eye with him on everything. He needed a woman who could aid him in seeing from an entirely different perspective. Mother helped him see through the eyes of the people he ruled. My parents fought from time to time but together they grew, as

did our kingdom. They started as a king and a commoner from two completely different worlds. Mother was humble. Father was prideful. Mother preferred small gatherings with family and friends. Father preferred hosting the most extravagant parties in the realm. When they first married, they didn't agree on most politics; and that system of balance gave Nubia its most prosperous reign in history."

"The queen was his polar opposite and yet his perfect match," Matthaïos stated thoughtfully. "It makes sense actually."

A tense silence fell over them as the firewood crackled and popped.

Sara addressed the elephant in the room, "There is obviously something between us. We can stand on ceremony and pretend it doesn't exist, but that won't change the truth. What are we supposed to do?"

"Remember that our duties are more important than our feelings," he sighed, "and try not to love each other."



Matthaïos could not bring himself to say goodbye on the morning following the best night of his life. The words pained him too deeply. As breaking dawn sent dancing shimmers over her beautiful face, Matthaïos made a stealthy exit from her chamber.

Sara awakened an hour later, pained by his absence. She understood why he couldn't say goodbye, but that realization made her miss him no less. She draped her soft feminine curves in a silk robe that left little to the imagination. Sara sauntered across her chamber. She stood on her balcony gazing down at the kingdom of Nubia. People were already flooding the streets in droves to begin the next day of the festival.

Pharaoh had not been able to travel with his builders, so the house slaves had to take their place for the moment. Matthaïos and the others were instructed to build a shrine at the festival to honor Pharaoh... as if the Emperor of Egypt didn't already have enough monuments, temples, and statues. Sara had never met anyone so in love with their own image. This shrine would take days to complete and Matthaïos was already dreading it.

This tribute to Pharaoh was a depressing reminder that Sara would soon be married to a lecherous tyrant. To make matters worse, the only man alive who

valued her would be doing construction under hazardous conditions for the next three days. She would worry every moment until he returned.

Sara looked up at the sound of a ruckus in the hall.

Sobek shoved past protesting chambermaids. She burst into Sara's room unannounced.

"There was an accident," Sobek heaved, completely out of breath.

"Who!" Sara shouted impatiently.

Sobek put her head down and tears filled her eyes.

Sara's mind raced. *If it was a family member, the nobles would be informing me. If it was a Nubian servant my maids would be delivering the tragic news. Sobek is here. It must be someone from the Egyptian court, someone personal to me.*

Sara shook the princess by the shoulders and demanded, "Is your brother unwell! Tell me of my betrothed! Is it serious!" Sara had not been jumping for joy to marry Pharaoh, but she would never wish harm on him. If only for Sobek's sake, Sara hoped for the best. "Is my betrothed unwell?"

"It's Matthaïos."

Sobek's admission stole the breath from the Nubian princess. Sara felt dizzy and nauseous at the thought of tragedy befalling him. Sara's legs felt weak, and she lowered to the floor, for fear that they may not support her.

Sobek knelt beside her, wishing she could do anything to soften the blow.

At last, Sara willed her petrified vocal cords to produce sound; she spoke in little more than a whisper, "How bad is it?"

Sobek shook her head and hugged her friend. "I'm so sorry."

## CHAPTER 5:

### The One I'm Trying Not to Love

Sara could hear bartering and bickering as she marched to the assembly chamber. The Council of African Kings was inside discussing politics, territories, and trade. It was not protocol to interrupt such a meeting, but a man's life was swinging in the balance, and she had not the time to waste.

"Step aside please," Sara instructed the armed guards that blocked her path.

"My lady, the council..."

"I am Princess of Nubia and you will step aside NOW!"

The guards opened the chamber doors and parted way in a formal coordinated motion. There were scrolls of papyrus and maps spread over an ebony table as the kings continued to debate. Sara's cousin, Adrion, excused himself from the table. Pharaoh followed suit. Neither of them knew who she needed to talk to, but they could tell it was of dire importance.

Sara addressed them respectfully, "your majesty, your highness."

Prince Adrion huffed impatiently, "I'm in the middle of a meeting. Speak, I haven't got all day."

"It's my betrothed I must speak with," Sara explained.

Adrion nodded understandably, "Good day, Cousin."

"Good day," Sara called after Adrion as he returned to the table of arguing royalty.

Pharaoh smiled and whispered, "I've been surrounded by grumbling men all day. Your beauty is a much-appreciated escape."

"Thank you, my lord," she modestly replied.

"But you didn't interrupt a council meeting for sake of gracing me with your presence. How may I be of service to my princess?"

Sara's insides cringed and her skin crawled at the words, *my princess*. Pharaoh was gorgeous. There was no wonder why she once fancied him, but his custom of treating women like territories to be seized was not an attractive trait.

Sara explained, "My physician, Dimp, informed me that he was denied permission to treat an injured man."

"That is correct," Pharaoh spoke without care. "My kingdom would decay to ruin if I paid a shaman every time a thoughtless slave fell from a construction



site. Even if Matthaïos receives treatment, he is unlikely to survive.”

“But you admit there is a chance of survival. Allow me to pay for his care. All I need from you is to grant the surgeon your consent.”

“If Matthaïos survives with irreparable damage he’ll be a cripple and a burden. I would sooner kill him myself.”

This sort of callousness regarding the lives of lower ranking people was not uncommon among royals, but it never sat well with Sara. “Is a man of flesh, blood, and spirit of no greater importance than a shattered vase, to be swept up and thrown away?”

Pharaoh was teetering on the edge of irritation now. “It’s just one slave.”

Her face twisted in a glare of repulsion. “How can you care so little?”

“Why do you care so much?”

Sara had no logical explanation for caring about the plight of a boy she barely knew. She searched for an answer but found none. “Pharaoh, I implore you...”

“You implore me?” His face split in a cunning grin. “I like the sound of that, much different from the tone you possessed at the banquet last night. I will permit your surgeon to touch my property under one condition.”

“Name your terms.”

“Prove that you will be an obedient wife. Kneel before me and kiss the hem of my robes.”

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Are you being serious, my lord? We’re in a chamber full of kings. You know the message that would send.”

Pharaoh nodded his head in the direction of the quarreling kings. “No one is paying attention to us. Do you want Matthaïos to die?”

“No,” Sara shook her head, “but you know I cannot kneel.”

“I’ll allow his suffering and death to serve as a precautionary tale for the others. Good day, my lady.”

Sara caught Pharaoh’s arm as he turned to leave. “I’ll do it.”

Tears filled her eyes as she began to lower herself literally and figuratively. She would endure this degradation if it meant that a life would be spared. The feeling of cold sharp steel at her throat stopped Sara before her knee could touch the ground.

“If you kneel I’ll strike you down,” Prince Adrion growled between clenched teeth, as he held his sword to Sara’s throat. “You are a symbol of our kingdom and Nubia bows to no man!”

Silence fell over the negotiations as every ruler in the chamber turned to stare.

Sara pleaded her case with tears streaming, "I'm trying to save a man's life! I implore you to walk away, Cousin."

"And I implore you not to force me to take your head." Adrion sheathed his sword and yanked Sara to her full height. He whispered in her ear, "I'm sorry, Cousin, but your heart is too big."

"At least I have one, you monster." She snatched her arm from his grasp and fled the chamber, nearly blinded by her tears. *I have failed to save the only man I matter to.*

She traveled to the servants' quarters to care for Matthaios. He was delirious with pain, and sweat beaded on his forehead. There were bowl sized bruises all over his body from blood pooling under his skin. Sara wept as she sat at his bedside, dabbing his face with a cool cloth.

She felt guilt and shame that the thought of losing Matthaios had pained her greater than the thought of losing her betrothed. *Has my treachery and disobedience brought grave misfortune upon Matthaios? Have the Gods invoked their wrath upon us? I yearn to be a humble and pious wife but how can I marry a man, even a pharaoh, who will humiliate his betrothed and allow a boy to suffer for the sake of proving a point?*

Sara jumped as she heard a knock on the window shutter. She wiped her tears and went to find out who. It was the village doctor, Dimp.

"You can't be here," Sara warned. "Pharaoh has forbidden you to touch him."

"I have three witnesses who will swear that I never entered the room," Dimp spoke through the window.

"Then why have you come?"

"Because Pharaoh forbid every physician, nurse, and shaman to treat this slave but you are none of those things, my lady," Dimp explained. "That slave will be gone within the hour if you do not do exactly as I say. You are going to set his broken bones and perform surgery."

"No! Matthaios will die if I cut him!"

"He will die if you do not. You've been watching me for years."

Sara shook her head with a distraught look. "I have also watched the sky. That does not mean I can fly or make it rain."

Dimp shoved a bag full of tools and medicine through the window and urged her to calm down, "If you have no faith in yourself then have a little in me. This boy is going to live because I am just that good. I am the best at what I do."

Sara laughed through her tears and shook her head at him. "All brains and no modesty."

Dimp grinned. "I'm handsome too. Now go to the washbowl and make your hands very clean."

"They'll just get back dirty with blood. Other surgeons call handwashing a silly superstition."

"Other surgeons are idiots. Your mother was the best healer I've ever laid eyes on and she was adamant about handwashing."

Sara started scrubbing away while Dimp continued to instruct her, "Now soak two strips of cloth in the tallest bottle of medicine and plug each of his nostrils. This will make him fall into a deep sleep."



Days passed before Matthaïos began to stir. He awakened to agony so intense that tears sprang to his eyes. In a single moment of consciousness, he had experienced every type of pain there was. There were shooting pains in his legs, stabbing pains in his shoulder, cramping pains across his torso, and throbbing pain in his head.

Starlight streamed through open shutters as a gurgle of agony escaped him. This alerted the blurry figure, who was walking around the room. Her image gradually came into focus as she approached his bedside. Matthaïos gasped when he saw the princess of Egypt fetching fresh bandages, like a common maid.

All but his eyes and one of his arms was bound by splints and dressings. He crowed in a raspy voice, "Princess Sobek... you shouldn't be..."

He released a sore groan as she pulled him forward and propped a pillow behind his back.

Sobek held a spoonful of herbs in front of his mouth. "This is for the pain."

He swallowed the spicy combination and chased it with a goblet of fruit nectar. "Thank you, my lady."

"Princess Sara and I are the only people who will not be killed for entering this chamber," Sobek explained. "Sara was up for the past few nights with you, so I promised to look after you while she rested."

Despite the intense aching, Matthaïos couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from curving in a small smile, "Her grace looked in on me?"

"Sara did much more. She saved your life," Sobek admitted with an amused grin.

Matthaios was taken aback. “I don’t understand, your highness.”

“You’re lucky to be alive. You’re going to be in the service of one remarkable princess.” The devilish grin remained on Sobek. “You have no idea the risks she took for you. Must have been a spectacular kiss.”

Matthaios was mortified. “I... I didn’t know...”

“Relax, your secret is safe with me.” Sobek teased as she redressed one of his numerous bandages, “My dear Matthaios you look like a mummy.”

“I nearly became one.” His chest hurt as they chuckled at his misfortune.

Sobek prepared to leave. “Sara will want to know you’re awake. I’ll send her your way.”

He shook his bandaged head and pleaded, “I beg your highness to allow Princess Sara and yourself to rest. I am unworthy of all you have bestowed upon me, and I am forever in your debt.”

Sobek took a moment to consider his request. “Are you well enough to write?”

He nodded and she rummaged through a cluttered drawer.

She walked over with an inkwell and a piece of parchment. “Send Sara a note to dowse her concerns.”

“Of course, your grace.” Matthaios extended the arm that wasn’t in a sling and obediently accepted the writing utensils.

He could already feel a sense of euphoria sweeping over him, thanks to the opium-based pain remedy. There was a narrow window of time to construct his letter before he became too loopy to function. With this understanding, Matthaios dipped his quill in ink and got right to it.



By week’s end, Sara became a reluctant member of a caravan bound for Egypt. She swayed to and fro as she rode in a royal carriage, suspended between two camels. She opened the curtains of her mobile chamber. Sunlight and fresh air flooded in, causing her pet kitten to yawn and stretch out of his nap. Sara gave the kitten what was left of her lunch and glanced out the window. Two lines of shackled slaves marched beneath a harsh desert sun.

Matthaios’s injuries prevented him from marching with the others. Sara was grateful that he was able to ride in the carriage with her. His powerful pain remedies caused him to sleep the majority of the time, but it was still a joy to

have him near and hear him breathing. It was a pleasure to see a bit of life return to him with each passing day. He was already down to half the number of bandages. Many of his bruises were yellow and fading.

Sara gingerly swept the hair from his face as he slept. She closed the curtains to give herself privacy, before retrieving the letter Matthaïos had written to her. A candle clock on an interior wall of her carriage provided just enough light for her eyes to devour his words.

*The one I'm trying not to love steals my breath with the caress of her fingertips. Her voice renders me senseless and her gaze makes my heart race like the hooves of a galloping horse. The one I'm trying not to love has an essence that pulls my universe into balance and all becomes right with the world. When I look into her eyes my thoughts flow with a sense of harmony, peace sweeps over my soul, and I find myself wondering if I've gone to heaven. The one I'm trying not to love looks upon me as if I am the most beautiful creation she's ever been blessed by the heavens to watch and I see her the very same way. She is the beacon of light in my darkest hour, my hope, and inspiration. She is my hero. The one I'm trying not to love has a smile that turns the worst of days into the best of days. Her laugh awakens my soul and breathes life into my being. She is more than my friend and the object of my affection. She is my Angel. The one I'm trying not to love kisses me in a way that makes time stand still. Nothing else matters or even exists when our lips meet. Two hearts forever linked. She possesses my mind, body, and spirit. She is my everything.*

Sara must have read his letter at least fifteen times and still yearned to read it again, but she knew she must destroy it for his protection. She gazed upon it once more, and with a heavy heart, she passed the note over the candle flame. She dropped the burning letter on a metal tray and watched as it charred and burned to a cinder. She swept the ashes out of the carriage window. That's when she heard the slaves speaking in a secretive tone.

Sara had never been one to spy, but the sound of Matthaïos's name floating on muffled whispers captured her attention. She listened harder. Her hands shot to her mouth in shock. *Matthaïos didn't fall! He was pushed! Someone is trying to kill him!*

# Chapter 6:

## The Golden Sands of Egypt

Against all odds, Matthaïos made a full recovery. He found himself, again, being summoned for answers he just didn't have.

Serving girls cooled Pharaoh by waiving enormous fans, as he sat upon his mighty throne questioning Matthaïos, "I gave no one permission to damage my property. I've heard whispers that you were pushed. I demand to know by whom, and why?"

Matthaïos swallowed hard. "Apologies, my lord, but I do not recall the one who nearly ended my life, or what I'd done to displease them."

Pharaoh pounded his fist on the armrest of his throne. "Is there anything you remember, prior to making a crater in the earth with your body! Anything at all!"

"Nothing of consequence, your majesty."

"I'll be the judge of what is consequential."

"Just the scent of mangos. This strange detail stuck out in my mind, but provided no real answers."

The slaves who'd witnessed the attempted murder of Matthaïos were too terrified to come forward, a sign that it was a person of high social rank. Why would anyone of nobility bother to assassinate a slave? Their motives were inconceivable. For obvious reasons, Pharaoh needed to know the motives of those he surrounded himself with. Pharaoh released Matthaïos with a wave of his hand. This conversation was over but the investigation was only just beginning.



Matthaïos returned to work in the palace of his sovereign. The soaring pillars and graceful chambers of alabaster stone had never looked more exquisite. The burning incense, rich with fragrance, had never smelled so sweet and enchanting. Matthaïos had cheated death and he was seeing life through different eyes.

He glanced up from the chore he was performing and noticed that Sara was deep in thought. He carried on preparing a soothing bath for her, in hope that she would relax and share her thoughts.

Princess Sara bent low to lift her kitten into her arms, gently stroking the creature's fur as it purred in gratitude. Egypt had proven fond of cats. They looked upon the animals with a divinity. Sara was grateful for this. Her cat Ra, named in honor of the sun god, was the only member of her household she'd been allowed to bring.

Dimp came to attend a school for healers and expand his medical knowledge, but he wasn't allowed anywhere near her.

Sara often missed her home. It was greener and quite a bit lovelier than the desert lands of Egypt. The Nile River branched through Egypt like the veins of one's body pumping life into this world of never-ending golden sands.

Sara set her kitten down on the floor of her palace chamber and walked out on her balcony. She stood with her forearms resting on the cool stone banister, catching a shiver from the chilly desert night.

A myriad of gleaming stars stretched overhead with no remnants of a moon. The mighty Pyramids of Giza and the Great Sphinx, with its lion-like body and human head, stretched out before her as she imagined life with her husband to be.

Physically Emperor Amenemhat was striking but Sara knew little of his heart. He claimed to love her as he did all his brides, but if he knew her darkest secret would he still be making such passionate claims or would he have her executed?

In her three months in Egypt, Pharaoh had spoken with her only twice just to see how her training was progressing. All of Pharaoh's brides had to be trained for many moons before he would go forward with the wedding. Sara's trainer was Matthaïos. He'd been wonderful to her and assured her during times when she doubted herself the most that she would be the greatest bride yet.

At the sound of a small handbell, Sara turned to find Matthaïos was finished filling the enormous marble tub. It was built into the floor, and the surface of the water was covered in flower petals.

"Thank you." She smiled pleasantly at him as she made her way back into the chamber.

Matthaïos dutifully unwrapped Sara's beaded loincloth, her only article of clothing. The rest of her body was merely covered in shimmering gold paint with decorative black lines. Amenemhat liked to keep his brides as naked as possible, but the only men allowed to touch them were harem boys like Matthaïos: hapless eunuchs who'd been butchered as defenseless children.

Matthaios removed her heavy gold armbands and the dazzling headband, which sat atop her raven hair. Sara tied her beaded hair on top of her head as she slipped into the warm sweet smelling bath. She was careful not to wet the hundreds of meticulously woven braids that Matthaios had spent all day doing.

Matthaios smiled thoughtfully at her consideration. *The one good thing about being a eunuch is how much time I get to spend with Sara. We've become close, but I can tell she is hiding something from me. She's afraid and I don't know why.*

Matthaios began to clean away her heavy black eyeliner, and sponge the golden paint from her breasts, arms, and belly. She closed her eyes and leaned back, allowing him to work his magic. It felt amazing as always, but tears streamed from the creases of her shut eyes.

"Am I being too rough, Princess," Matthaios asked with concern.

"No," she wept as the residual makeup stung her dark eyes.

"Please tell me what you are afraid of," Matthaios implored as he continued to bathe her. "I'm your friend. I want to help you."

"No one can help me." She shut down like a steel trap.

Matthaios sighed deeply and finished her bath. He toweled her off and tucked her into bed. He extinguished the torches on her walls and was about to leave when she spoke at last, "Come to me, Matthaios."

He walked over in the now dark room, "Princess?"

She pulled back the cover for him and he climbed in with his best friend. She asked him hesitantly, "Do you ever miss having your... your..."

"It's hard to miss what you never had," he answered honestly. "I was little more than a toddler when Pharaoh had me cut."

She sniffled. "Do you ever have desires?"

Matthaios was grateful that the darkness of the room hid the huge blush on his cheeks. "Only one in ten slaves survive a full castration, where the surgeons take most of the stem along with the berries. In order to have a squadron of twenty harem boys, Pharaoh must have 200 children butchered, 180 of which would bleed to death."

Sara's hand shot to her mouth in horror.

Matthaios calmed her and explained, "That was too much slave labor to lose, so Pharaoh ended the practice of full castrations, and went with a safer procedure. I was fortunate that he only took my berries; he left the stem. I sometimes get a bump down there when I'm working in the harem or tending to one of the brides but I would never harm you," he promptly assured.

"I didn't think you would," she quickly assured him.

"Then why are you asking me these things?"



She answered his question with a question, “Does that mean that you can make love, that you can fall in love?”

“I... I suppose so. I never gave it much thought.” *That was a lie. I’ve thought about it every second since I met you. It makes no sense that I have desires at all. The purpose of mutilating a slave is to ensure that he can serve and defend Pharaoh’s women without being tempted to bed them.* “Why are you asking me these questions?”

“I... I don’t know.” She broke down.

He pulled her into his arms, placing gentle kisses upon her forehead. “I have been honest with you, Princess Sara. It is time you were honest with me.”

“I want you to make love to me, Matthaïos. If you cannot I’ll understand, but I want us to love one another before I die.”

He gasped and held her even closer. “Why do you think you’re going to die, Sara?” Her words were so shocking that he forgot to use her title.

After a silence that seemed to span an infinity, she confessed, “Out of pubescent curiosity and yearning I broke myself. It was stupid. I didn’t realize how important a simple veil of flesh was until I was forced into this betrothal. I don’t know what to do, Matthaïos. Pharaoh Amenemhat is going to find out in less than a week and once he does, he’ll assume another man has had me. He will cut off my head.”

He tried to soothe her but he was crying too. He didn’t want her to die, especially over a childish mishap, an innocent mistake.

“Make love to me, Matthaïos.”

“No.” She could feel him shaking his head against hers. “You only want to because you are scared and you are giving up, but there may be a way to remedy this.”

“How?”

“It is written that every ten years the stars align and create a portal to Fertility Goddess Qetesh. We’ll bring an offering and plead for her to restore that which has been broken.”

“When will the stars next align?”

“Two weeks from now.”

“By then it will be too late.”

Matthaïos spoke hurriedly, “Tell Pharaoh that you’ve done the math and you don’t want your menses to fall on your wedding night. He will postpone the nuptials, and then I will tell him that you have fallen ill and everyone should stay clear of your chamber for a few days. That will give us time to make the trip and return.”

“What kind of offering do I need?”

“The eyes of a Pharaoh,” he admitted reluctantly. “I’m going to have to rob a tomb.”

“Matthaios! The tombs are heavily guarded!”

“There is no other way!”

Sara took his hand. Her eyes were bearing into his in the dark palace chamber as she asked, “For me, you would steal the eyes from a Pharaoh?”

“For you, I would steal the sun itself from the mighty Ra.”

Before she could stop herself, her lips were pressed against his. She was in love with this slave boy, even if he’d never be able to love her back. On natural instinct, Matthaios melted into the kiss for a full five seconds before his logical mind told him to break it. “You deserve more than half a man, Sara.”

“You are more of a man than Pharaoh will ever be.” She smirked devilishly. “And I’m having trouble sleeping.”

He chuckled, aware of what she was asking for. “You used to protest my massages.”

“Only before I knew how good they were.”

He pulled back her covers and wet his hands with a bottle of scented oil. She moaned pleasantly as his palms and fingertips glided over her supple skin and tense muscles. All harem boys were well versed in the art of erotic massage. Pharaoh was as lazy as he was lecherous and preferred that his women be prepared to have him. This is why Matthaios started massaging Sara. He needed to get her used to his touch before her wedding day came. Matthaios’s duty was to arouse his princess but never to penetrate her.

Normally she obeyed and allowed him to do his job, but tonight she couldn’t convince herself that this was business as usual.

She rolled over and gazed up at him. “Take me. I know you can. You are just scared and so am I, but I want this. I want you. We are going to fix my virginity anyway. Pharaoh never has to know.”

His mouth lowered to brace hers, and his tongue slid between her lips. It was not appropriate to kiss a princess. That was not part of the massage. Her hand slid up his back to tangle her fingers in his sea of wavy locks. The entire world and all its problems melted away as they kissed and caressed between the warm covers.

He broke their kiss and promptly apologized, “I’m sorry I almost crossed the line.”

“I’m sorry I tried to snatch you over it.”

“Princess”

“Yes, Matthaios”

He chastised her, not only for her sake but for the good of both kingdoms, “You haven’t given our glorious Pharaoh a chance.”

“Pharaoh doesn’t love women. He collects them.”

“You’ve only spoken with him twice,” Matthaios insisted. “The royal advisor owes me a favor. I’ll do everything within my power to get you an audience with Pharaoh.”

Sara thanked Matthaios and hugged him tightly, “You’re right. It’s only fair that I give him a chance. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“There’s something else,” Matthaios spoke hesitantly. “I know it was just passion talking but you cannot say things like you want me and you love me. You just can’t. It... It gets in my head. If I was whole, I would have...” He felt so ashamed that he couldn’t finish the sentence.

Sara smiled wistfully. *If only you knew how much I wish you would have. It wasn't passion talking, Matthaios. Those words came from my heart.*



A malevolent eye left the peephole that had been bored into Sara’s wall. A sinister smirk darkened the face of the monster who’d been watching their intimate encounter, the very monster who had tried to shove Matthaios to his death. *I suppose the show is over for now. I thought I would have to kill Matthaios, but he is proving more useful than I imagined. He and Sara will have their heads cleaved from their bodies, and I will attain all that I desire...*

# Chapter 7:

## Chamber of the Fallen Pharaohs

Princess Sobek went to the chamber of her brother. Pharaoh's servants were draping him in gold jewelry and fine fabric. Sobek cleared her throat. Pharaoh waved his hand, and the serving girls walked out.

Now in private, Sobek addressed him, "Brother, I implore you to give up this obsession with having sons. Name one of your many capable daughters to be your successor, and release my friend, Sara, from the bonds of this obligatory union."

He laughed at the sheer absurdity of her suggestion. "Egypt will fall without a man on its throne. There has never been a woman Pharaoh."

"One of my nieces could be the first. Our sister Ruptah is the person you admire most in the world. She is wise, just, and forthright. Ruptah is everything you admire in a leader, and she is not a man. What makes you certain your daughters won't be the same?"

"You judge me because you haven't any idea the burdens I face as a ruler. Even Ruptah, whom I value above all others, is aware of her place. She rules at the side of a man, as it was intended by the gods. It is my duty to ensure the future of Egypt by placing a son on its throne. Thus far, all of my wives have failed me in this regard. I must marry your friend for the good of the empire."

"She does not love you."

"If she loved me once, she can love me again."

Sobek sighed, "but can you love her? If you will not free Sara of this forced marriage, all I ask is that you give her a chance."

He huffed in frustration, "Why do you think I'm putting on my best garb? I'm trying to impress your friend. I know how important this is to you."

Sobek shook her head at his naivety and removed his flashy gold necklace. "Allow her to get to know the real you, not your riches and power, but you."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Thank Gods you're pretty." Sobek laughed. "Sara is cut from a different cloth than the rest of the ambitious opportunists you call wives. Stop trying to bait Sara with your snobbery and allow her to know you the way Ruptah and I do."

Pharaoh mulled over her suggestion and eventually nodded, “agreed.”



Sara would only have one shot to make a positive impression before her wedding. She had to know if she had a chance of building something genuine with Pharaoh. Sara sought advice from the one who knew him best. Ruptah told her about his favorite foods, the places he most loved to visit, and many of his interests. Ruptah even allowed Sara to choose from her vast perfume collection.

Sara pointed to a vial with a peculiar twisting shape. “How about that one?”

Ruptah’s upper lip curled in disgust. “Not one of my favorites.”

Sara laughed and chose another, a pink container with a heart-shaped cap.

It got an immediate nod of approval from the queen, “Now that’s an excellent choice.” Ruptah splashed Sara with a fragrance so lovely it mirrored a spring day.

“Thank you for everything,” Sara said with a thoughtful smile.

Ruptah grinned at the young idealistic version of herself. “You are most welcome. Now run along. You’re going to be late.”



That evening, Sara drew in a deep breath as Pharaoh extended an arm to her. Sara’s heart leaped as she hooked her arm around his mighty bicep. If nothing else, Pharaoh was handsome, with the poise of a true king. He had eyes so black they shone silver in the light, like two enchanted mirrors.

He smirked slightly with a muffled, “mmmm,” as her fragrance enveloped him, and Sara grinned at the small triumph. His smile was like a blessing from the gods: pristine white teeth, framed by full lips, and gorgeous dimples. Sara was lauded as the most fortunate woman in the land for her betrothal to Pharaoh. She felt selfish to ask for more, but she needed more than wealth and power. She yearned to meet the man beneath the crown, in order to have any chance of a loving marriage. At Sobek’s request, Pharaoh wore no headdress or jewelry, revealing a head of shiny black curls. Sara and Pharaoh walked arm in arm,

through the high-ceilinged corridors of the palace. Bowing servants stared curiously, as they saw their Pharaoh dressed so plainly. Nobles were aghast. Pharaoh sighed and shook his head. Sara chuckled with amusement.

“Well are you going to tell me what you want,” Pharaoh snapped with irritation.

“Only to know you, my lord,” Sara spoke humbly. “I would love to hear of your interests, your travels, the things that make you happiest.”

After her conversation with Ruptah, it was clear that there was another side to Pharaoh, but would he be willing to share the depths of himself?

“That is a conversation for another time,” Pharaoh informed her. “We have more important matters to discuss. How many sons did your father sire?”

“None, my lord.”

“Even if they were lost in battle or died as babes, I need to know.”

“I have no brothers, living or dead.”

“That does not bode well.”

She assured him, “My grandfather sired seven sons and each of my uncles, brought forth at least two.”

“I am relieved to hear this. I need sons.”

The conversation drifted in a disappointing direction for Sara. *It seems all Pharaoh yearns to talk about is my dowered lands and my fertility. Does he even care who I truly am?*

They stopped before enormous double doors. Two guards stepped aside, in a synchronized formation. Pharaoh unlocked the doors to a vault of treasure. Every wall and table surface was dripping with diamonds, gold, and precious gems.

Pharaoh assured her, “Choose anything you desire. Just walk up and take it for yourself.”

Sara carefully examined each dazzling piece, until she had toured the entire chamber. She returned to Pharaoh and placed an empty hand over his heart. “This is all I want, the most valuable treasure in this vault: your heart.”

“You’re being absurd,” Pharaoh laughed and picked out a necklace. “Try this one. It’s worth a fortune.”

“I’m not for sale, your majesty,” frustration was evident in her voice. *It seems highborn men are all the same: arrogant swine that lack respect for women. I promised Matthaios I would give Pharaoh a chance, but Pharaoh isn’t giving me a chance.*

“Apologies, my lord,” she spoke modestly. “I was merely hoping that with time we could see this marriage as more than a union of political expediency. I

hoped that one day I will have greater value to you than a potential breeder of sons.”

“What greater purpose can a woman have than bearing sons for the grandest empire in the world? You should feel honored.”

“I do, your majesty,” Sara assured him. “I was merely hoping to be blessed with a fraction of the happiness my parents had when they were alive.”

“Your father was a disgrace, who married a lowly peasant incapable of bearing sons.” Pharaoh stiffened his shoulders in pride. “Love doesn’t win wars, and it doesn’t build empires. If I were to choose a wife to love, it would be one of pure royal blood, a woman worthy of a Pharaoh of Egypt, not the offspring of a weak king and his common whore.”

Sara felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. Her eyes filled with tears. “Am I to understand that I will be an ornamental wife and you will never love me?”

“You should understand that love has never been on my list of priorities, and it shouldn’t be on yours. You are a princess and a ruler. Grow up!” Pharaoh slammed the necklace in her chest and stormed out.

He returned to his harem of scantily clad women to commit unspeakable acts of debauchery. Sara ran back to her chamber, flung open the doors, and collided with Matthaïos.

“What happened!” Matthaïos demanded.

Sara adamantly shook her head no. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Matthaïos gingerly wiped her tears with his thumbs and held her close. In his embrace, all felt right with the world.



It was the dead of night. All of Egypt was at rest, except for Pharaoh’s guards. Sara and Matthaïos disguised themselves, packed a few provisions, and embarked on their quest.

“Follow me,” Matthaïos whispered in the darkness.

“Over a cliff,” Sara vowed, with the utmost faith in him.

The princess and the slave gazed into each other’s eyes. His hand flinched to caress her cheek but he retreated out of duty.

“We should be going,” he whispered.

“Yes of course.” Sara nodded with an unconvincing smile.

Matthaios crept stealthily through the tombs with Sara at his heels. It seemed every wall was covered in pictographs and petroglyphs. Each wall told a different story than the last, and yet they were all connected: an entire history of Egypt written in stone. The air was cool and musty. Flickering torches cast an eerie orange glow in the vast labyrinth. If not for the map Sara had stolen from Pharaoh's architect, they would've been incapable of navigating the endless winding pathways.

They hid in the shadows as armed guards made their rounds. Matthaios and Sara remained as still as the dead. They didn't even breathe. If caught trespassing in such a sacred place the penalty would be severe. They drew breath at last as the guards ventured out of range.

Sara and Matthaios journeyed to an enormous room known as the Chamber of the Fallen Pharaohs. It was overflowing with gold and precious gems, even grander than the palace treasure vault. This gleaming treasure was intended to provide riches in the afterlife.

An armed sentinel paced the floor of the chamber, while the others made rounds.

Sara removed the lid from a jar and slid it through the entrance to the chamber. A pungent fog barreled out of the container.

The guard whipped around and unsheathed his sword. "Halt!"

Matthaios drew his blade, ready to engage in battle.

The giant man stomped toward them; he began to stagger as the fumes overwhelmed him. The guard collapsed at Sara's feet.

Matthaios and Sara covered their faces as they entered the foggy chamber. They cautiously tiptoed around the unconscious guard.

One gold-plated sarcophagus after another lined the tomb like dominoes. These ornate caskets held the remains of Egypt's late rulers, but Matthaios knew the eyes weren't in them. Organs were removed during mummification, one of several rituals performed to ensure immortality.

The gaseous cloud burned their eyes as they rummaged through a collection of jars.

Matthaios at last found a container with the proper markings. "I've got it."

"You're incredible," Sara exclaimed. "I owe you my life."

They whipped around at the deafening sound of a gong.

The fallen guard had regained consciousness. He was alerting the others.

Matthaios and Sara bolted from the chamber. They skid to a stop as a troop of sentinels rounded the corner.

Sara and Matthaios ran the other way only to face a greater number of watchmen.



They were trapped.

With razor-sharp swords and an earth-shaking battle cry, the temple guards ran straight for them.

Matthaios traded steel, kicks, and elbows with the sentinels. He'd lay one flat just for two more to charge him.

Sara pressed the panels of the wall behind them, trying to remember the sequence to open it.

The grinding sound of stone scraping over stone resonated as the wall began to open.

Sara and Matthaios fled down the corridor, leaping, rolling, and ducking from the path of boobytraps.

Projectiles shot at them as they ran. Giant blades nearly took their heads off.

Sara cried out as a poisoned dart shot from the wall and pierced her side. Her movements became slow and sluggish. The walls began to spin, and she collided with the cold stone floor.

Matthaios could see her struggling to speak, but muscle paralysis was a symptom of the poison she had been stricken with.

Sara became as still and silent as a corpse.

Matthaios swept her unconscious body into his arms. He continued to escape with her.

They had lost the map while fighting the guards and every corridor looked exactly like the last. He had lost his way.

Poison was coursing through Sara's veins, as Matthaios wandered through the labyrinth.

Her breaths were becoming shallow, and he could barely detect life.

A tear rolled down his cheek. *We must escape this place! I'll lose Sara if I don't find a physician...*

## Chapter 8:

# Temple of Qetesh

Matthaios held fast to the hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight dangling from his arms. Sara was barely clinging to life, as he searched the labyrinth for an exit.

If apprehended, he would likely be put to death for pilfering a sacred artifact. At the very least Matthaios would be beaten until he wished he was dead, and then Pharaoh would cut off his hand, but the guards Matthaios had fought and fled were Sara's only chance of survival. She would surely die if she didn't see a physician immediately.

Matthaios saw the glow of a torch. He froze, torn between self-preservation and love. Sara's skin had grown clammy and cold. He hadn't the time to wander around lost. *I will turn myself in and face the consequences if that means Sara will live.*

Matthaios fought his base instinct to run. He took a deep breath and walked toward death.

His mind calmed as the figure emerged with feminine curves. Half of her lovely face was illuminated by firelight, while the other half lie in shadow. He breathed a sigh of relief. *Princess Sobek? No, taller and curvier. It's Queen Ruptah.*

His apprehension level rose once more. He knew that Sobek was merciful and understanding, but would Ruptah allow him to trespass in her family's tomb without punishment?

Ruptah whisper-yelled as she fussed over a comatose Sara, "What happened!"

"Boobytraps, she needs a doctor."

"Come this way. I know the ins and outs of this maze. I've been coming since I was a child to pay my respects. What on earth are you doing here!"

Matthaios pleaded, "Your majesty if you care for the girl in my arms you will trust that we were here for an important reason, and not force me to tell you something that could get her killed."

Queen Ruptah decided to let it go for now. "Saving Sara's life is more important than getting answers, but I do expect answers at some point."

“Yes, your grace.”

They hurried out of the temple and into the crisp night air. Matthaïos and Ruptah joined forces in finding a doctor they could trust.



Sara bounced from one end of the temperature scale to the other. In the temple, she was as cold as ice, and now she felt like fire. Matthaïos dabbed her face with a cool cloth, to combat her fever. He smiled as her eyes began to blink open.

“You scared me,” Matthaïos said as she came to. “We were blessed that Queen Ruptah was visiting her deceased parents and stumbled upon us.”

Sara felt like she’d been trampled by a herd of oxen. She looked around the stuffy room. Shelves of scrolls, bottles, and balance scales lined the walls. There was a leech jar in the corner.

“Where are we,” she asked in a hoarse voice.

“Dimp’s infirmary. He was the only one I could trust.”

“Where is he?” She smiled sleepily. “I would expect to be hearing the valiant tale of how he singlehandedly brought me back from the brink of death.”

Dimp entered the room, with a giant grin. “First you must recover, then I shall enthrall you with the legend of my superiority.”

Sara and Matthaïos burst into laughter. She hugged the cocky physician. “Thank you.”

“Get some rest child,” Dimp instructed as he left the room.

The shock was wearing off and the reality of the situation was filtering in. Sara shook all over and tears filled her eyes. “When that poisonous dart struck me I thought I was going to die. I was totally aware and yet paralyzed.”

Matthaïos hugged her tightly. “Paralysis is an effect of the poison. Dimp assured me that it will gradually wear off.”

“I kept trying to tell you to leave me and save yourself, but I hadn’t control of my throat.”

“Even if the words had come out as clear as a bell, it would have been the first order I have ever disobeyed.” He wiped her tears and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Please rest, your highness.”

Matthaïos rose as Dimp beckoned him. Dimp pulled him out of sight and placed a satchel of coins in Matthaïos’s hand.

“I couldn’t,” Matthaïos respectfully refused. “I know physicians don’t often get paid what they deserve.”

Dimp assured him, “I was recently paid a hefty sum by a wealthy patient. She merely needed me to procure a little silphium.”

“Truly? Who?”

“I can’t say. It’s a doctor/patient secret.”

Matthaïos nodded understandably.

Dimp promised, “I’ve never known Princess Sara to be untrustworthy. If she robbed a tomb I know she must be in serious debt or serious trouble. Will you tell me what has happened?”

“I’m so sorry but I cannot.”

Dimp gave an understanding nod. “Use these coins to get Sara out of whatever mess she’s in.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Matthaïos didn’t want to take the hard-working physician’s money, but it was better to allow Dimp to believe Sara was in debt instead of the truth of her needing an offering for the fertility goddess.



As soon as Sara was back on her feet she began to prepare for her journey. It was the dead of night when she crept into the deserted palace pantry. She cautiously looked over her shoulders before stuffing her sack with food.

“It’s a little late for a snack, isn’t it princess?”

A stunned Sara spun around and dropped her bag. A stone fruit rolled across the floor.

Osiris slithered out of the shadows with the fruit in his hand. “But the size of that sack suggests more than a midnight craving. Are you going somewhere, your grace?”

Sara marched over to the sinister looking man in the eyepatch. She snatched her food back. “I don’t answer to you. How long have you been following me? Have you been watching me?”

He said nothing, a confirmation of his guilt. He just stared at her. His suspicion was palpable to Sara.

Osiris informed her, “Someone broke into the Chamber of the Fallen Pharaohs mere days ago, and now I find you packing provisions in the middle of the night.”

“One should be careful when hurling around preposterous unfounded accusations.”

They walked in a slow circle as if sizing each other up for a battle.

Osiris smiled without humor. “You haven’t a clue how to hold your tongue in the presence of a man. Do you know what that tells me?”

“Please elaborate,” Sara insisted with a sour smile.

“It tells me that the rumors I heard from Myron’s court were true. You are an unruly and petulant girl, unfit to birth the next Pharaoh of Egypt.”

Sara snickered with amusement. “You haven’t a clue how to hold your tongue in the presence of royalty. Do you know what that tells me?”

“Please go on,” he insisted with a perturbed smirk.

“Your lack of respect tells me that you were born of nobility, but took a long fall from grace, likely because you couldn’t mind your own business, a lesson you still haven’t learned. Is that how you became a cyclops? Looking in places you had no business?”

His face grew crimson with anger. It was clear that she had poked a tender spot.

His hand tentatively searched out his eyepatch as he recalled the painful manner in which he lost his eye and his nobility. “I once dared to gaze upon a woman above my station and paid the price. I learned my place, but it is clear that you don’t know yours. I don’t need two eyes to see through you, Princess. You stole from the tombs and now you are trying to escape with your plunder. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t go to Pharaoh right now.”

“Because I had nothing to do with that robbery,” Sara snapped. “I was born of wealth and I am marrying into it. Just this week Pharaoh offered me my fill of treasure from the palace vaults and I chose none. You can ask him yourself. As for tonight’s visit to the pantry, I am planning a surprise picnic for his majesty, and if you ruin that surprise I’ll have you hanged.”

Osiris backed off with an intrigued grin. “Begging your pardon, my lady.”

Sara grabbed her bag of food and left. As she bent the corner and Osiris lost sight of her, the terror began to overwhelm her. She’d maintained a pretense of fearlessness in his presence but there was something about him that shook her to the core.

Her heart pounded as she fled to her chamber. It was not his suspicions or even his temper, but his smell: the scent of mangos, the only detail Matthaios remembered from the night he was nearly killed...



Matthaios and Sara left to seek out the Temple of Qetesh. They purchased supplies from a marketplace and climbed back on their camels. The trip had been arduous. They were exhausted, but they'd come too far to give up now.

Sara could feel that they were close to their destination. This thread of hope kept her moving. Matthaios was determined to restore her virtue and save her from execution. He pushed forward, if only for her sake.

Two weeks had commenced since Matthaios nearly crossed the line with the woman who was to be the fifth bride of Pharaoh. Matthaios could barely look his emperor in the eye before they left. He felt guilty even a little ashamed, and at the same time, Matthaios found himself wondering why Sara had to be the fifth wife of any man. If he was Pharaoh he would make her his one and only, raise monuments in her honor. Matthaios would worship her.

As they ventured on, the plants and trees became fewer. The sand grew plentiful and vast. Soon the bustling market was a distant vision. They were now in the heart of the Sahara, a treacherous expanse of land that had claimed the lives of countless nomads.

Sara and Matthaios drank from waterskins, containers made from the hides of animals. This combated dehydration, as they traveled beneath a desert sky.

"Why are you so quiet?" Sara asked as they swayed from side to side on the backs of their camels. "You look troubled."

"No, I um... I'm happy for you... really," Matthaios stammered as they journeyed over the rolling dunes of sand.

"Once I am a bride of Egypt you will be highest in my council." Sara smiled softly. "I pray you never leave my side, Matthaios."

He assured her he never would. They were at their best only when they were together. As a pair, they had managed to rob a tomb. They had eluded, fought off, and subdued temple guards. They'd survived deadly boobytraps and stolen a sacred jar from a fallen pharaoh of Egypt. Soon Sara would use her offering to pray for her virginity.

Golden beams of twilight illuminated the horizon. The sky darkened to a mixture of crimson and violet. They decided to make camp for the night. Matthaios climbed down from his camel and helped Sara down from hers. They

pitched a tent and drifted into a peaceful sleep, aided by the tranquil beauty and serenity of the desert.



By midday the following afternoon the sun was scorching without a single cloud in the heavens to quench its unrelenting bite. Matthaïos and Sara thought they had seen the sacred temple at least twice already but each time it turned out to be a mirage. This time the vision was not fading and they could see a flowing river behind it.

They took off on their camels creating a cloud of flying sand.

They raced toward the river, dismounted, and dove into the waves with a giant splash.

The water was cool and pleasing, like a blessing and reward for the long journey.

Sara splashed Matthaïos with water, wishing for this moment to never end. This beautiful moment when they were just Matthaïos and Sara and away from Amenemhat's ominous presence. Even if Matthaïos would never be able to make love to her she would still choose him over Amenemhat, for Matthaïos had become something that Amenemhat could never be. Amenemhat might have been Pharaoh of Egypt but Matthaïos was the ruler of her heart, and that position was the most profound of all to Sara.

If it wasn't for the fact that every mercenary, bounty hunter, and common thug who needed a coin in his purse would hunt them down like animals, Matthaïos would run away with Sara. He couldn't stand the thought of her in danger, so he chose not to pull such a risky and selfish move. She looked over to see Matthaïos so happy for her.

He spoke joyfully, "Are you ready to become a virgin?"

She nodded and climbed out of the water. She grabbed her sacred jar, the lid of which looked like a sculpture of Anubis: God and guardian of mummies. "Aren't you coming, Matthaïos?"

"I cannot enter. I have no offering," he explained as he climbed out of the river. "But I'll be right here waiting for you."

She nodded and looked way up high to read the hieroglyphics chiseled above the entrance: *Temple of Qetesh Fertility Goddess of Sacred Ecstasy and Sexual*

*Pleasure.* Sara hesitantly disappeared into the elaborate temple. She kneeled before the shrine of Qetesh and began to pray.

Matthaios waited on pins and needles for half an hour before taking up his sword.

He charged toward the temple to make certain Sara had not been held up by bandits.

Pain ripped through him. He fell to his knees.

Beams of light shot from his mouth and eyes.

Sara came running at the sound of his wails of agony. She dropped to her knees at his side, holding him as he writhed on the ground in pain.

When at last the attack upon him ceased he murmured a single word, "Sara..."

Matthaios gasped and covered his mouth. His voice was foreign to him, much deeper.

He broke free of her embrace and scrambled away from her.

Matthaios sank to his knees at the river's edge. He fell backward, shocked by his appearance in the rippling waters. He had more muscle now and was quite a bit larger. Before his hand could fall between his legs, he knew what she had done.

Tears trickled down Sara's ebony cheeks. "I pleaded for Qetesh to restore that which has been broken. I loved you regardless, but you did not love yourself and that was a problem for me."

"Sara!" he bellowed. "You wasted your only wish on me! I can never take you home now!"

"Amenemhat's palace was never my home! It was never yours either! Osiris tried to execute you! It's only a matter of time before he tries to finish the job because I will never be able to let you go! I would rather be the only love of a slave, than the fifth wife of Pharaoh!"

They closed the distance between them, embracing one another dearly, as Matthaios planted kisses all over her face.

Matthaios looked at her accusingly. "You never intended to gain your virginity back for Amenemhat."

She smiled like a cunning little nymph. "I had to say something to get you to take me here. I already knew of that legend."

"You little minx." Matthaios laughed good-naturedly. "You weren't crying that night out of fear for your life. You were crying because you were lying to me without a conscience. You pretty little liar."

Sara giggled happily. "For what it's worth, I did tell the truth about tearing my maidenhead, just not the whole truth about the fact that I did it on purpose. I



knew you would not rob that tomb and smuggle me out of the palace for yourself, but you would do it for me without a second thought. I love you, Matthaios.”

“And I love you, Sara.” He pulled the pretty little liar into his strong embrace and kissed her long and deep.

They would be stalked, hunted, and chased to the far reaches of the earth. Amenemhat was soon to open the gates of hell itself and together Matthaios and Sara would take him on...

## Chapter 9:

# Assassin's Creed

Pharaoh lay naked beneath a sheet as a harem girl massaged the tense muscles of his back. His eyes remained closed as he struggled to tune out his nagging sister. He allowed the massage to relax him and pushed the problems of the world aside.

It was like talking to a brick wall for Sobek. "You did the exact opposite of what I begged of you. I pleaded for you not to push Sara away with your arrogance. I pleaded for you to allow her to know you as I do. Of course, you did not listen because I am not your precious Ruptah! Against my advice, you treated my friend like a whore. You took Sara straight to the treasure vault and attempted to purchase her affections. After you failed you began to insult her deceased mother and father. Now you are confused as to why Sara ran off, and your only solution is to hunt her down, drag her back to Egypt, and have her publicly executed! Did I leave anything out!"

Pharaoh's only reply was a groan of pleasure in response to the soothing massage.

Sobek grew frustrated with being ignored and snapped at the masseuse, "Out with you!"

The girl fled and Pharaoh sat up with a glare of aggravation. "Be still, Pharaoh speaks!" Silence fell upon Sobek and he said, "I have grown weary of your soporific ramblings. You know why I must do this. Sara made a fool of me. She made me appear weak!"

"When you appear weak so does Egypt. I understand, but there has to be a way of resolving matters that does not involve murder."

"There is no other way. If I am rumored to be an impotent ruler, who can't even control his women, other kingdoms will see fit to attack us. A public execution of Sara will restore my dignity and the power of my reign."

"A public execution will bring war with Nubia."

"And they will be defeated. I am well within my rights to execute a bride who dishonored me. If Nubia attacks Egypt, the Council of African Kings will align with me and pound Nubia into the dust."

Sobek shook her head, "Are you even sorry that you were cruel to her?"

“It doesn’t matter. Regardless of what I feel, I’m going to have to kill her.”



Sara and Matthaïos had been on the run for a month, never staying in one spot for more than a few days. Pharaoh Amenemhat’s men were never more than a step behind them. When traveling Sara kept on the veil of her purple harem garb, which covered all but her eyes and the bridge of her nose.

As of present they were in a merchant city, with buildings, shops, and stands lined up along the Nile like dominoes. The marketplace sold everything from livestock to fine silks, spices, scented oils, and weaponry. Merchants bartered goods and services all through the day and drank and partied all through the night. Sara and Matthaïos had gone unnoticed. They’d rented a room upstairs in some hole in the wall tavern, where the service was good but the food was lousy.

Sara had to admit Matthaïos looked phenomenal in the candlelight of the bustling tavern. He had more brawn, more height, even his voice was deeper, but Sara was never in love with his looks, to begin with. She was in love with his heart and his way of thinking, which she feared could change along with certain physical attributes. Matthaïos gingerly reached across the table of their booth for her hand but she withdrew before he could touch her... again.

“Please just talk to me, Sara,” he pleaded.

“You used to have the most beautiful singing voice, Matthaïos.” She sniffled, reminiscent of times he would sing to her as beautiful as an angel.

“I can learn to sing with this voice too,” he promised with that smile of his that always made her mind go blank and her heart skip a beat. His enchanting smile was one of the things that stayed the same, that and his gorgeous amber eyes. He sighed deeply, “I have a feeling this isn’t just about my singing voice. You don’t allow me to bathe you anymore. You barely allow me to touch you.”

“You’re not my servant anymore.”

“I do these things because I love you. I thought we loved each other.”

“Matthaïos I...”

Sara was interrupted by a serving wench in a black harem outfit. The young woman poured another ladle full of stew into their bowls, though neither of them had touched their dinners. She sat down the second loaf of bread. Sara pinched off it and chewed slowly. At least it was less stale than the first loaf. Matthaïos

tipped the serving girl. She thanked him graciously and weaved a staggered line through noisy drunkards to get to her next table.

Sara confessed, "It would taste a lie to say I'm not just a little afraid of you now. I'm so sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me." Her voice broke and tears welled up in her eyes.

Matthaios yearned to comfort her, to caress the skin of her knuckles with his lips. He refrained, knowing his actions could unintentionally make matters worse. He thought she would love him even more now that he seemed manlier, but she actually seemed threatened by him now. This didn't make sense to Matthaios. His heart sank and his muscular torso slumped a little in despair.

Sara smiled apologetically at him and changed the subject, "Did you have any luck with this village elder?"

Matthaios released a defeated exasperated breath. "The first two elders hadn't a clue where I was from. The third one actually believed my tattoos are from the far north." He chuckled at the thought of it.

"The snowy lands?" Sara giggled. "How on earth did you come to be here?"

"My point exactly," Matthaios laughed. "It makes no sense at all, but at least this elder was entertaining with his tall tales. He swore that the marking on my forearm meant I was tribal royalty."

"Prince Matthaios," Sara mused, dragging out the words for dramatic effect, "does have a ring to it."

"If only." Matthaios grinned against the cool rim of his goblet, before draining the crisp tangy wine from it.

"I will return shortly." Sara smiled sweetly. "I'm going to grab my shawl. These desert nights are drafty."

Matthaios nodded. The thin material of Sara's harem pants and midriff-baring top worked wonders for keeping her cool during the scorching heat of the day, but the temperature could fall as much as fifty degrees overnight. She waded through the sea of noisy patrons and disappeared upstairs.

Matthaios began to force down the bland stew and stale bread, knowing full well that steady meals were uncertain for fugitives. As he chewed on a lump of rubbery meat, a sharp tapping sound alerted him. Despite all the noisy voices, laughter, and gambling the small tapping sliced Matthaios's eardrum like a razor blade.

He turned toward the eastern wall. Matthaios gasped as he spotted two of Pharaoh's guards tacking up wanted posters. The time had come to move on. This haven was compromised.

Before he could lose himself in the crowd he'd been spotted. The guards rushed straight for him.

He had to lead them away from Sara. Matthaios fought through the crowd and bolted through a steaming kitchen.

He fled from the back exit and lost himself in a maze of shadowy alleys.



As Sara opened her door, a figure flipped down from the rafters with the grace of an acrobat.

The man, dressed in all black, gripped her arm and swung her into the wall. She crashed hard.

Her yelp of pain was drowned out by all the hustle and bustle of the tavern.

“Adrion, NOOO!” she cried as his fist sailed toward her face.

She ducked.

His knuckles smashed against the adobe wall.

While Adrion was distracted by pain Sara landed a punch to his jaw. She swept around and kicked his legs out from under him.

In one swift motion, Adrion leaped forward from the flat of his back, regaining his stance.

He gripped her by the throat with both hands and slammed her into the door with such force that everything went blank.

It took a few seconds to regain her sight. She couldn’t breathe. His grasp was growing tighter.

She brought her arms down in the pits of his elbows swift and hard. This broke his grasp.

She stumbled groggily, sucking the much-needed air.

“Prince Adrion! Listen to me,” she pleaded as she blocked, spun, kicked, and punched, fighting off her enraged cousin as he matched her blow for blow.

“Amenemhat does not love women. He collects them!”

“Your duty was not to be loved, but to be wed!” Adrion bellowed as he came at her with everything. “Now the only way I can avoid war with Egypt is to bring Pharaoh your cold stinking corpse!”



Matthaios could not breathe as two of Pharaoh's mercenaries crept past the dark alley he was hiding in. Moonlight glinted off the long curved blades of their swords. Matthaios clutched his sword. He peaked through a crevice in the large wicker basket that concealed him.

He felt guilty for killing the cobra that formerly resided in the lidded container, but he was no snake charmer and the creature's venomous bite would have certainly struck him dead.

"We haven't checked there," said the tall brown-skinned guard.

Matthaios swallowed hard as they made an about-face. They were marching his way. His grip tightened on the sword. As a harem boy, he had been well trained in the art of handling a weapon to protect Pharaoh's brides and concubines, but if these guards failed to report back to Egypt, Amenemhat would send a hundred more in their place.

The short man called out, "Those containers bear the markings of a snake tamer. Those abominations enchant serpents to dance with the music of wind instruments. I'm not going near those things."

The tall one called him a coward and laughed at his expense. Without warning, his sword plunged into the container. It barely missed Matthaios.

"Satisfied now," snapped the short one. "We're wasting time. He's probably halfway to the next city."

Matthaios breathed a sigh of relief as the razor-sharp blade withdrew from the basket. *I must grab Sara now. It is imperative that we find my people, whoever they may be, and pray they offer sanctuary.*



Matthaios burst into the room. It had been ransacked.

Sara was gasping for air.

The thin wire of Adrion's garrote sliced painfully into her hands as she desperately pried it away from her throat.

Adrion released the garrote at the sight of unwanted company.

Sara fell to her knees heaving.

Adrion unsheathed his sword and beckoned Matthaïos with an amused smirk. Sparks flew as Matthaïos and Adrion traded steel in the ransacked chamber.

Blocking, slicing, lunging at each other.

Matching one another strike for strike.

Adrion blew a cloud of burning dust in his opponent's eyes. Matthaïos hollered out, swinging his sword blindly.

Grinning in triumph, Adrion lifted his blade to destroy the slave who'd ruined the alliance.

Pain ripped through Adrion as Sara's long sharp hairpin plunged into the tender meat of his shoulder.

In the blink of an eye, Adrion crossed the room. He flipped out of the window with ninja-like dexterity.

Sara darted to the glassless window but he was gone.

At last able to see, Matthaïos gasped in disbelief at the warrior's phenomenal abilities. "Who on earth was that! I've never seen anyone fight like that. He couldn't have been one of Amenemhat's people."

"He was one of my people," Sara coughed. She was shaking all over. "A mindless assassin blinded by a misplaced sense of patriotism and honor."

"Is it possible to reason with him?"

"I don't remember a time when Adrion was reasonable."

"Can we pay him off?"

She shook her head no, "He'll never stop coming for me."

With the adrenaline of the fight dying down, she burst into tears.

Matthaïos held her and vowed from the depths of his soul, "He will have to get through me first."

# Chapter 10:

## What Makes a Man

With Pharaoh's soldiers on the ground, Matthaios would have to stealthily take Sara from rooftop to rooftop. This would be extremely dangerous but he had no other choice.

"We're almost to the stables," spoke the charming rogue as he hoisted Sara up on a crate.

Once she was on his level, she couldn't help but smile at him. He had rescued her in more ways than one. Sara stepped down to follow him. She tripped over the hem of her wrap and fell into his arms.

She could hear him chuckle. "Aren't princesses supposed to be elegant and graceful?"

"Aren't slave boys supposed to be submissive and obedient," she playfully scolded him.

She slowly straightened herself up and looked into his eyes. They stood there for a moment, her hands on his shoulders and his resting lightly on her hips. She was afraid and yet she yearned for him to grip her harder and never let go.

Matthaios was practically one of the girls: gentle, kindhearted, and understanding. This was why Sara first began to trust him, but now he was all man. Every man in her life had been a domineering horrible brute.

She could no longer allow herself to enjoy such indulgence with Matthaios. She pulled away from him and adjusted her veil, making sure to keep much of her face concealed. She couldn't let him know that her flesh desired his new muscular body, and Matthaios would have been able to read it all over her face.

"I want to thank you," she said. "If not for you, that zealot would have surely killed me."

He shrugged it off as if it was no big deal, "It was the least I could do after you saved me in so many ways."

His heroic modesty caused Sara to swell up inside.

"I couldn't help but notice that you called the assassin by name," Matthaios said before leaping over the gap between two buildings.

She projected her voice over the gap, "The assassin was my cousin Adrion, Crown Prince of Nubia, son of King Myron".



Matthaios laid down a board for her to use as a bridge, but she took his chivalry as a challenge. With a running start, Sara leaped over the gap, same as him. He gave her an impressed nod and they strolled across the rooftop.

Matthaios concluded, “Adrion must feel betrayed that you didn’t finalize Nubia’s alliance with Egypt, by your royal wedding to Pharaoh.”

Sara nodded forlornly, “Was I selfish?”

“No. Myron was selfish for sacrificing his niece to a lecherous brute who collects women. You deserve better than Amenemhat. You deserve better than me.” Matthaios looked at her with such honest eyes that Sara couldn’t help but blush and clasp her hands together.

She blessed him with a gaze that made his knees shake, and he felt a little faint. He shook his head and quickly regained his manly composure. He smiled and took her hand gently, careful not to hurt the cuts she had received in her scuffle with Adrion.

She shivered at the intimate touch. It had been weeks since she’d allowed him to embrace her in any manner. His hand was warm and much larger than her own, easily enveloping her tiny palm and delicate fingers.

Matthaios’s insides turned to jelly at the feel of her. Even simple contact never felt simple when it came to Sara. He yearned to taste her delectable wet lips, but would not push his luck with a kiss. They were making progress and he felt blessed for even that.



Sara and Matthaios rode straight to the next city, only stopping to treat their minor wounds and use the restroom. It took them until dusk the following afternoon to reach Luxor. Though weary and exhausted they didn’t check in at any rooms. They knew how close they were to Pharaoh’s guards and likely Adrion too.

Matthaios led her up the stairs of an abandoned structure. Sara pulled off her veil as they traveled through what was once an upstairs room, now left in shambles. It was drastically different than what she was used to; every drape was shredded, and not a single rug or vase was in one piece, yet it was the most beautiful dwelling she had ever seen because she was sharing it with Matthaios. He warned her against low rafters, and she ducked her head to avoid them, but

Sara's main focus was on the way his messy brown hair tickled the back of his strong neck. They continued their climb all the way to the building's roof.

Her stomach fluttered at how much she'd like to wrap her fingers in those smooth locks, but now he had all the same parts as every other man. Would Matthaïos start bedding every girl that honed into his field of view, like Amenemhat? Would Matthaïos become controlling and awful to her, like her uncle Myron? Would Matthaïos try to harm her if she did things he disagreed with, like Adrion?

Sara and Matthaïos made camp on the rooftop of the building under a starry sky. He figured this was the best vantage point. He took her hand, gently pulling her toward the building's edge.

"It may not be a palace but it has a breathtaking view," Matthaïos assured, inspiring Sara to take a gander.

Her eyes were flooded with the sight of Luxor, Egypt at sunset, drowned in hues of gold and crimson. Its soaring temples, monuments, and statues looked like heaven from where she stood, and the busy citizens looked so very small.

"You're right," Sara breathed. "The view is amazing. Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?"

"Every day," Matthaïos confessed, with a gentle caress of her cheek.

Her eyes widened in shock, and she gazed up at him. Their eyes met and locked, and her bosom ballooned with longing. Her face softened into a warm smile. Her heart pounded in her chest and yet she felt calm and serene, with Matthaïos grinning back at her.

To break the tension, he spoke, "I'm surprised you weren't glad to leave your home, with a cousin like that."

Sara could hear the concern in his voice; it was tangible and hung about him as he walked over and sat next to the low fire. Sara sat before the warm glow, forcing herself not to look at him. She had a need to cry and the urge to wrap her arms around him and be comforted.

She sighed and hesitated for a moment before revealing the ugly truth of her situation, "My father once governed the vast lands of Nubia. He was a great king, beloved by his people. Though he never had sons, he yearned for me to rule one day as queen. After he died, his brother Myron presented a false scroll, swearing that my father had named him heir. The council believed Myron and crowned him king. My cousin Adrion was once a kind and compassionate friend. After Myron took the throne, the vile king decided Adrion was too soft to be an heir. He sent my cousin off to some assassin's camp when he was little more than twelve. He came home at the age of eighteen, but he was different. I don't know what unspeakable horrors happened to him there, but Adrion never truly

returned to me. He'd become an empty shell that lived for nothing but serving the throne."

"But it's you who belongs on that throne!" Matthaios spoke furiously.

"Yes, but Adrion doesn't know that."

Her eyes turned up to see his reaction. He was watching her, bearing into her with pained eyes, hurt plastered on his face. She averted her eyes down and away as tears threatened to spill. Matthaios's empathy was causing an emotion to build inside of Sara that made the whole world and all of its problems melt away.

"Such vehement words, aren't slaves supposed to be soft-spoken," she teased him in retaliation for his earlier jab at her lack of grace.

Matthaios gave his incredible breathtaking grin. "A beautiful woman earlier informed me that I was no longer her servant."

"Oh did she," Sara flirted and leaned in closer to him.

This was an inappropriate game and they both knew it. He looked down still smiling, and she noticed the way his long lashes brushed his chiseled cheekbones.

He spoke quietly, "Somehow, someday, we must get your throne back."

The sun slipped below the horizon and the night grew colder. He moved closer to her and she could feel the heat radiating from his body. They traded looks and grins. Her heart began beating rapidly, desperate to rip through her chest and become one with his. She moved towards him and he leaned into her. Her smile dissipated into shocked expectancy as she noticed the smolder in his eyes. His lips touched hers tenderly. Her eyelids drooped and closed in ecstasy. Blood coursed through her veins like the waters of the Nile in monsoon season. Matthaios felt her whole body go rigid. He pulled away and looked at her as if trying to read her very thoughts. Neither of them had mattered to anyone in so very long, but at least they mattered to each other.

With no words of protest coming from Sara, Matthaios cupped her face with his hands and kissed her even deeper. The palms of the former slave were rough like sandpaper on her delicate skin, still, she invited his caress. She inhaled sharply as he began moving his lips with hers. Her hands were flat on the stone surface of his chest to maintain some sense of distance, a modicum of control, which was starting to matter less and less at this point.

As his hot moist tongue began to sweep the valleys of her mouth, she gasped into the kiss. Sara slid her hands out and around his back. The hands she'd been using to keep them apart were now clinging to him, to keep herself from floating above the sleeping city. Matthaios smiled against her mouth, at last, releasing his captive, yearning not to push her too far. He was beginning to understand why

she didn't trust him. Almost every man in her life had been a terrible person. He placed his hand on hers and Sara relaxed and entwined her fingers with his.

As their mouths met once more and his tongue touched her lip she tentatively opened her mouth and let him in. She breathed deeply, focusing on the curious feeling that overwhelmed her with every one of his sensual kisses. At long last they separated gazing at one another, catching their breath. His left hand was still holding hers, while his free hand moved down to rest upon her thinly veiled hip.

Sara panicked and jumped up, suddenly granted mental clarity. He looked at her puzzled and apologetic as if he had done something wrong. She could feel her heart twisting into a knot. He rose with her, towering over the petite princess, cautiously taking both of her hands into his. He stroked the back of her hands with his thumbs, and she could feel her tense muscles loosen. She hadn't realized until now that she was trembling from excitement, fear, love, everything. Standing in the open air, a chill ran down her body and she shook.

"You must be freezing," he said apologetically as he realized how low the temperature had dropped.

It was as if he thought that because he had no blankets or warmth to offer her it was his fault that she was cold, his fault that she'd given up wealth, privilege, everything for him. She shook her head to negate him, but he could tell she was lying and wrapped his travel robe about her shoulders. He led her to their makeshift bed, a mat with a worn pillow big enough for a person and a half to lay on. Sara kneeled down. Matthaïos had every intention to leave and fetch provisions from the town below, but she held onto his hands and pulled him down with her. She kissed him for so long that they floated out of the embrace gasping.

Hesitantly, he sat with her, still holding her hands, kneeling, facing each other, unsure of what to do next. She'd been naked in front of him countless times but this was different. This time they knew that something could come of it, a concept that was as frightening as it was exciting.

"Don't touch," she pleaded, "not until I'm ready."

Matthaïos nodded respectfully and watched as Sara removed her shiny purple slippers, her earrings, and necklace. She untied her braids and allowed them to rain upon her shoulders. Feeling more comfortable, she slid his robe down her body and relished the feel of the evening air on her skin. It raised gooseflesh as she slid her top off, causing Matthaïos to swallow hard with desire.

He began to peel away the layers of his own coverings. His baggy trousers and tunic lay in a crumpled pile on the rooftop. Sara breathed in sharply as her eyes drank him up. With each article of clothing removed in the blackness of the desert night, Sara became braver, bolder, and she beckoned him, but when he

laid her back, removed the last of her garments, and cast them aside, this raised the hairs on the back of her neck. She was terrified and trembling as he positioned himself between her bare legs. Matthaïos rubbed the fronts of her thighs to calm her. His eyes, so full of love and sincerity, bore into her soul and he held back.

“Do you have faith in me?” he whispered.

He was happily surprised as Sara nodded her approval for whatever he was about to do, which she knew was something she was supposed to save for marriage. A brief pulse of anger coursed through her at the concept of arranged unions, but her reverie was broken when she felt Matthaïos lower himself upon her. She bit her lip and held onto the bedroll to brace herself. That’s when Matthaïos chastely pecked her on the lips, rolled to the side of her, and spooned her body. He covered their nakedness with his warm robe and nuzzled his face against the nape of her neck.

“Matthaïos!” She spun in his arms, so enamored she could barely think.

“I did this to prove myself to you. I am the same man you fell in love with, the same man who can show restraint around beautiful women. What makes a man is what’s up here,” he used her fingers to touch his temple. “And what’s in here,” he placed her hand over his furiously pounding heart. “Not just what’s down here,” he cupped her hand over the parts of him that she feared. She felt that angst and worry melting away with his love, and he vowed, “I will make love to you soon but on that day, we will be wed and it will not happen on the roof of an abandoned building.”

Sara wiped away the tears Matthaïos hadn’t realized he’d shed and he likewise wiped away her tears. He hugged her so tightly she could feel his love resonating through the pores of her skin. He could likewise feel her love as they drifted into the most beautiful heavenly slumber they had ever been blessed by the gods to have...



Beneath the blanket of a dusky sky, Matthaïos gently nudged Sara awake. They helped one another dress, feeling satisfied, soothed, and loved. If cuddling together felt this incredible they could only imagine that their coupling would feel like a brush with destiny. As they sat to watch the sunrise he held her in his arms leaning in for a kiss.

Their serenity was interrupted by an angry shout, “They’re up there! Seize them!”

Sara leaped to her feet. Matthaïos did the same. She could hear the metallic sound of swords slicing through the air.

There was only one way in or out of this place, and that was the staircase that the guards were stampeding up.

Sara pressed her hands to her face in horror. She whipped around.

Matthaïos stood on the stone ledge, ready to jump. He extended a hand to her and asked as he did the night before, “Do you have faith in me?”

“What are you doing!” Sara asked, eyes wide.

Were they just going to end it? Just like that? Leap to their deaths willingly, together, rather than being scorned and executed before the masses?

Even if Sobek could convince Pharaoh that it would make both kingdoms look better if they pretended Sara never ran away, Matthaïos would be locked in a dungeon for life and Sara would be locked in marriage.

Sara would rather die than marry for any reason other than love. She would rather die than be separated from Matthaïos for a single moment.

The thought hit her hard and she sucked in a breath, struggling for oxygen. She felt dizzy.

“Do you have faith in me?” Matthaïos repeated with determination, breaking through her racing thoughts, holding out his hand to her.

Inside, she was battling with herself. The sound of the guards growing nearer caused adrenaline to burn through her veins like wildfire.

She was afraid, but as she looked into his eyes she knew he would never hurt her and she had to go with him. She loved this man, every part of him.

“Yes,” she replied, at last, taking his hand.

He pulled her up to his level and shouted, “then jump!”

He went over the edge and Sara clumsily followed, screaming as she tore through the first awning and then another and another.

Each veil of material slowed their descent until they hit the packed sand with a roll and a tumble, aching but uninjured.

Matthaïos and Sara looked at each other grinning and breathing rapidly from the exhilarating chase.

They could hear Amenemhat’s guards cursing from here.

With a rough passionate kiss, Sara joined hands with Matthaïos. She joined hearts with him as they ran through the city of Luxor.

She felt foolish, ashamed, even a little angry for entertaining doubts about him. They reached their camels and boarded hastily.

“Are you ready, Sara,” Matthaios grinned, his heart pounding with a mixture of love and adrenaline.

She leaned over on her camel engaging him with a mind-blowing kiss so passionate it left him gasping for breath, his mind whirling, his whole body tingling.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He planted a sweet peck upon her knuckles and took off on his camel.

As Sara rode into the rising sun with her beloved, the wind whipping her braids, love bursting from her heart, of only one thing she was certain. *Pharaoh Amenemhat can send assassins, plagues, and locusts for all I care. We’re going to beat him...*

# Chapter 11:

## Ghosts of the Past

*Seven years ago...*

King Myron's Nubian Palace was lofty and Persian in appearance. Colorful pastel curtains danced whimsically as a breeze floated throughout the corridors. High ceilings with beautiful molding enchanted every hallway and chamber. Gigantic statues and pillars made one feel as if wandering through a land of giants.

"I will not marry him!" screamed eleven-year-old Sara with her arms stiff at her sides. Her small fists were balled in fury. "What does a man with FOUR wives want with me!"

"That is neither your concern nor mine," Myron growled, his lips tight with anger. "But you will leave for Egypt upon the day Pharaoh decides you are old enough."

"I do not love him. When and *if* I choose to marry someday it will be for love. I promised my father I would marry for no other reason."

"Your father was a lovesick fool. He threw away a chance at a treaty with Egypt to marry a worthless peasant woman below his station. Now I must fix his mistakes!"

Sara's eyes burned bloodshot with anger as Myron insulted her deceased parents. If she possessed the physical strength she might have ripped his heart out with her bare hands. "I will thank you not to speak ill of my mother and father."

"I merely speak the truth, and you WILL marry Amenemhat! It's your duty!"

Sara heaved with furious rapid breaths. *I'm receiving a lecture on duty from the man who stole my throne!* Before Sara could stop herself, Myron heard the young princess scoff at his hypocrisy.

In the blink of an eye, Sara felt the bitter sting of a leather strap. She hit the floor as if her legs had been cut out from under her. She flailed her arms to shield her body from the hits.

Soon she heard the lashes but felt few. It was as if she'd been wrapped in a blanket of security as if her mother and father's love had survived beyond death to protect her from this vicious attack.



She clenched her eyes clinging to this blanket of love and safety until she heard no more swinging of the strap until she could celebrate the sound of Myron's footsteps leaving her chamber. As young Sara opened her eyes, her tear-blurred vision fell upon Adrion's face.

"Cousin!" She screamed as she realized he'd been beaten to unconsciousness.

His unmoving face was shiny with tears from covering her body with his own. Adrion had taken the brunt of the beating for Sara. Her parents' undying love remained to protect her, just not in the way she thought. They'd sent their love and protection through Adrion by making him promise to always look out for her.

The following day, Adrion was drug outside by palace warriors. Sara clung to him for dear life, painfully skinning her knees as her arms remained wrapped around his waist. She screamed in anguish as they tore her away from him.

Before Myron's guards could haul Adrion off to the assassins' camp, Adrion managed to pull Sara's birthday gift from his pocket: two meticulously carved hair sticks that he'd spent the last month working on.

Sara sank to her knees clutching his gift, with tears cascading down her face, as the soon to be assassin shrank into the distance...



Sara woke up screaming in a pool of her own sweat. She sprung straight up in bed heaving for breath. The same horrible nightmares had been plaguing her for the last three nights. Sara knew not if this was a sign that Adrion still cared for her or a dreadful reminder that he was lost to her forever.

"It's all right, princess," Matthaios promised, holding her trembling body to soothe her.

Sara willed her breathing to slow. With a shaking hand, she reached over and pulled a hair accessory from the nightstand: a long decorative pick carved from the ivory of an elephant's tusk. She kissed it goodbye, kissed Adrion goodbye. He was no longer her cousin, but an assassin determined to end her life. With that bleak but truthful thought, Sara tossed the trinket in the garbage along with what love remained for her deranged kinsman.

"Matthaios, where did you get that beautiful sword?" Sara asked after seeing him instinctively reach for a weapon that wasn't there. "It's unlike any I have

ever seen.”

“The only thing I recall of my people was the night of that dreadful storm. I was on a ship when the wind and waves began to knock the mighty vessel about as if it was no greater than a child’s toy in a bathtub. Men were running all around me, sliding and falling on the water drenched deck. My father was fighting his way through the pouring rain to get to me. He was struck by a piece of debris and he didn’t open his eyes after that. I slid, crawled, and made my way to him. I grabbed the only thing within reach, a sword that hung from his belt. The wind whipped my tiny body like a flag. My legs flailed in the air as I held fast to my father’s sword, only anchored by the weight of his body. I saw my big brother coming for me, screaming for me to hold on. Before he could grasp my arm the leather strap snapped in two. I went overboard, sword and all. I washed up on the shores of a warmer place than I had come from, and opened my eyes to much darker skinned people. That is all I remember. I cannot recall the name of my father and brother nor the name of my tribe.”

“I’m sorry,” Sara spoke sincerely, placing her warm palm on the back of his hand. “We will find your family. I know they love you. How could anyone not?”



Adrion nearly broke a tooth as he bit into his smoked fish. He’d only set his lunch aside for five minutes and already the extreme dry heat of the Egyptian desert had transformed his fish to jerky and his loaf of bread to crunchy toast.

When he first sat to eat at the fountain’s edge Pharaoh’s sister, Sobek, had warned him not to unwrap his food until right before he was ready to eat. Just as he prepared to break bread he saw one of Amenemhat’s councilmen and spoke with him briefly. Adrion had completely forgotten that during this time of year the desert air would suck the moisture out of his lunch in the blink of an eye.

With an irritated huff, Adrion prepared to throw his ruined meal away, until his gaze fell upon the pleading eyes of a slave child. He honestly didn’t give a damn about the child; she was under Amenemhat’s reign, not his. She could have starved for all Adrion cared, but he was sick of her looking at him.

He warned the little girl to watch out for bones, but she inhaled the unsuitable vittles before he could finish his sentence. Adrion glanced at the large sundial, its angular shadow bearing witness to the time of day. It was getting late.

He clutched Matthaïos's sword, furious that this was the closest he'd gotten to the white devil. Adrion had succeeded in capturing Matthaïos and Sara only to be thwarted by a well-calculated escape. To make matters worse they'd killed some of his men in the process. Adrion was forced to return to Giza to regroup.

Looking up at the skies of Egypt, he decided to make his way back to his guestroom in Pharaoh's palace. The sun spread waves of crimson and violet across the evening sky as it lowered behind the great pyramids. A pale half-moon was already visible, just poking over the tawny-colored sphinx.

Adrion decided to have the bodies of his soldiers mummified in Egypt before making the long trip home to Nubia.

*Funeral rituals are the worst. Adrion grimaced as he passed idling servants and scantily clad concubines. It isn't the death that bothers me, but rather the grief of others. Grief is one of the most difficult emotions to fake. I haven't a clue how to look as if I care, and as always it's going to be awkward. I can already envision the widows keening, reaching out for comfort I cannot provide. Awkward. I can just imagine my emotionless eyes unable to shed tears of mourning. Awkward. I loathe funeral rituals because my lack of a heart makes these ceremonies so damn awkward! But at least these funerals will grant me an opportunity to leave Amenemhat's empire and return to my own. Something is off; that is the one thing I can feel. I need to investigate and the sooner I return to the Kingdom of Nubia the better.*

Adrion entered his guestroom and paused at the sight of a pitcher of wine and a fresh bundle of food on a platter. The large bloom of a lotus flower gave a sweet fragrance and a sparkle to the display. *Sobek!* He snarled.

Ignoring his hungry belly, Adrion tossed the flower aside and took up the silver tray of food and wine. With perfect balance, he stormed through the palace to confront Pharaoh's meddling sister.

Adrion caught Sobek just before she entered her chamber. "You overstepped your boundaries, woman!"

"You're welcome." She smiled charmingly, not the least bit ruffled by the anger all over his face. "I thought you liked food."

"I like personal space," he growled, slamming the tray and its contents in her chest, "and you keep violating it."

"I was merely being hospitable."

"You were being meddlesome, as always."

She passed the platter to her servant and got right in his face, punctuating every word with a hard poke of his even harder chest, "You don't scare me."

Adrion threw up his hands. He stormed away before he launched his country into war by garroting Pharaoh's sister.

Sobek's handmaiden gave her a funny look.

"Careful with that one," the maid warned in a hushed whisper. "He's a dirty evil bastard and you have a fancy for dirty evil bastards."

Sobek smirked thoughtfully as she watched the handsome killer disappear down the corridor. She was neither frightened nor put off by bad boys. She was the sister of Amenemhat after all. *I'll feed the uneaten fish to Sara's feline. I promised her I would take care of him. I could tell it was difficult for her to part with him. My brother hates Sara, but I envy her courage and wish her well.*

With a puzzled glare in her innocent doe eyes, the handmaiden pondered. "One would think you'd be angry, Princess Sobek. Prince Adrion spurned your gift of food."

"Yes, but he kept the flower." Sobek spoke as she entered her lavish chamber, "and why on earth would he do that?"

Across the palace Adrion slept fitfully, tossing, turning, and sweating. The same dreams that had been plaguing Sara were tormenting him as well.

Adrion awakened from the hellish nightmare still entangled in the sweat-damp sheets. He climbed out of bed and hastily packed his things. These ghosts of the past had to be a sign. He needed answers that could not wait. He was leaving for Nubia right now...



Weeks later, Adrion threw every noble and elder out of the Nubian council chamber. There were gasps of protest and disgruntled mumbles but Adrion cared not.

"Get Out!" He shouted. The stragglers hastened their stride. Once Adrion was alone with his father he slammed a royal decree on the table.

"This is not Uncle's handwriting!" Adrion bellowed. "Explain yourself!"

Myron picked at his beard and rubbed a nervous hand over his shaven head. "A king is ordained by the Gods and explains himself to no man!"

"You will explain yourself to me," Adrion growled. "Or I will tell everyone with ears that the document that made you king is a forgery."

"You forget your place! YOU SERVE ME!"

"I SERVE THE THRONE!" Adrion corrected him. "And I'm not certain you belong on it."

Myron shushed his son, "Are you mad!"

“No, just curious,” Adrion rebutted, staring his father down with a deranged glare, tapping his finger on the papyrus. “I am very curious as to why a King who never utilized royal scribes would have a writer draft the most important document of his reign.”

Myron assured Adrion, “It is common knowledge that my brother insisted upon drafting his own decrees but as his illness advanced he became unable. Yes, I wrote the decree for him but it was what he wanted. Why the sudden curiosity?”

“No reason,” Adrion grumbled.

“It’s, Sara isn’t it?” Myron spoke sternly. “She’s gotten to you. I couldn’t help but notice that you said she escaped. Why didn’t you just kill her on sight, as were your orders?”

Adrion flopped down into a random chair, mindlessly fiddling with the intricately carved hairpin, half a pair, that Sara had pierced his shoulder with during their first fight. It had been whittled from the ivory of elephant tusks and at one time this simple trinket bore a great deal of meaning to him. Now nothing bore meaning to him.

Adrion confessed, “Sara could have pierced my heart or stabbed me through the eye with this. Why would she pierce the fleshiest part of my torso?” Adrion rubbed his sore shoulder.

Myron gawked awkwardly for several seconds before coming up with an explanation, “She isn’t a seasoned assassin like us. She has poor aim.”

Adrion shook his head no, “I recall Sara having excellent aim, and yet on the first night I faced off with her it was as if she was trying not to kill me, as if she was aiming to cause as little damage as possible. The fact that she would use a gift I gave her made it seem as though she was trying to relay a message. That’s why I took a second look at the decree, and though the writing was very similar to Uncle’s, it was not the same.”

“Adrion,” Myron placed a hand upon his son’s shoulder.

Adrion’s eyes grew wild. He jerked away. “Don’t!”

“I forgot,” Myron spoke quickly with his hands raised in retreat.

Since the day Adrion returned from the assassins’ camp he could not stand to be touched by anyone for any reason. The corner of Myron’s lip curled up in disgust and contempt for his freak of a son. He walked around the table and took a seat across from Adrion, as if not wanting to taint his lungs with the same air that Adrion breathed.

*Some heir.* Myron shook his head with disapproval. *How will Adrion ever continue my bloodline like this? It is one’s offspring that truly make an African King immortal. Adrion has proven useless in that regard.*

Myron sighed, a little repulsed, but mostly bewildered. “What did they do to you in that camp?”

“Like you give a damn,” Adrion snarled. “You imprisoned me there.”

With a final vow that he was indeed Nubia’s rightful king, Myron left the council room. Adrion sat alone brooding, unsure of what or whom to believe.

Milus, an African sorcerer, and high elder, quietly entered minutes later. He was unable to tell if the prince was in good spirits or not. Adrion’s face bore no emotion; it never did.

Milus cleared his throat. “Pardon my intrusion, Prince Adrion, but you requested I retrieve you the moment my line of magical weaponry was complete.”

“Of course,” Adrion nodded and rose.

He tossed Sara’s hairpin in the wastebasket. It meant nothing to him; she meant nothing to him. He made his way to the artillery tent near the training grounds to test out the latest in enchanted weapons.

Adrion had made up his mind. *Father is telling the truth. Sara is lying, and for her lies and her betrayal, she will perish at my hand...*

# Chapter 12:

## The Sword of Mystery

King Myron conducted a profitable trade with northern warriors. Most of the visiting men fit the same description. Their skin was as pale as the belly of a fish. Their hair was the color of churned butter, almost a white-blond, and their eyes were as blue as the seas they sailed. Nubia traded with these fair skinned giants at least twice a year. They could speak without a translator most of the time. They bargained over trunks of treasure, deadly weapons, exotic spices, and fine silks.

The leader of these warriors was even greater in stature than the rest of his fleet of giants. He had to remove his horned helmet and duck to get through the threshold. Rather than a sword, he armed himself with a heavy double-sided ax. The man spoke with a voice like thunder. “May I trouble you to accommodate my warriors for a second week? My shaman senses a storm on the horizon.”

Myron laughed with amusement. “If your men haven’t had their fill of Nubian women just say so. You needn’t make such claims to extend your stay. The skies are perfectly clear.”

“Your women are lovely,” the chief admitted with a good-natured smile, “but my need to postpone our trip is not a joke. Nelson senses a storm brewing and he has never steered me wrong. Ever since the death of my father and the loss of my little brother I always make certain to bring a shaman aboard to predict bad sailing weather.”

“All right then, Chief Zachariah,” Myron assured. “I’ll have my servants make preparations.”

Jaxon, a fellow warrior with dark tresses whispered to his chief, “I couldn’t help but notice that you said your brother was lost rather than dead. He was a child of maybe three. You can’t possibly believe he survived.”

“I know with my whole mind that he perished,” Zachariah admitted, “but I feel with my whole heart that he is alive.”

“Then never give up hope,” assured Daronco, the chief’s second in command. “There are times when a feeling can tell you more than a logical thought.”

“We sail together. We conquer together. We die together,” Jaxon assured Chief Zachariah.

Nelson, the only thin one in the bunch, blessed the room with his infectious grin, “I knew we were sailing to Nubia twice a year for more than spices and hospitality.”

Myron exited the council room hastily. His head was pounding, and his palms were sweating. *I must find an excuse to get rid of them! Many years before I began trading with them, a pale-skinned child washed up on shore. I'd never seen a person of such complexion. I thought he was the creation of pure evil from our legends: The Great White Devil. I told my soldiers to kill him or sell him to Amenemhat as a slave, whatever it took to get him out of Nubia. Then years later a fleet of pale skinned warriors docked at our port to trade. I knew at this point the child I sent to Egypt had not been The Great White Devil, just a foundling from a faraway land of snow and mountains. If they find out that their precious prince was clipped and forced into the life of a harem boy, both Nubia and Egypt will be at war with these pale-faced giants. I must get rid of them and soon...*



A flock of sheep interrupted their grazing to mutter their surprise in Sara and Matthaios's direction. They had come to Nubia to retrieve any treasures hidden within the property of her dowered lands. They knew it was dangerous, but they would need money for their travel to the far lands of West Africa. In the far west, there were many sympathizers and supporters of Nubia's rightful heir.

A trusted friend of Sara's family had taken care of the property in her absence. The groundskeeper offered to watch out for assassins and sound a bell if Pharaoh's soldiers approached as well.

Sara's adobe cottage was cozy and simple. Its furnishings were wicker, topped with soft cushions. Matthaios arched a brow at the flimsy looking furniture. Sara assured him that the intricately woven chairs and loveseat were much stronger than they looked. He took a seat to test the furniture. The wood groaned a little but didn't give. Matthaios gave an impressed nod at its surprising comfort. The vacation home had not been used in many years, so Sara was bursting with joy to step over its threshold.

“Home sweet home,” she mused as she walked about igniting oil lanterns and candles.



“I thought the grand palace of Nubia was your home,” Matthaïos stated, slightly puzzled about Sara’s love for a place so simple.

“The palace was a job, but this little cottage was home,” she explained as she sat next to him. “This was the only place I ever had my mother and father all to myself, and the rare occasions when Adrion could come with us were the best times of all.”

“I understand,” Matthaïos said as he traced the curves of her face in the soft light. “Your mother and father were not your family at the palace. The three of you were just a trio of dignitaries working together for the good of the people.”

Sara nodded with a warm smile. *Matthaïos is still a wonderful listener. None of the things that matter most have changed about him.*

She excitedly pulled him to a window. She swept open the wooden shutters, pointing through the open space to the joys of her life. “That pond over there is where my father asked my mother to marry him. She didn’t have a title or wealth. As you can imagine it caused quite the stir.”

Matthaïos embraced her from behind, dropping a kiss on the crown of her head. *It’s hard to believe how much she’s opened up to me. I no longer feel like an outsider.* “What is that structure over there?”

“That was the treehouse I shared with Adrion,” she spoke excitedly, taking his strong arms and pulling them even tighter around her. “That field over there with the posts at each end is where we played a game called coconut catch.”

“Coconut catch?” Matthaïos inquired.

She giggled. “I’ll explain the rules to that later. The beautiful white gazebo to the far east is where my maternal grandparents were married.”

“This was their home,” Matthaïos concluded with a gentle brush of his lips upon her temple.

“Mmhm,” she answered dreamily. Her eyes drifted closed at the sensation of his lips. “That gazebo was built on hallowed ground and one should never set foot there unless they are planning to wed.”

“I see,” he spoke softly, a little mesmerized and enchanted by the thought of spending life with the woman he loved.

“Can you smell that? I think it’s going to rain soon. It’s amazing some of the strange things you miss about a place. Spending months in the desert can certainly make you long for regular rain showers.”

“Unless it’s monsoon season, you certainly won’t see much precipitation in Egypt,” Matthaïos agreed with a chuckle.

There was no warning or drizzle, no rumble of thunder, just a sudden downpour of rain as if the Goddess Tefnut had unzipped the heavens and unleashed this blessed bounty.

“What are you doing?” Matthaïos chuckled as she beckoned him to the door.

“It’s perfect weather for coconut catch.”

They joyfully ran into the cool rain. Sara grabbed a coconut from a stockpile. She briefly explained the rules to Matthaïos and the game was on. They ran about the mud slick field tackling one another, falling with a splash into the puddles.

They laughed blissfully, playing with childlike happiness as they ran up and down the rain-soaked field. Mud splattered on their faces and hair. The thin material of their homespun clothing was drenched beyond recognition as they tussled and rolled about.

Thunder rolled in the distance. Lightning split the sky in two as Sara lay atop Matthaïos in the grassy meadow.

“I got you,” she spoke just inches from his lips, her excited breaths making her words come out a whisper.

“I surrender,” Matthaïos breathed in response.

He raised his head from the cool wet grass and kissed her. It was a soft teasing kiss at first, but her sweet taste was potent on his lips, and he lusted for more. He deepened the kiss, his tongue flicking across her lips, requesting entrance into the warm depths of her mouth. To his surprise, Sara showed no hesitancy and allowed him in. His tongue met hers in a sensual waltz. Their lips never separating, his hands slid down her feminine back, gripping her close. This elicited a pleasurable moan from her and Sara could feel the hum of Matthaïos moaning against her lips.

The storm intensified. Lightening cracked. Thunder shook the ground beneath their entwined bodies. The rain began to beat against them harder.

They helped one another up, nearly blinded by the pouring rain. Sara and Matthaïos took off running. Laughing all the way to the nearest shelter.

“Look where we are, Sara,” Matthaïos smiled down at her.

She hadn’t even noticed they were sheltered in the elegant gazebo, the one built on hallowed ground. Sara gazed up at him dreamily, brushing a wet lock of hair away from his dazzling brown eyes. “Marry me, Matthaïos.”

“I already asked you to marry me.” His gorgeous face scrunched with a puzzled expression.

“I mean now.” She gave him an enchanting smile, a blinding white compared to the muddy mess she’d made of herself.

“There’s no one to marry us.”

Sara made a sweeping motion with her hand in the direction of the storm that billowed around them. “We have the Goddess Tefnut to ordain our union. She

brought us to this holy place for a reason, and my groundskeeper is a Nubian priest.”

“Let’s do it.”

She rang the gazebo bells to summon the tribal priest, who gave them a stern warning that without witnesses and the permission of her next of kin the union would not be official. The lovers cared not about legalities; they cared about each other.

Matthaios and Sara’s eyes glistened with tears of happiness and profound love as they recited their vows before the holy man. Still damp with rain and a little muddy, Matthaios married Sara with little more than their vows of unconditional love and a beautiful storm as their witness.



Zachariah, Jaxon, Daronco, and Nelson lay chest down on narrow beds as dark-skinned harem girls massaged their muscles. “This is the life,” Jaxon grinned devilishly as a pretty young woman fed him fruit from a bowl.

Before anyone could respond, Adrion entered the elaborate chamber. “It appears Nelson was correct about the storm and now it seems to have cleared so...”

Before Adrion could finish his sentence, Zachariah was demanding to know where Adrion got that sword within his grasp. Adrion had been so distracted by everything else that he’d forgotten to put the blade away before evicting the guests.

“That blade belonged to my father.” Zachariah sat up on the bed, covering the essentials of his godlike body with a sheet. “Where did you attain it, your highness?”

All of the visitors were sitting up now with bone-chilling glares on their faces.

Adrion spoke as smoothly as silk, “This sword washed up on our shores.”

“And did it have a three-year-old child attached to it when it grazed your sands?”



The storm had passed, the weather was Africa warm once more, and a magnificent rainbow festooned the sky. Beams of light warmed the planks of the gazebo, where Matthaios and Sara remained hours after their wedding.

“I love you, Sara,” Matthaios whispered with a peck of her temple, as they lay bare in each other’s arms. “I promise next time this will happen on a bed.”

Sara giggled as she ran her fingers through his hair, which crunched with dried mud. “This was perfect.” Matthaios sighed and she questioned, “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that... I vowed to get your throne back before we did anything like this,” he explained.

“I don’t want it anymore. I don’t want to lead rebellions or take my throne back from Myron. I don’t want war with Amenemhat either.”

“Then what do you want?” He asked earnestly.

“You Matthaios. You are all I have ever wanted.”

He hugged her warmly, his heart bursting with joy, “And you are all I have ever longed for. I feel you deserve to be queen and more but that is your decision. We can go far away and become shepherds for all I care as long as we do it together.”

They dressed quickly, soon to wash up and pack for their journey. Sara and Matthaios never got the chance at a new beginning in West Africa. They never even got a chance to leave the gazebo. Before they could embark on a life together, Sara’s horrified gaze fell upon none other than Pharaoh and his minions...

# Chapter 13:

## Pharaoh's Blade

The heavy iron shackles had rubbed the skin from Sara's wrists. They were pink and raw. It hurt like hell. She rested on the lavish bed of her former chamber in Egypt. A long chain extended from the wall to her cuffed wrists.

She closed her eyes and reflected on the last time she was truly happy with Matthaios before their bliss was interrupted by an ambush. Pharaoh's forces had taken her priest captive before he could sound the warning bells. Armed soldiers charged into the wedding gazebo. Matthaios and Sara were shackled and arrested for treason. She was forced to watch as Pharaoh's minions set fire to her family home and the gazebo where she wed her love.

Pharaoh was too furious to speak words. Sara gasped in horror as he reared back and knocked Matthaios unconscious. The henchmen drug Matthaios's limp body away in chains, soon to execute him.

Sara sat up in bed as the chamber door creaked open.

It was Pharaoh Amenemhat. "I'm sorry this chamber now serves as your prison."

"Let's be honest, for once. This chamber has always been my prison," Sara confessed.

Amenemhat sat next to her on the bed. "I've just talked to Matthaios. I know everything."

Sara sighed with heavy guilt and tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't plan for this."

"I know." Pharaoh nodded solemnly.

He removed the striped headdress he wore for a crown as if he could no longer bear the weight of it. Sara closed her eyes and gingerly ran her fingers through his silky black curls. Pharaoh's eyes drifted shut and he embraced the wonderful warmth of her intimate touch until a sense of duty forced him to pull her hand away.

Pharaoh warned her, "Sara, you can't... It isn't appropriate."

"You can't kill me twice, and I've been waiting to do that from the moment I met you. Before you had four wives." She snarled at the crown he set on her bed. "Before you became that."

He unlocked her wrists to grant her this one indulgence. The chain fell to the ground with a loud clang. Sara pulled Pharaoh over to rest his head upon her lap as she continued to stroke his curls.

He asked without opening his eyes, "You truly love this slave?"

"Yes"

"And what of me," Pharaoh questioned. "If I had an open heart and an open mind when I brought you to Egypt would you have given me your loyalty?"

"Amenemhat," Sara spoke as tears rolled down her cheeks. "I would have given you my love. Your heart was all I ever asked for, but you made it clear from the beginning that I would never be worthy of it."

Sara was utterly shocked as Pharaoh did something she thought incapable of a ruthless emperor. A single tear escaped the crease of his closed eyes and trickled down his bronze skin.

"Oh, my Gods." She shook her head in disbelief. "I never saw it before. Now it's so clear to me. You cared for me! You fancied me and you chose to break my heart! Why!"

"I was ill-informed," Pharaoh confessed as he rose from his comfortable resting position on her thighs. "My advisor told me about your uncle and cousin. My advisor said that you were raised by a certain kind of man and if I were to win your respect and your heart I had to be like them."

"Who!" Sara demanded. "Who told you to treat me like garbage!"

"It doesn't matter!"

"I already know it was that bastard, Osiris! Wasn't it!"

"I said it's of no consequence! My word is final!"

Sara jumped back as Pharaoh pulled out a dagger.

"Go ahead." She stared him down with great fortitude. "Pierce my heart, cut my throat. Anything would be better than having your executioner hack at my neck."

"Don't fight it," he spoke with an eerie calmness, before lunging at her with the blade.

She blocked him and countered with an elbow to his face.

They tussled about the bed until he sliced her shoulder.

Sara flipped backward off her bed.

She stood firm in her fighting stance. "Is this little scratch the best you could do, almighty Pharaoh!"

Amenemhat laughed with amusement as he wiped the blood from his lip. "This blade was laced. All it takes is a scratch."

Sara instinctively pressed a hand over her cut to stop the bleeding. "You poisoned me..."

She already felt woozy and light headed. She stumbled forward, full ready to rip out his throat and take him to the afterlife with her.

Sara was too far gone to fight.

She staggered a few more steps and fell into his arms.

Pharaoh set Sara on the bed and eased her back to rest on the pillows.

Her eyes were wild and frightened but she hadn't the strength to swing at him.

"Don't fight it," he whispered. "It will be over soon."

The vision of him swam in and out of focus. The world around her spiraled into darkness.

Pharaoh kissed Sara's unmoving lips and sat at her desk to forge her suicide note...

# Chapter 14:

## Death Chamber

The Egyptian mummification chamber was a vast underground lair in the center of the tombs. This is where the bodies of the deceased were prepared for the afterlife. There were sharp gleaming tools and strips of white cloth for wrapping mummies.

Though the rest of Egypt was scorching hot, this chamber of death was constructed so deep into the earth that it remained cold. A row of preparation tables cut the room in half. They were slabs of polished stone with trenches carved into them to drain the blood.

Sara's body lay on the center table with a corpse on each side of her. She gasped awake and looked around frantically. Sara panicked at the sight of dead bodies.

A strong hand clamped over her mouth to muffle her screams.

Pharaoh stood over Sara restraining her as she fought like a mad beast.

Pharaoh answered the question she was incapable of asking, "If I had pardoned you I would be seen as an impotent ruler and other kingdoms would attack me, but I couldn't kill you. Sobek would never forgive me. I would never forgive myself."

Pharaoh removed his hand from Sara's mouth as her rapid breathing calmed and her arms stopped flailing.

He went on to say, "I attained a tonic from that Nubian physician. It mimics death. I laced my dagger with it before I scratched you and Matthaios."

"Matthaios is going to live?" She cried in disbelief.

Pharaoh nodded. "I told my guards that you and Matthaios took your own lives. Dimp pronounced you dead. My sisters will smuggle you out of Egypt. Your memory will be disgraced, and you'll never be able to set foot on this continent again, but you will live."

Sara wept tears of relief and threw her arms around her unlikely hero. "Thank you. May the gods bless you for your mercy."

"I will return at nightfall to see you off." Pharaoh placed his lips upon her cheek and returned to the palace.



Sara grabbed a torch from the wall and searched the pale creepy faces of every dead man until she found Matthaïos. He began to stir with a groan. Her heart leaped and she hastened to his side, ecstatic that they would soon be free.



Queen Ruptah, Pharaoh, Sara, and Matthaïos crowded onto a pulley operated lift. It was a small wooden platform, with a guardrail, suspended by heavy ropes. They began to elevate themselves from the icy pit of death. Before long they had reached the top. Pharaoh and Ruptah exited the lift and led Matthaïos and Sara through the dark winding pathways of the tomb.

“Where is Sobek?” Pharaoh questioned his older sister.

“She’s waiting at the north exit,” Ruptah explained. “Sobek never comes to the tombs. She fears the dead.”

Pharaoh nodded and informed Sara and Matthaïos, “There will be a boat waiting to take you up the Nile. You will meet a ship that will carry you across the sea.”

“Thank you,” Matthaïos spoke as he clutched Sara’s hand and ventured forward.

Ruptah tripped over a loose stone and went hurdling forward. Pharaoh instinctively caught his sister before she hit the ground. A spirally shaped vial slipped from Ruptah’s purse and shattered on the floor. The entire corridor flooded with the scent of mangos.

Matthaïos froze in a horrified trance as memories washed over him like a tidal wave. He could see all of Nubia from the lofty monument he was building in Pharaoh’s honor. It was a beautiful cloudless day until he saw something he shouldn’t have. On that dreadful morning, Matthaïos witnessed Queen Ruptah conspiring against Pharaoh Amenemhet. That mango perfume transported Matthaïos back to the day Queen Ruptah shoved him from a construction site.

Sara screamed as Matthaïos grabbed Ruptah by the throat.

“Let go of her!” Pharaoh bellowed as he fought to pry Matthaïos’s hands away. “I knew I should have taken your head, you savage! ”

Pharaoh elbowed Matthaïos and knocked him away from his sister.

“Run, Pharaoh!” Matthaïos screamed. “It’s an ambush!”

Ruptah snatched the blade from her brother’s waistband.

Pharaoh turned around just in time to catch a dagger to the gut. Dark red blood poured between his fingers as he clutched his wound.

He collapsed. A crimson river flowed over the stone floor.

Ruptah took off running.

Sara fell to her knees at Pharaoh's side, while Matthaïos ran after Ruptah. He chased the treacherous woman through endless tunnels, determined to wring her neck for all the harm she'd caused.

Soldiers came into view.

Queen Ruptah screamed, "Guards!! Arrest these traitors! They assassinated Pharaoh!"



Matthaïos and Sara stood chained to a wall in the prison, soon to be executed for a crime they didn't commit. They stared at Pharaoh's traitorous sister as she proudly wore Amenemhet's crown and headdress.

"Where is Pharaoh?" Matthaïos demanded.

"You're looking at her." Ruptah grinned triumphantly. "My brother is on a slab in the tombs and I have been nominated by the council to claim his throne. I am the queen of two nations. After I cleave Sara's pretty little head from her body, Nubia will declare war and I will be the queen of three nations."

Sara laughed without humor. "You're assuming that my kinsmen give a damn! Adrion was willing to hand Pharaoh my corpse just to prevent war."

"True," Ruptah admitted, "but quietly handling the matter with a lie to cover it up, is far different from a public execution. A public punishment tells the world that Nubians are not to be trusted and their women are unsuitable for marriage alliances. That's a huge problem when considering that most alliances between kingdoms are forged by royal weddings. A public execution will weaken your kingdom dramatically, and Nubia will have no choice but to deny the charges against you and declare war. Truth be told, we don't actually need Nubia to declare war. Myron betrothing my brother to his assassin gives me cause to invade your country, but Egypt looks a lot better if Nubia throws the first punch."

Sara had a sinking feeling that she hadn't even scratched the surface of Ruptah's depravity. "What have you done with Sobek?" Sara demanded, "Where is she!"

Ruptah approached them with a wicked smirk. “Sobek doesn’t want to see the scoundrels who murdered her brother.”

“Why are you here,” Matthaios snapped.

“To offer Sara a deal.” Ruptah gripped Sara’s chin.

Sara snapped her head sideways to rid herself of the ruthless queen’s touch.

Ruptah laid out her proposal, “It would be easier for me to keep the backing of the Council of African Kings if there are no whispers that contradict my account of what happened in the tombs. If you sign a confession I will allow you to spend your final hours with Matthaios, and the two of you will receive quick and private deaths. Your kingdom will no longer be at risk of war. If you don’t sign the confession, tomorrow morning you will wish that you had.”

“Why would I trust a woman who betrayed her own brother,” Sara replied.

Ruptah fumed. “Because my brother had it coming! I didn’t steal his throne. He stole mine! I was the firstborn! I never asked to be cast aside to put that imbecile on the throne. I never asked for my parents to sell me into marriage for Amenemhet’s glory! I never asked to be a woman.”

Matthaios shook his head at her, “You wicked crone. You did all this because you were sold into one marriage. Did it ever occur to you that Amenemhet was sold into four!” Ruptah shuddered and took a step back as Matthaios continued to attack her, “Pharaoh and I talked when he came to the prison. I told him everything because I felt I owed him that much. At first, he demanded to know because he was furious, then he encouraged me to continue because he was fascinated. And for whatever reason, perhaps because I’m a nobody who would take his secrets to the grave, Pharaoh shared a few things with me. He confessed that he’d never known love and that your father sold him into one marriage after another, to women who loathe the sight of him and only bed him out of duty. Your father bred him like a horse! But you already knew all this, and instead of relating to Amenemhet’s troubled and lonely existence, you murdered him!”

“I don’t have to listen to this!” Ruptah shouted. “Sara, will you sign the confession or not!”

“I would sooner die a thousand agonizing deaths than help a witch like you!” Sara screamed.

Ruptah stormed out.

Matthaios whispered to Sara, “I would have understood if you had signed it.”

Sara confessed with a bitter scowl, “It was tempting but no, not for her. She wouldn’t have kept her word. I once went to Ruptah to prepare for an evening with Amenemhet. I reached for that twisted bottle of perfume and she cautioned me that it was not a favorite of hers. I could tell by the look on her face that she honestly hated the smell of it, yet she kept it.

Matthaios nodded, "I can only think of one reason a woman would hang onto a fragrance she hates."

"To please a man she's sleeping with," Sara concluded. "I have smelled that mango perfume on Osiris more than a few times, and he admitted to losing his eye because he looked at a woman above his station. I believe he did more than look. Osiris told Ruptah that you and I kissed at the festival."

Matthaios sighed at the revelation, "It was her who chose me to be your harem boy, knowing that we would fail Pharaoh and give her an excuse to conquer your country."

"It was her who convinced Pharaoh to be cruel to me, in order to further push me in your direction." Sara sighed ruefully. "Ruptah plans to conquer my kingdom and place Osiris on my throne. Once he is a king in his own right, she will finally be able to wed him."

"But she's already married. Women can't have multiple husbands."

"If she plotted to assassinate a brother who adored her, then her husband is not long for this world. She used us, Matthaios. I realized that Ruptah and Osiris have been plotting to sacrifice us from the very beginning. That's why I couldn't sign that confession."

Guards soon took Sara away to comply with Ruptah's cruel wishes that the lovers did not spend their last moments together. The Egyptian prison was composed of three separate buildings, and he could only assume Sara was in one of the other two.

Matthaios lay back on the cold hard floor of his prison cell. The sky was becoming lighter and he would be dead soon, DEAD after everything he and Sara went through to be together.

Matthaios snapped to attention at the clang of the gates.

It was time...

# Chapter 15:

## The Execution

The desert sun was brutal and the air was so dry that it scorched the throat and nasal passages. Still, every native of Egypt poured from their homes to get a piece of the scandalous harlot who'd betrayed their Pharaoh and the filthy slave who'd led her astray.

The ropes that bound Sara's wrists behind her back were painfully tight and burned her skin. She was paraded barefoot through the streets of Egypt on a walk of shame that went on for hours.irate citizens hurled garbage and insults.

Sara, of course, was afraid of being beheaded. She'd heard horror stories of executioners getting drunk the night before and showing up for the execution without clarity. They would hack at a screaming victim repeatedly before they were able to follow through with a death stroke.

She'd also heard that a decapitated person did not die instantly. The victims remained alert for the better part of a minute, desperately clinging to life, with their heads severed from their bodies. They could hear their own heads strike the ground. The victims could see the crowd as the executioner gripped them by the hair and brandished their faces before a mob.

She'd even heard that the bowels and bladder released upon death, robbing the victim of a dignified departure. Sara had heard a thousand terrible things and she wished none of it on Matthaïos. He didn't deserve it. She wished she could go back to the night they met and walk away at the sound of the bells that brought them together. She would never know happiness, but at least he would live.

In the great distance, she spotted Matthaïos on the platform where they would be killed. He was forced onto his knees, with his arms bound behind his back. His hair was soiled with rubbish. It broke her heart to know that he'd gone through the same hateful and humiliating treatment.

Ruptah paced the platform in her finest garb, delivering her political speech. She had the crowd eating out of her hand. They lauded Ruptah as the savior of Egypt, who brought Pharaoh's killers to justice. Her subjects were already volunteering to invade Nubia at her command. Once Ruptah had the citizens of

Egypt right where she wanted them, she left to watch the execution from a safe distance.

Sara was led to the platform by a guard she barely knew, while a wall of other guards held back the angry mob. She cried out as someone got a handful of her hair. She would have sworn the man was ripping off her scalp. The Egyptian soldiers quickly dislodged the person and shoved Sara forward.

When the furious citizens were restrained from tearing her apart with their bare hands, they resorted to screaming obscenities that would appall the devil himself and pelting Sara with rotten food. Her tears were hidden by the fruit juice running down her face.

None of the nobles, Sara once called friends, yearned to participate in her execution, but neither did they yearn to save her. They could not understand how Sara could betray Pharaoh in such an unspeakable way, how she could turn her back on her people by committing acts that would bring about war.

It would have served as a comfort to Sara if even one of her relatives was there to send her off to whatever came next... if there was anything after death. Dimp would have come if his heart could bear it, but the physician was like an uncle to Sara, and he could not watch her die.

A weeping Sara made her way up the steps of the platform, leaving a trail of bloody footprints. Sharp rocks had just about sliced her feet to ribbons. Now every step was filled with an agony similar to walking on broken glass. Much to her dismay, she found that Matthaïos had left a bloody trail of his own.

As Sara limped forward she bit her lip to hold in the tortured scream that threatened to escape. From here she could see the entire screaming belligerent crowd, and as she suspected, not a single familiar face. *Not even Adrion is here and I don't know if that's because he loves me too much to watch me die, or hates me too much to say goodbye.*

Sara was forced to her knees as she joined Matthaïos. The boards bit painfully into his knees as he rotated to face her. She likewise rotated to face him as they awaited certain death. She looked into his eyes, and like the night they met, it was like falling into the stars. The entire world faded away and they were entranced in a different moment.

Matthaïos didn't bother with a final plea to Ruptah. Instead, he gave a different plea, one he knew might go unheard over the chaos, and yet he could not perish without saying it.

With a tear of mourning, he whispered from the depths of his soul, "Forgive me, Sara. I never meant to bring you death."

"You didn't take my life. You gave me one," Sara vowed. "I floated through the palace corridors as empty and dead inside as a ghost, and as invisible as one,

until your kiss brought me to life. It is I who must beg your forgiveness. My quest to run away has killed you.”

He shook his head no, wishing he had just one free hand to wipe her tears and bring her comfort.

“If not for you I would have died from the fall,” Matthaios reminded her. “You didn’t kill me. You blessed me with seven amazing months.”

The glorious vision of one another was snuffed out by the cover of a blindfold, Ruptah’s only act of mercy.

A soft tune played in the distance, and Matthaios couldn’t tell if he was imagining it to comfort himself. But he was grateful to hear anything in his last moments other than taunts and jeers. The music was beautiful.

Sara’s stomach rolled at the sound of approaching footsteps. There was a metallic swish as the executioner swung his sword to sever her neck. It was the single longest fraction of a second of Sara’s life. The death blow seemed to take forever as her pounding heart galloped like the hooves of a horse as if trying to fulfill a lifetime of beats in a single moment. She kneeled, frozen, and petrified, expecting death to follow... but it didn’t.

Sara heard the shrill screeching of a bird. Men shouted in a foreign tongue. The unmistakable clang of metal as they battled.

She felt tugging on her wrists as the ropes were sawed off.

Sara snatched off her blindfold and found the executioner lying dead at her feet.

Her pet falcon was still tearing at his throat. Who on earth had summoned the creature?

Sara gazed up to find Adrion’s face. She’d never been so glad to see Adrion’s face.

He placed an ivory hair pick in her trembling hand. “I was just returning this. You left it in my shoulder.”

She was too stunned to say anything back.

Matthaios was reunited with his sword and his long-lost family. He had imagined this reunion countless times and now his brother was here at last to save him.

Matthaios and the pale warriors fought back Egyptian guards, while Adrian helped Sara to her feet.

She wept in utter disbelief, still shaking all over from nearly being killed. “I can’t believe you came for me.”

Adrion confessed, “I’m sorry it took so long to get here, but I got lost. My head was too far up my ass to see where I was going.”

Adrion tossed Sara a sword. Together they jumped into the fray.

Adrion and the ivory warriors had an escape route chosen.

They battled their way through armed soldiers to get to it.

Ruptah looked on in horror. What was supposed to be a routine execution had exploded into a melee.

Ruptah snatched one of her noblemen from his chariot and fled the battle.

Soon the guards were defeated.

The mob of citizens scattered.

“Come on, Sara!” Adrion hollered amidst the chaos.

He extended a hand to help her onto the back of his horse, but she didn’t go with him. She couldn’t.

Sara could see Ruptah escaping and she could not allow this to happen. “I must go after Ruptah. She has the world believing I assassinated Pharaoh. If I don’t force her to recant, Nubia will be destroyed in a senseless war.”

“Ruptah is now Pharaoh. Charging after the ruler of Egypt is suicide. I can’t allow it,” Adrion spoke sternly. “Get on the horse or I’ll throw you on.”

Sara shook her head no, “You have always done what is best for Nubia. Now I must do the same.”



# Chapter 16:

## The Hall of Horrors

Adrion protested Sara's insane plan to go after the ruler of Egypt, "Even if you got Ruptah to recant about the assassination of Pharaoh, Egypt will still demand your head on the grounds of adultery. That's treason!"

"Not if I bring Pharaoh's true killer to justice," Sara explained. "Sobek will inherit the throne and pardon me of my crime, but this will never happen if we don't save Sobek!"

"Sobek is in danger?"

Sara nodded regretfully, "No one has seen Sobek since Ruptah took power. Sobek has become a royal hostage. You must rescue her. If Ruptah will assassinate her brother, what's to stop her from harming her sister?"

Adrion took off at her words.

Sara threw her arms around Matthaïos as he ventured forward. He returned her embrace, and informed her, "I'm going after Osiris. Ruptah may not attack your kingdom if she has no lover to place upon its throne. If I take Osiris hostage, Ruptah will negotiate the cessation of hostilities against Nubia."

"Please be careful," Sara pleaded. "Come back to me."

"I will always come back to you." Matthaïos swept her into his arms and kissed her goodbye.

Sara ran to the nearest chariot. A blood-soaked guard was slumped over the side of it. She dragged the heavy body of the dead man out and climbed aboard. She narrowed her sights on Ruptah and snapped the reins.

Sara raced over packed sand, at the speed of a falling star.

Ruptah had never driven a chariot, as such she was awkward behind the reins and struggled while steering.

Sara had been taught by Matthaïos, so it didn't take her long to close in on the wicked queen.

Soon, Sara and Ruptah were neck and neck.

Ramming their chariots into each other.

Fighting to regain balance and control.

"We should discuss this!" Ruptah shouted as they rumbled over golden sands. "I can still pardon you!"

“You are the mother of lies!” Sara shouted back. “We have nothing to discuss but your full confession before the Council of African Kings!”

Sara dove from her chariot and tackled Ruptah from hers.

They tumbled painfully to the ground as the horses sped away.

They brawled in the hot sand, trading punches, knees, and elbows.

Ruptah escaped Sara by blinding her with a hand full of sand.

Ruptah raced into the tombs crying out for her guards. She received no answer. The temple guards were killed when they ran over to help contain the brawl at the execution.

Sara gave chase, almost certain of where to find her nemesis. *If I was an evil backstabbing wretch where would I hide? In the preparation chamber, there are tools that can be used as weapons...*

Sara sought out the preparation room and operated the lift to get down to it. To her shock, it was empty, except for the dead bodies, soon to become mummies. Tears sprung to her eyes as she spotted Pharaoh on the slab. His abdomen was still wrapped in bandages from when the finest Egyptian physicians tried and failed to save him. They’d performed surgery to stop the internal bleeding. They’d even cast spells to keep death away, but he ended up here.

It made Sara sick but now was not the time to mourn. Now was the time to catch his murderer. Anger coursed through Sara’s veins as she searched for a means to deal with Ruptah. Sara grabbed a red-hot poker from the hearth and a sharp knife from the table.

“Drop it!”

Sara turned slowly and cautiously. Ruptah had entered through a secret door and she was clutching a crossbow.

Sara dropped her weapons, but deep down she knew that complying wouldn’t stop Ruptah from shooting a bolt into her heart...



Adrion had beaten a soldier until the man confessed to Ruptah’s plans for Sobek. Princess Sobek had gone behind Ruptah’s back and demanded an investigation into her brother’s murder. Ruptah found out about this and had Sobek arrested to teach her a lesson. Ruptah explained to her elders and noblemen that a few weeks in jail will teach Sobek loyalty.

Adrion charged to the prison on a mission, leaving behind a trail of dead and dying guards.

The other two buildings were heavily guarded, but not this one for some peculiar reason. What was even more bizarre was the fact that all of the windows were bricked shut.

There was a lone sentinel guarding the entrance. “No one may enter. We must contain the disease.”

Adrion shouted, “Out of my way or you will join your comrades in the afterlife!”

To Adrion’s surprise, the guard didn’t fight him. The sentinel took a key from a large ring full of them and passed it to Adrion. The guard unlocked the gate to the entrance and allowed Adrion to pass.

A foul putrid smell engulfed Adrion as he ventured forward. The odor was like a mixture of rotten eggs and maggoty meat. Vomit rose to the top of his throat and he could taste it in the back of his mouth. He fought it down and forged onward.

The prison was eerily quiet. An outbreak of typhoid fever had ravaged the jail and killed the inmates. Adrion passed numerous cages of horrifying corpses. They were covered in rashes, floating in a stew of their own fluids.

At last, he found Sobek’s cell. She was alive but showing symptoms of the deadly disease. The Egyptian princess was barely conscious.

Adrion shook his head. *This is no punishment; It’s murder. What better way to rid yourself of a royal pest than to claim you are jailing them for only a few weeks and throw a sick person into their cell? Ruptah never intended for Sobek to leave prison alive.*

Sobek murmured incoherently; the only words Adrion understood from her ramblings were, “Leave me. Leave me or you’ll die.”

Adrion knew that she was right. He was a prince, and as such had the obligation to protect himself for the sake of his subjects. Typhoid swept over cities like an icy blanket of death. All logic and reasoning dictated that he should run for his life, but he swept Sobek into his arms and carried her down the hall of horrors.

“Stop!” Adrion hollered as the guard began to crank the gate closed.

Adrion ran with Sobek in his arms. The gate snapped shut in front of them, encasing him and Sobek in the hall of horrors.

“I’m sorry,” the sentinel swore. “If I allow you to bring her out she will kill all of Egypt.”

“She’s your princess, you coward!” Adrion screamed as the guard locked the gate. “You swore an oath to defend her!”

“I swore an oath to defend Egypt, and though it pains me, I cannot allow my princess to destroy it.” The sentinel shook his head with tears in his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

The guard hurled a container of oil through the bars. The fluid spilled all the way down the hall as it flew. The pottery shattered on impact, spraying oil everywhere.

“Noooo!!!” Adrion bellowed as the sentinel dropped a fiery torch.

The oil ignited, turning the prison red with flames.

The sentinel fled, unable to stand there while his princess burned. It was awful but the guard could not allow the terrible deed to get to him. It was his job to stop the deadly illness. He had to burn the corpses to accomplish this.

The bodies of the dead were catching fire.

Everything was going up in smoke.

Adrion and Sobek were hopelessly trapped...



Matthaios and Osiris circled one another with weapons raised. Their faces were locked in ferocious expressions.

“It wasn’t enough to enslave me, torture me, and cut away my manhood!” Matthaios growled at the slave driver who’d been nothing but a menace to him. “You stood by as your pharaoh was assassinated! You were content to let Sara’s head roll on a lie!”

“I was born of noble blood!” Osiris screamed, “I am destined for greater things than training animals like you!”

They collided with a thunderous battle cry.

Sparks flew as sword struck sword repeatedly.

Vases and statues crashed to the ground as they knocked one another around the chamber.

Matthaios and Osiris ransacked the throne room as they spilled each other’s blood...

# Chapter 17:

## Into the Flames

Adrion called for help until he could call no more. The smoke was overtaking him. He and Sobek coughed and gagged on the cinders as scorching flames danced around them.

He'd never imagined things would end like this, burning to death because he chose to rescue a damsel. Adrion had never been the dame rescuing type, or at least he hadn't been since childhood.

Princess Sobek awakened something in Adrion, something that guilted him into telling a visiting warrior where he could find his long-lost brother, something that convinced him that saving his cousin, Sara, was the right course of action. This wild and peculiar princess revived a pinch of humanity that Adrion didn't realize existed, and now he was forced to watch her die.

"Get back!" yelled Chief Zachariah.

Adrion staggered back as the blond mountain of a man swung his mighty ax. Zachariah pounded the lock until it gave way.

Adrion staggered out of the flaming building with Sobek in his arms. He warned the warriors, "Step back! She's contagious and I'm likely infected too."

"Have you seen my brother," asked the chief. "We got separated in the chaos."

Adrion shook his head regretfully. Zachariah passed Adrion the reigns of a horse and left to search for Matthaïos.

Adrion placed Sobek over the back of the steed and took her straight to Dimp's infirmary. Dimp opened the door to find Princess Sobek alone, slumped over a horse. He carried her in and began his examination.

Adrion watched from a distance as the physician went to work but he refused to make his presence known. Adrion would defend Sobek until the day he died but he knew that he wasn't what she needed.



Matthaios grabbed Osiris by the collar in the ransacked throne room.

He balled up his fist and punched Osiris so hard his face snapped sideways. “That was for Pharaoh!”

Matthaios punched the other side of Osiris’s face. “That was for Sara! And this is for trying to have me killed!”

Matthaios lifted Osiris and slammed him on a table so forcefully that it broke in half.

Before Matthaios could tie Osiris up and drag him away, the room was flooded by Egyptian guards. Osiris laughed and climbed to his feet.

While the guards held Matthaios, Osiris punched him in the stomach so hard he doubled over.

“You forget your place, slave boy.” Osiris grabbed the back of Matthaios’s head and ran a knee into his face. Matthaios collapsed with blood flowing from his nose as Osiris taunted him, punctuating every sentence with a powerful kick to Matthaios’s ribs. “The blood of Egyptian kings flows through my veins! In what world would something like you have ever defeated someone like me?”

Osiris ordered the guards, “Kill him.”

The tyrant stood in awe as Matthaios did something unexpected. The doomed slave threw his head back and laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Osiris inquired. “Please share.”

Matthaios shook his head with amusement. “The one trait common among nobles, even disgraced and demoted ones like you, is your vanity. You were too arrogant to consider the possibility that I have friends.”

Osiris looked up to find his henchmen surrounded by pale skinned warriors. The Egyptian guards surrendered their weapons.

Osiris swallowed hard at the sensation of cold sharp steel at his throat. He protested as they drug him away, “What right have you to do this to me! I am a sovereign prince of Egypt!”

“Yes,” Matthaios smirked, “and now you’re my prisoner.”



Sara stood in the icy chamber of corpses, staring at the bad end of Ruptah's crossbow.

Sara snarled, "What did I ever do to you?"

"I would sooner cut my own throat than watch the spawn of a Nubian peasant ascend to my throne!" Ruptah screamed, "You would have destroyed our great dynasty! Corrupted it with your tainted offspring! My brother was unfit to reign from the moment he even considered marrying a creature like you."

Sara cried out in pain as a bolt pierced her arm.

Ruptah reloaded the crossbow and closed in on her.

The second bolt struck Sara's leg; she hit the ground and pain charged through her body like a jolt of electricity.

Ruptah growled bitterly as she stood over Sara with the weapon aimed at her heart, "You were never a bride of Egypt, you filthy mud blood. You're not even a princess."

Sara gasped as Ruptah's head suddenly rolled from her neck.

Ruptah's body collapsed.

Pharaoh Amenemhet emerged from the shadows, standing in all his glory.

He fell to his knees still clutching a blood-covered sword.

With both Sara and Pharaoh badly injured, they crawled to one another. Amenemhet and Sara supported each other as they hobbled out of the death chamber.

"I thought you were dead," Sara confessed with tears streaming.

"So did I," Pharaoh admitted, "but Ruptah didn't stab me with her blade; she stabbed me with mine. It was still laced with that tonic that mimics death."

# Epilogue:

## A Land of Snow & Mountains

Sobek and Pharaoh sat in the council room surrounded by gossiping elders and noblemen. “What’s the rush,” she protested. “You’re still in bandages and I am barely over my fever. You should be resting.”

“I’m fine,” Pharaoh insisted and passed her another decree to sign.

Sobek had already signed a stack of them. She felt as if her arm might fall off. “Why are you doing this?”

Pharaoh explained, “The one thing Ruptah was right about is the fact that a woman can make a fine pharaoh, just not her.”

“I don’t want to be your heir.”

“And that’s exactly why you are the right person for the task. No sane person would want this.” Pharaoh tapped the scroll in front of her. “This one states that my wives and servants are not to be killed in the event of my death.”

The nobles gasped. One shouted, “Your majesty! Who will be there to serve you in the afterlife!”

“I’ll figure it out,” Pharaoh snapped. “My daughters need their mothers. My wives are not to be harmed!”

The elders grumbled about his choices from time to time but Pharaoh threatened them into silence.

Pharaoh passed Sobek another scroll of papyrus. “Now sign this one stating that none of my daughters are to be sold into marriage. They will marry if and when they choose, to whomever they choose.”

“Of course,” Sobek signed right away. “It’s the least I can do. You never sold me into marriage.”

Pharaoh wrapped an arm around her shoulders and kissed her temple. “Keep signing and I’ll return in a bit.”

Pharaoh slipped out of the meeting, no longer able to lie to his baby sister’s face. It was not the stab wound that would kill him. It was the surgery that followed. Only that strange Nubian physician believed in washing his hands and sterilizing tools. Pharaoh’s physicians thought these practices were silly, unfounded, superstitions. They operated on Pharaoh with the same tools they



used to prepare dead bodies, and he was stricken with infection. Pharaoh met Dimp in the corridor.

Dimp passed him a sack of opioids. “These will keep you comfortable. I’m sorry I can’t do more.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you break the news to Princess Sobek?”

“I couldn’t.” Pharaoh smiled thoughtfully, despite his fate. “But I’m proud of Sobek. She’s going to make a great Pharaoh.”



Away in Nubia, a row of beds lined the wall of the infirmary. A pretty nurse, with chubby cheeks, and a kind disposition made her way over to the surliest patient she had ever cared for.

“Sir please, you have to eat something,” the nurse pleaded as she held a spoonful of soup up to Osiris’s mouth.

Osiris’s lips didn’t part to eat or speak. He just sat slouched in a chair, a broken huddle of a man. Ruptah was dead and Pharaoh refused to pay the ransom of a traitor. This left Osiris at the mercy of Matthaïos and his brethren. Chief Zachariah was outraged at the ill-treatment of his brother.

Matthaïos stopped his big brother from killing Osiris by reminding him, “I yearn not to take his life. All I ask is that you extend him the same courtesy and compassion he showed me.”

Osiris screamed and fought like a wounded beast as Zachariah, Jaxon, and Daronco drug him to the village surgeon.

The nurse set down the bowl of food in defeat. “Perhaps the fertility Goddess Qetesh can aid you.”

This was meant to cheer him up, but Osiris was aware that the fertility goddess only doled out blessings every ten years. Could he live like this for a decade, a lowly slave stripped of his manhood?

The nurse tried to make him hear sense. “The slaves you used to cut spend their whole lives in your recent condition and they walk with their heads held high. They are beautiful resilient men. Are meager slaves stronger and braver than a sovereign prince of Egypt?”

Osiris’s only reply was a single glistening teardrop trailing down his tawny brown cheek. Come nightfall he wandered off alone. They found him two weeks

later, face down in the dirt, stricken dead by the venom of a cobra.



The leaping orange flames of the torches seemed so alive against the background of a desolate black sky. Sara stood at the edge of a large ring of torches. The fire cast dancing shadows upon the faces of a myriad of screaming spectators. She'd named Adrion her champion because he cared about what was best for their people above all else. He was soon to engage in a fight to the death against his own father for rights to the Nubian throne. Neither Myron nor Sara yearned for a civil war and this was the only way the people would unite behind one leader.

Myron thought nothing of challenging his oldest child to a duel. Adrion had proven useless as an heir and Myron's younger children seemed more promising. Sara never wanted to turn father against son. She'd volunteered to fight for herself but Adrion convinced her it was a bad idea. Sara was a good fighter but she was no trained assassin like Myron. Matthaïos volunteered to fight but he was no son of Nubia and therefore lacked all rights to challenge Myron.

"I can't watch," Sara began to weep into her hands.

Adrion deciphered her emotions as concern for a loved one; another confusing human emotion he lacked the ability to fully comprehend. "Please take her away. She's distracting me," he said with a tone of exasperation, his face scrunched in an annoyed expression.

Matthaïos kissed Sara on the forehead and informed her she would have to leave with Nelson.

Adrion smirked at his cousin. "I'll swing by your cottage to gloat later."

"You better," she snapped in a reprimanding tone. "Even if you are incapable of caring for me, that doesn't change the fact that I love you, Adrion."

"Sara," Adrion spoke in his usual emotionless tone. "I'm not incapable of caring. I'm just incapable of expressing it."

She smiled through her tears, wishing to hug him at that moment but knowing something that simple could trigger a flashback from his days at camp and cause him to break her arm. "May the gods be with you, Adrion."

Matthaïos promised his wife, "I'll look after him, and I'll make sure that Myron doesn't cheat."

"Don't come home alone," Sara demanded and kissed him goodbye.



Matthaios cautiously and nervously opened the cottage door, knowing how upset Sara would be. Before he could make it into the living room she'd already met him at the door.

"Where's my cousin!" She demanded at the sight of Matthaios alone. "Where's Adrion!"

"Sara, I rode ahead of the others to prepare you," Matthaios explained.

"Prepare me for what!" She shoved him in the chest with both hands. Her obsidian eyes shimmered with tears. "I told you not to come back here alone!"

Matthaios turned toward the door. The remainder of their caravan had arrived.

He solemnly called out the door, "Bring him in. She wants to see him."

Even from this distance, she could recognize her cousin's limp, lifeless, body being rolled onto a stretcher. Sara started screaming at the top of her lungs as they carried the battered bruised body over the threshold. She felt her whole world come to a sudden stop, and then start spinning out of control.

Matthaios restrained his keening wife, trying his best to talk to her, "There was nothing I could do, my love. Daronco insisted upon getting Adrion drunk."

"What?" Sara stopped panicking at last. "Adrion's just drunk?"

"Very drunk," Matthaios chuckled. "The man won you a kingdom. We figured that's cause for a celebration."

Daronco complained with a grin as he crammed into the room with a gang of noisy warriors. "Your cousin handles mead like a wee baby."

Sara slapped all seven inebriated men who were still standing. She smiled with utter joy and wiped her tears. She kneeled on the floor seizing this single opportunity to bless her unconscious cousin's bruised cheek with a kiss. "Thank you Adrion." She turned to the others. "Please take him to the guest chamber so that I may treat his wounds."

"Yes, *Queen Sara*." Matthaios smiled brightly as he emphasized her rightful title.

She gave Matthaios a lingering peck on his soft pink lips and then went to see about Adrion.



Guests from the furthest reaches of Africa and beyond all gathered in the grand Nubian palace for Queen Sara and King Matthaïos's royal wedding. The reception was now in full swing. Nobles celebrated with drink, dance, and merriment well into the night. Commoners held festivals throughout the lower village.

Every man, woman, and child celebrated except for Sobek, the new Empress of Egypt. Still mourning her brother, she turned in early. She'd merely come as an act of good faith for the peace treaty she'd drafted between Egypt and Nubia. After Sobek freed and compensated all of her brother's slaves she left for Nubia with a wedding gift and Sara's cat, Ra.

Sobek crossed the room at the sound of a knock on the door. Festive music blared into her chamber as she opened the heavy wooden barrier. When she saw that it was Adrion she immediately tried to close it again.

"Sobek, please," he called to her.

She stood eying him through the crack of her door. "It's not that I don't trust you. It's just that the last man I trusted, promised me he was fine. Then he died and left me alone!"

"I couldn't leave you alone, even if I tried, even when my life depended on it!" Adrion yelled. "That's why you make me so frustrated. I'm terrible at this sort of thing. I wish I knew what to say and how to say it but I don't. Sobek, I can kill a man twice my size at a thousand paces but if you ask me to talk to a woman I..." Sobek continued to stare at him unblinking, and a flustered Adrion gave up. "You deserve better."

He began to trudge away, defeated. How did he expect this to end? He was still too mentally warped to woo her, to wed her, to make sweet love to her.

"Why did you keep the flower?" Sobek called after him. Adrion whipped around with a confused expression and Sobek granted further clarity, "I brought you food one night when you were visiting Egypt. It would have been simpler to return the entire tray to me, but you didn't. You took the time to remove the flower first. Why did you keep it, Adrion?"

Adrion began to walk back toward her, coaching himself. *Sara wrote down a beautiful poem for me, but I need to do this myself.* He tossed Sara's paper aside and went with his gut. "I kept that flower because it was the only thing I was

capable of touching that encompassed your beauty, or a fraction of it anyway. And I refused to leave you to die in that prison because...”

“It was you?” Sobek smiled with a hand over her mouth, positively gushing at his words. “You were the angel of mercy who sprung me from prison and delivered me to Dimp.”

Her fever had made her so delirious that she could not recall anything from that night. Sobek beckoned Adrion with a finger.

He reluctantly shook his head no. “I don’t know any other way to touch someone but to hurt them.”

“Then hurt me,” Sobek ordered.

She wanted, needed to feel something, anything other than sorrow, grief, and anger.

“No... I...”

She slapped him so hard it echoed down the corridor, “I said hurt me.”

Adrion charged into her room and pushed her onto the bed. He gripped her roughly and pinned her arms above her head. He looked down at Sobek, half expecting her to be horrified at the monster he fought for so long to keep hidden from her. But she was intrigued by his brutal nature, intoxicated by how he handled her. She yanked him down into a deep kiss, bit his lip hard enough for it to bleed and Adrion swooned in response to the pain she inflicted on him. Adrion had been putting too much pressure on himself to be gentle, without considering the possibility that all Sobek wanted was him.



The following morning Adrion, Sobek, a handful of nobles, and a few dozen guards gathered on the warm sandy beach to bid farewell to Matthaïos and Sara. Normal people would honeymoon in a tropical place rather than a cold destination but Sara and Matthaïos had never claimed to be normal. They were about to set sail for a faraway land of snow and mountains, a land Matthaïos once called home.

After a plethora of teary-eyed goodbyes and well wishes, Matthaïos and Sara boarded the small boat that would take them to the giant ship that awaited.

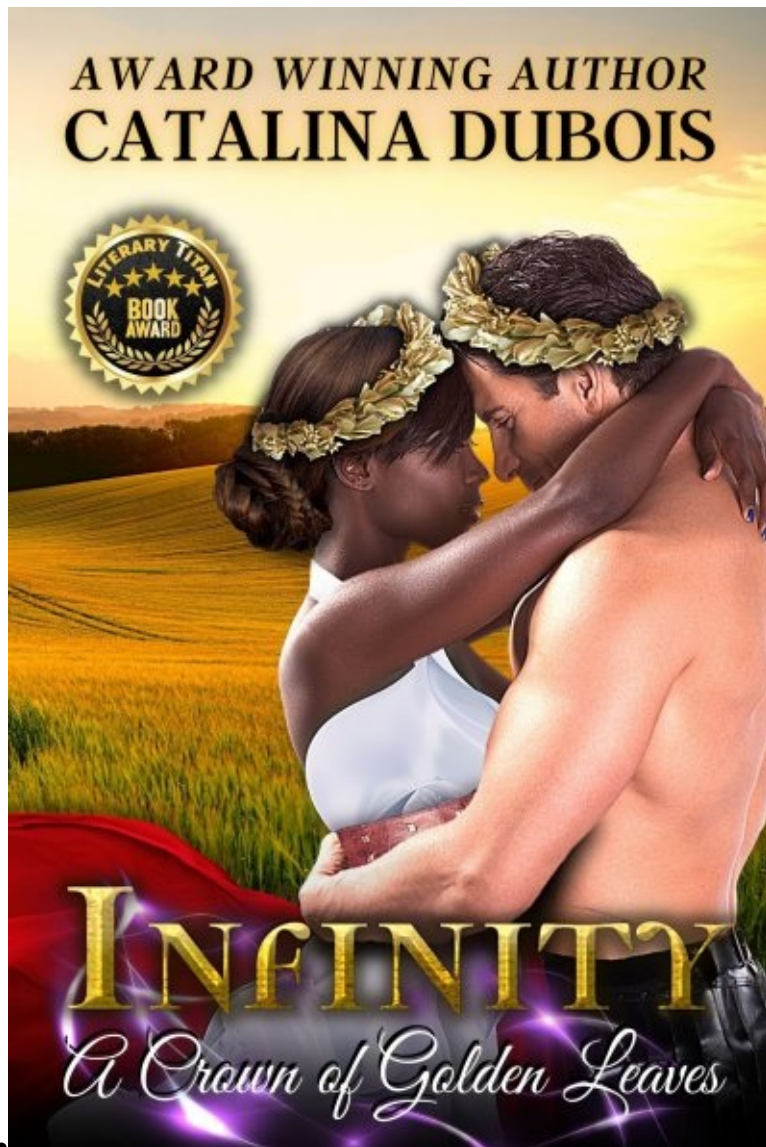
Adrion ran out into the water. He gave Sara’s hand a tiny squeeze and his face shone with an awkward smile that melted Sara’s heart. It wasn’t an

affectionate hug or a tearful embrace, but with the love of a good woman, Adrion was beginning to put the past behind him and heal.

Before long, Sara and Matthaïos had boarded the mighty vessel and taken to the seas. Matthaïos stole a passionate kiss from her lips as his warrior brethren cheered and whistled obnoxiously.

For many generations King Matthaïos's adventure was told and retold: the legend of a harem boy who became a king, the slave who had stolen the fifth bride of Pharaoh and captured the heart of a nation.

Each one of Sara's grandchildren and great-grandchildren told the story a little differently but the one detail that remained the same throughout the ages was how much the king and queen truly and profoundly loved one another...



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*-Shey Saints Reviews*



# Prologue:

## The Wrath of Caesar

*Rome, 79 A.D.*

Prince Matthaïos sits regally upon his white stallion. His Mediterranean tan glows bronze in the setting sun. He watches Sara in total bliss, the girl who has secretly possessed his heart since childhood. She is an exotic beauty with dark skin and twisted locks of hair. She saunters barefoot along the beach, with frothy waves rolling over her ankles. Her obsidian eyes take in the vibrant hues of a glorious sunset. Matthaïos trots forward and extends a powerful arm to Sara as he helps her onto the back of his horse.

“Hold on tight,” Matthaïos warns as he glances over his shoulder at her with a charming smile.

Sara closes her arms around him tightly, putting the utmost faith in him. He spurs his horse forward and they break into a trot. The wind is whipping her braids and it feels like heaven on her skin. As they travel, the sand grows sparser and the land becomes covered in lush green vegetation. They gallop through a field of wildflowers, bathing in glorious twilight. Sara is unable to believe she is holding him this way. Matthaïos is heir to an empire and she is a slave from a faraway land. They might as well be from different planets. Most days it feels as if they are, but in this one perfect moment they are free.

The air begins to smell sweet and fruity as they approach the vineyard that gives birth to the best wine in all the land. Beautiful grapevines sprawl as far as the eye can see. Their joyous and exhilarating ride ends. Matthaïos dismounts his steed and reaches up to assist Sara. He helps her down and his hands remain at her waist for longer than they should, but when he withdraws them her stomach gurgles with a strange feeling of disappointment. He plucks a juicy green grape. She parts her lips with an expecting look and he gives it to her. She sinks into the delicious tangy fruit and he kisses a sweet drop from the corner of her mouth.

Sara backs away and nervously looks around. She whispers, “Someone could see us.”

Matthaïos smirks with amusement. “That isn’t possible.”

Her eyebrows scrunch in wonder. “How do you know the owner won’t approach at any moment?”

“Because she’s already here. You are the owner.” He grins brightly. “I bought this land. Everything you’ve seen today is yours.” As Sara just stares with an open mouth, Matthaios grows concerned. “I am sorry. You mentioned a beach, mountains, wildflowers, and a vineyard. I just thought...”

“It’s perfect,” Sara confesses with tears of happiness. “You are perfect.”

He slowly pulls her into his arms and lowers his lips to meet hers. They are locked in a full-blown embrace before either of them realizes it. She soon feels her back pressed into the cool moist earth as they kiss and caress in each other’s arms. Their forbidden encounter remains concealed by endless rows of grapevines. When at last they come up for air they are breathless and their hearts are racing.

She hears him whisper in the coming darkness, “Sara, do you love me?”

“More than words can express,” she answers while twirling her fingers in his silky black curls.

His eyes go wild. His voice has an edge of warning, “If you truly love me you will survive for me!”

A brutal kick to the stomach snatches Sara back into the hell that is her reality.

The vineyard is gone.

Her prince has vanished.

The assault of a furious mob continues.

Sara had escaped her torment in the only way she could, with fantasies of a dashing prince, but that’s all they were, the dreams of a desperate slave girl.

The roar of the angry mob shatters the serenity of a Roman night.

In an instant, she’d become a prisoner in the stocks. Wooden splinters pierce Sara’s skin like a thousand stabbing needles. Her muscles cramp and burn as if lava flows through her veins.

A cacophony of shouting and torch fire close in on her.

There is nothing she can do to stop them.

The heavy slab of oak locked around Sara’s neck and wrists makes it impossible to escape.

She cries out in pain as a rotten apple slams into her face so hard she would have sworn it was a fist.

Her tears stream as the irate mob pelts her with rotten fruit and moldy vegetables.

Daetor, Caesar’s enforcer and captain of the guard, slithers up with a satisfied smile.

The brute grabs a fist full of Sara’s hair.

He crudely saws it off with a knife.

Sara's screams resonate through the commons as he yanks and saws without care.

A woman's hair is considered her glory. Daetor intends to rob Sara of this and so much more...

# Chapter 1:

## The Gladiator

Sara sluggishly turns her head as she regains consciousness. In addition to the agony of being bruised and battered, she feels slimy and cold from the rotten food they threw on her. She wrecks of the rubbish they defiled her with. The odor makes her want to vomit, but she fights the urge. Sara opens the eye that isn't bruised and swollen shut. She is surrounded by judging eyes, gossip, and whispers.

Only one empathetic face stands out in the sea of vengeful mugs. Prince Matthaios is cradling her and yelling obscenities at her attackers. He freed her from the stocks before the mob could do further damage but he hates himself for arriving too late.

Sara tries to calm Matthaios before he strikes them all down in a bout of rage. Matthaios's signature grin has been detached. Sara sees a fury in his eyes that makes her shudder. She isn't the only one who sees it. Her enemies take cautious steps back, as they ponder why their prince is so deeply wounded over the plight of a lowly slave girl.

*My prince is not himself*, Sara realizes, fearing that this may be the single blade of straw that breaks the noble camel's back. *A man, even one with a crown, can only endure so many trials. As the son of a warmongering Caesar, Matthaios endures endless hours of weapons training. Though beaten, broken down, and brainwashed to be a killer, the prince is anything but. He isn't easily enraged like his father. Matthaios is generous to beggars, playful to the point of childish absurdity, and he rarely takes anything seriously. All of these are signs of weakness in his father's eyes, but to me, they are signs of strength. I tell him often that it takes a beacon of true power to witness the horrors of life and still find reasons to smile but tonight is different... he is different.*

To avoid a bloodbath, Sara reminds him in a choked whisper, "I am blessed to be alive. Thank you, my lord."

Her rational words have the desired effect. He knows that most who incur the wrath of Caesar suffer far worse fates.

Dread bubbles up from the pit of Matthaios's stomach. *Father would have killed her if she was any other slave.*

Matthaios carries Sara away, cursing the townsfolk who did this to her. The now docile crowd watches the prince and the slave in profound bewilderment as they disappear into the night.

Sara feebly explains as she bounces down the path in his arms, “I helped Princess Andromeda escape the palace. I had to or a boy would have died.”

“You don’t have to explain,” Matthaios assures her. “I’m here now.” *I cannot allow her suffering to be for naught. I must find a way to help this boy.* “His name?”

“Huh,” she murmurs groggily.

“I need the name of the boy you were trying to save.”

“Perseus, he’s a gladiator.”

Sara loses consciousness and dangles helplessly in his arms. Matthaios prays that she is at peace and hopes she has escaped to that happy place she goes to whenever life is at its worst.

They have never been lovers, only childhood friends. Any intimacy between them had been no more than a figment of Sara’s imagination. Yet the sight of this resilient and beautiful girl reduced to such a state crushed his heart in a way he never knew possible.

A single sparkling teardrop falls from the prince’s eye. With no free hand to wipe it away, it rolls down his cheek unhindered.



The Roman Coliseum was a marvelous vision, with its soaring marble walls and elegant architecture. Its sheer enormity was enough to capture one’s breath. Its beauty and functionality ranked second to none, but for the gladiators, this arena was a place of torment, suffering, and death.

The prison mess hall, where the gladiators ate, was a grungy noisy environment. It was eerily lit by torches along the walls and a candle on each table. Without the fancy candleholders of the villas above, the wax melted and formed a puddle on the rough unfinished wood.

A young gladiator, named Perseus, sat in the orange glow of a candle, aimlessly stirring his porridge. He knew that he should eat to keep his strength up. Food was never a guarantee for slaves, but the knowledge that any moment could be his last made something as natural as eating seem pointless.

Remus, a sadistic predator of children, winked at the young gladiator and blew a kiss. Remus was a giant burly man, with brown teeth, and arms the size of cannons. Perseus's stomach rolled and a wave of nausea washed over him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, as Remus watched him in a creepy and unnerving manner.

The fact that Perseus was of a tender age made him a target among prisoners. What little hope remained in his fragile young heart died as he reflected on the plight of a friend. *My only comrade within these walls was a hilarious bloke named Felix. We would stay up late making plans for travels and epic adventures. Felix had me convinced that a life existed for us beyond the confines of the Coliseum. In an instant, everything changed. As Felix lay hemorrhaging before my eyes, he warned me not to fight the vile Remus when he comes for me in the dead of night.*

A single tear escaped the prison of Perseus's lashes and splashed into his bowl. With his appetite lost in a sea of sorrow, Perseus pushed his dinner away. *Despite my friend's warning, I cannot go willingly with Remus. I would sooner cross into the afterlife than allow Remus to have his way with me.*

A strong hand shoved Perseus in the back.

"What's your name boy?" Remus demanded as he stood with two of his goons.

Perseus sat up straight. "My name is not your concern, you depraved, murdering, heretic."

"Harsh words for one so young and so pure." Remus leaned forward to smell the boy's angel blond hair.

Perseus leaped from his seat and shoved the miscreant away.

A fist flew at Perseus's face; he countered the blow with a well-executed block.

Perseus twisted the brute's arm behind his back, slammed his face on the table, and called to the others, "Only three of you this time? I'm insulted."

The cafeteria exploded into a bloody and brutal fight. Guards charged into the fray, trampling the bodies of dead men to reach the instigator.

As usual, they yanked Perseus out of the center of the melee.

Four guards stretched his arms out wide while the fifth unsheathed his sword to end the ever-present thorn in everyone's side.

Perseus's heart pounded at the sight of the blade swishing down on him.

"Sheath your sword!"

The soldiers whipped around at the sound of a feminine voice.

Perseus grinned with relief as his sapphire eyes fell upon the beautiful face of Princess Andromeda. She possessed rose red hair, eyes like shining emeralds,

and skin the color of a pearl. Thanks to Sara's diversion, the princess had arrived safely, but Andromeda was completely unaware of the price the serving girl had paid.

The head guard shouted orders at the gladiators, "You're in the presence of a lady! To your cells, you filthy dogs!"

The gladiators obediently returned to their cells. The guard pulled a lever and numerous gates shut simultaneously.

"May I enter this cell?" She asked the prison guard.

"Apologies, my lady." The guard explained, "It's for your protection."

Andromeda nodded understandably and turned to Perseus. She jested with a smirk, "I see you're making friends again."

He laughed, "I'm Prince Popular."

The slave and the princess floated into their ritual of witty banter as if they weren't separated by iron bars, societal rules, and the ever-present threat of death.

As lovely as it was to reflect on the past, Perseus knew that she hadn't risked severe repercussions just for a chat. He was concerned about the information that she was hesitating to speak of, yet he yearned not to press her for it. He longed to enjoy her breathtaking smile, and enchanting laughter a bit longer. They gazed at one another for an inappropriate length of time before dutifully forcing their eyes elsewhere.

She couldn't hold it in any longer. *Pretending like all is wonderful will not make it so, no matter how badly I wish it. Perseus deserves to know about the looming dangers.*

Andromeda slipped Perseus a care package through the bars of his cell.

"Thank you, my lady," he spoke, mesmerized by her generosity and kindness.

"You shouldn't thank me," Andromeda confessed. Her smile faded and tears filled her eyes. "I bartered for your release and I'm sorry to say that I have failed you. The slave trader would not agree to any amount of treasure. He received orders from Caesar, as a favor to his ally Medusa, that you will fight on Saturday, and you will die on Saturday."

Her words shook him to the core, but he refused to show it. He was determined to be strong for her.

Perseus begged, "Please do not cry. You have done all that you could, more than a slave like me deserves."

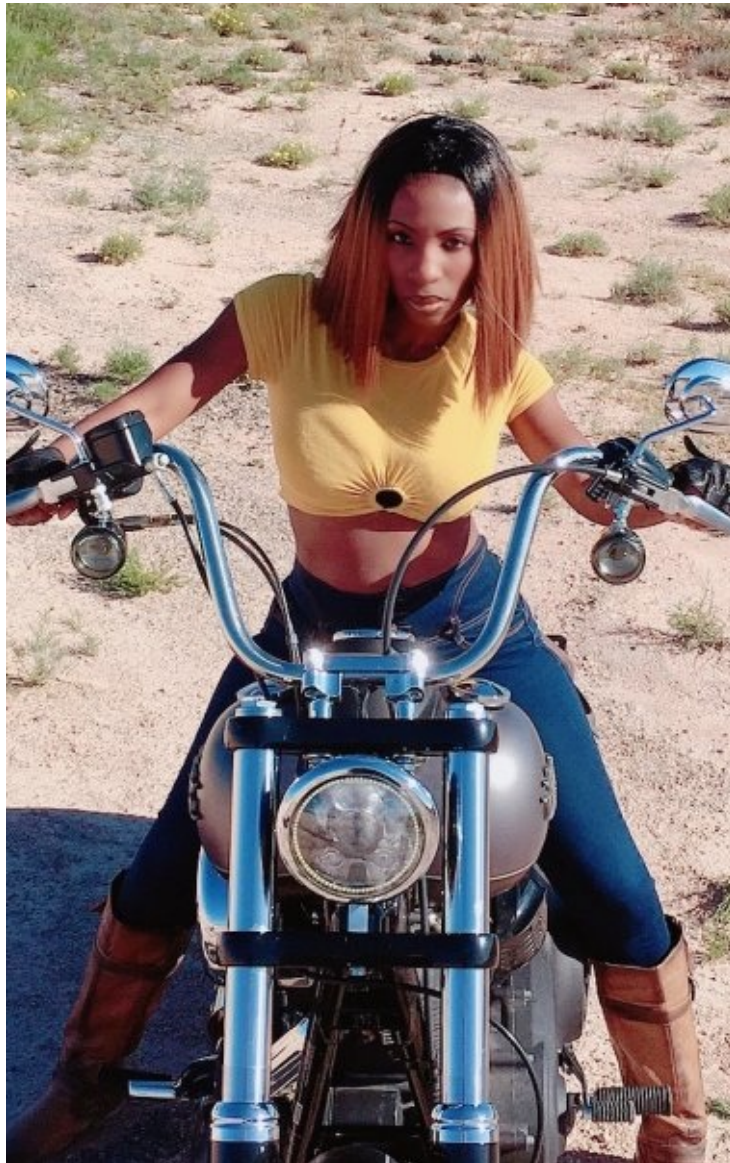
He was the one who'd been sentenced to death and yet he was comforting her.

Andromeda reached between the bars and placed her hand upon his cheek. She tearfully and silently mouthed the words, *I love you*.

Perseus felt more for her than societal rules would allow, but to avoid the ruin of her reputation he would take his vows of love to the grave. Out of duty and honor, he buried everything he felt and wished her a long and happy life.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Catalina DuBois has received many literary awards for her historical thrillers. She resides in Roswell, New Mexico with her husband and daughter, where she is writing her *Infinity* series, based on the many star crossed lifetimes of Sarah and Matthew.

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