The background of the cover features a woman with long dark hair, seen from behind, wearing a vibrant red dress with intricate gold and white patterns on the sleeves and hem. She is holding a large, ornate blue ceramic vase with two handles. She stands in a courtyard with a low wall of colorful mosaic tiles in shades of green, blue, and gold. Beyond the wall, there are tall, slender cypress trees and a bright, sunlit sky. The overall atmosphere is one of historical elegance and mystery.

TESSA
AFSHAR

THE
ROYAL
ARTISAN

QUEEN ESTHER'S COURT



THE ROYAL ARTISAN

T E S S A
AFSHAR



BETHANYHOUSE

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The Royal Artisan • Tessa Afshar

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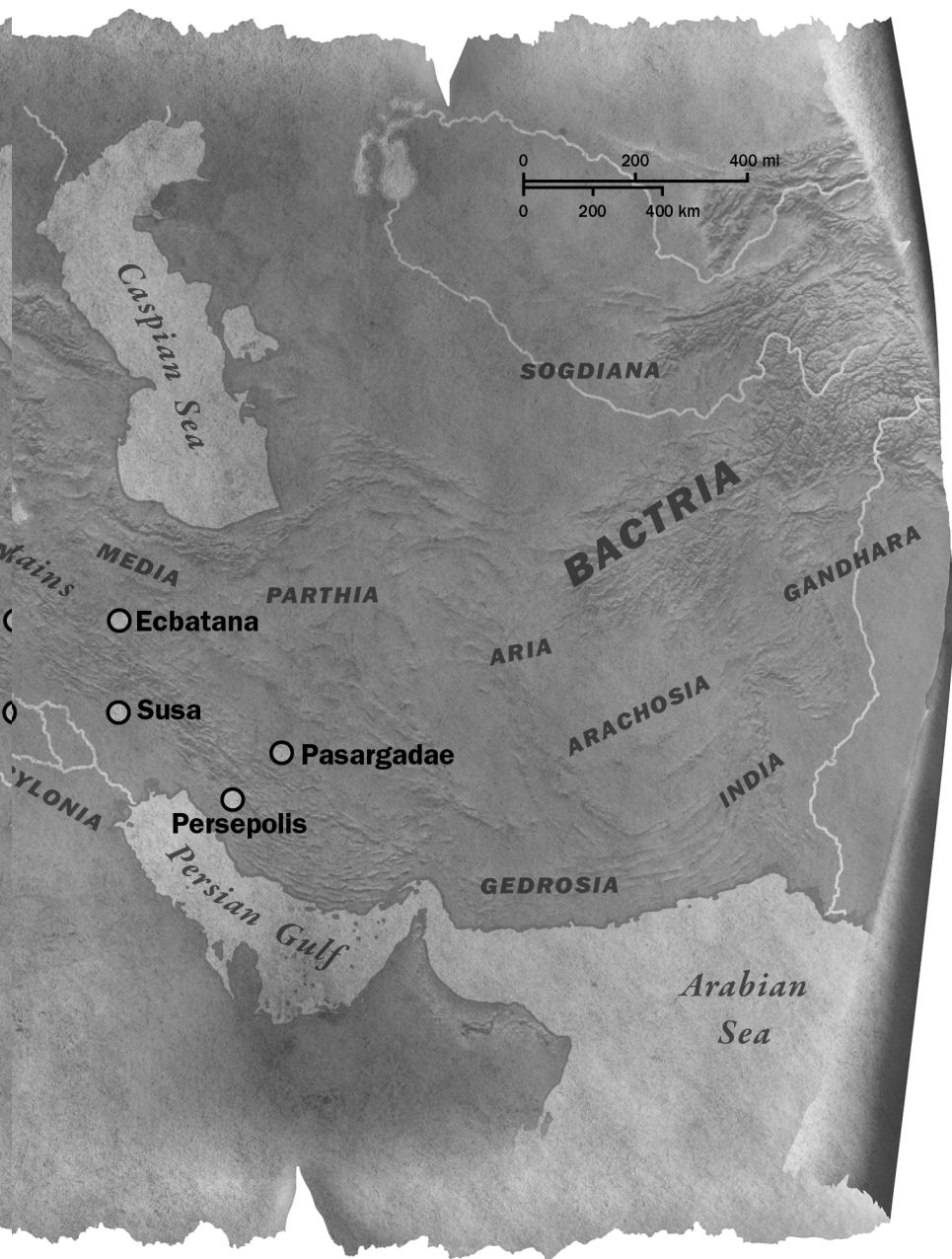
*To my readers.
You make writing a joy.*





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From the Secret Scrolls of Esther

And the young woman pleased him and won his favor.

Esther 2:9

The Twenty-Fifth Year of King Artaxerxes's Rule

Let me tell you a secret: Being queen will not fill the empty places in your heart.

I arrived at the Persian court on trembling legs, a stranger to its rigid protocols and sharp-edged rules. All the priceless jewels and alluring garments in the world could not chase away the chill of loneliness that plagued me those early days.

At eighteen, I was one of the oldest girls brought into the palace for that absurd competition—for though no one called it that to our faces, we all knew we were contending against one another for the crown.

My age and my faith had garnered me enough wisdom to recognize a few things by the end of my first month at the court. My companions in the women's quarters were ruled by their longings. The longing to be the loveliest,

the wittiest, the best liked, the most admired. The longing to be chosen, wanted, desired.

The longing to be queen of an empire.

Longing flowed over the polished marble of the women's chambers like an invisible river, its currents pounding against every wall, demanding fulfillment. But I knew that the way of my companions would lead to discontentment. To disappointment so deep it would swallow them whole.

All their yearning, palpable in its reaching, snap-jawed hunger, rose out of empty places in hearts that had been starved of better things. My companions thought the crown would fill those old aches.

I knew better.

But looking at them, I felt the first quaking of real fear. I had my own empty places. The child of dead parents, I had learned loss at an early age. No heart is whole in this fractured world. I could easily fall into the same pit as the young women whose craving eyes looked upon me and thought, *rival*.

Which is why I determined I would never be queen, not even when Hegai, who had charge over the virgins, set me up in the best chamber. I had no desire to win the king's love, nor had I any interest in surrendering my heart to him.

I kept my own counsel and hid my Jewish heritage as my cousin Mordecai bade me. Like Abraham, I laid the Isaac of my hopes and dreams at God's feet.

I was almost twenty when I completed my year of beauty treatments. The night before my first visit to the king, I slept like a sated babe. I asked Hegai to choose my garments and went to the king not with the fluttering of desperate hopes, but with the ease of a woman who did not care.

Imagine my surprise to find Xerxes staring at me as though enchanted when I told him his beard needed a good trim.

I found love when I had thought to protect myself from the pain of it. The pain came, sure enough. But love also brought something unexpected. It opened the door for the salvation of my people.

In that vast palace, I discovered that I was not alone after all. God brought me the companionship of a few dear friends. And together we were able to stand up to dark forces that were greater than us as individuals.

I am older now and live a quiet life. The life of Hadasah. The queen is forgotten, as I meant her to be. My hidden life keeps me safe from those who still wish me harm in a palace full of sharpened knives.

But even here, my friends surround me. Together, we sometimes remember the wonder of days when a fragile queen was able, against all odds, to save her people.

Prologue

Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
The troubles of my heart are enlarged . . .
Psalm 25:16–17

FORTY-FIVE YEARS EARLIER THE YEAR BEFORE XERXES BECAME KING

Three solitary stars pierced the sullen clouds, their bright glow like a whispered promise in the otherwise uninterrupted gloom. Shoshanah set her gaze on that cheery corner of the sky as she tucked her body against her mother's side, seeking comfort in the familiar curves.

Her mother kissed the top of her head. "We'll arrive at the inn soon, my love."

Shoshanah wriggled closer. "I like the cart. Can we sleep here again tonight?"

Her mother gave a mock shudder. "My back still aches from last night's adventure. I need a proper bed." Her father and Arta nodded in unison, their heads bobbing in vigorous assent.

As if in apology for not granting Shoshanah's request, her mother gave her another kiss, followed by a cuddling embrace

that had more than a touch of a mother babying a child. At eleven, Shoshanah made it a general rule to remind adults that she had outgrown childhood and stood on the verge of becoming a proper woman. But reading the worry on her mother's normally serene face, she let the cuddle pass without comment.

These were extraordinary times, after all.

The end of her family's world as they knew it had arrived four days earlier when they had walked into their pottery workshop and discovered the place in utter disarray. Pots broken, wheels upturned, baskets toppled. The culprit, whoever he might have been, had even rummaged through the cold kiln in the yard, spreading ashes in his wake. For a thief, he had certainly searched in odd places. What had he hoped to find?

Shoshanah, who spent two hours every afternoon training at the pottery wheel under Arta's expert tutelage, had stared slack-jawed at the disaster. The sight of the vandalized workshop made her ache, like a sharp-nosed trimming tool jabbing her innards.

She had expected her parents to mourn the senseless destruction. The workshop had once belonged to her mother's father. Years of memories lay hidden in every nook and cranny of the place. Her mother had learned her trade there, had become the only female potter well known for her craft by laboring in those dusty rooms. The shop was more than a trade. It had become a heritage. A place of belonging and becoming. Seeing it so abused clawed at a deep place for all of them.

Shoshanah understood her parents' grief. She expected tears. Anger, even.

Instead, after a few hours of secret discussions, her parents proclaimed that Babylon was no longer safe. With a haste that made her head spin, they sold her mother's precious inheritance to her competitor and found a buyer for their family home as well. In three days, they severed every ancient root they had set in Babylon's soil and left behind the life they loved, departing for Susa.

Nothing Shoshanah said persuaded them to change course. “You will regret it,” she said, her voice pleading. “You love this place too much.”

Her gentle father treated her to a stern gaze. “We would not leave if we did not have to, child. You must trust your mother and me. This place is no longer secure. Not for us.”

Child. In moments like this—moments when life’s hardest decisions stared them in the face—she found herself relegated to the schoolroom once again, her burgeoning womanhood shoved aside unacknowledged.

She loved them more than life, the man and woman who had been the center of her world since birth. But nothing they had done in the last four days made any sense.

In the swaying cart, the heaviness of sleep pulled on her eyelids. The cart had belonged to her father’s father and was one of the few familiar things they had with them. Years ago, when her grandfather had felt homesick and lonely while on a long journey, he had carved his name into one of its wooden panels. That name, written neatly in Hebrew rather than one of the languages of Babylon, seemed to ask for a little company now. Or perhaps it was Shoshanah who needed the companionship.

She scrambled to her knees, remembering the task she had set for herself. “Father, may I carve my name next to Grandfather’s?” She pointed at the curling letters that spelled *Libni ben Mispar*.

In an upside-down world where a strange new landscape met her gaze from one hour to the next, she needed a reminder that she was still Shoshanah bat Bani. Without home, without the workshop, without her favorite wheel and the feel of the clay between her fingers, she could still remain herself.

Her father took a quick look before returning his attention to driving the donkeys. “Yes, daughter. You may. Perhaps Arta can help you. Wielding a knife can be tricky in this teetering cart.” His voice was soft, tinged with what Shoshanah recognized as

regret. He understood why she needed this tiny claim upon the wood that cradled all they had left.

The handle of a short knife appeared before her. Arta, her parents' dearest friend and the man who had been like a beloved uncle to her all her life, held it aloft with a winsome grin. "What language shall it be, then?"

"Hebrew, like my grandfather's," she said.

Her name was one of the few words she knew how to write in the tongue of her ancestors. Born and raised in Babylon, she had never set foot on Israel's soil. And unlike her scribe father, and his before him, she had not inherited an aptitude for languages. Instead, she had come into the world with clay in her blood.

"Bani, can you slow the cart for a moment?" Arta called to her father. "We are trying to create a work of art back here."

Her father nodded. Shoshanah gave him an appreciative smile when the cart's bouncing steadied. She whittled the curves of a Hebrew *shin* into the wooden slat just next to her grandfather's name. The letter always reminded her of a short lampstand with three branches. Arta helped hold her hand steady when the cart dipped into a long rut. She drew a straight line, followed by another *shin*, a *nun*, and a *heb*, each letter carved right to left, and as straight as she could make it, until her name was complete. שושנה

She blew away the last of the wood chips and sat back to examine her work.

Arta gave a nod of approval. "That's fine work. Of course, I can't tell if you spelled it correctly since I don't speak Hebrew," he teased.

Her mother gave an arched look. "You can be certain it contains no mistakes. Bani taught her himself, so you know it will be perfect."

Her father glanced over his shoulder. "Couldn't have done better myself. Well done, daughter."

She had finished just in time, for in a short while her father

pulled the cart onto the edge of the road alongside the inn where they would spend the night. A popular stopping point on the road that stretched from Babylon to Susa, the inn seemed full to bursting on this cloudy night, for its yard was crammed with carts of every size, donkeys, mules, oxen, and horses taking up every spare spot, leaving no room for them to turn inside.

“You and Shoshanah go and see if you can arrange for a room, please.” Her father passed a purse to Arta. “And you will be among the blessed if you can procure some bread and cheese for our supper.” He handed the reins of the donkeys to a servant boy. “Elihana and I will have our baggage brought in.”

The aroma of Babylonian stew greeted Shoshanah as she entered the main dining hall of the inn, making her stomach grumble. The smell of butter, milk, and herbs mingled with lamb, a recipe that her Jewish lips would never taste, for the law forbade the mixing of dairy with meat. Bread and cheese would suffice until they found a new home where they could cook their own meals.

She sighed. Even insignificant events like an ordinary supper became a barbed reminder that they had lost all that felt good and familiar.

Arta spoke to the innkeeper about procuring a room for the night while Shoshanah scanned the busy dining room. Spotting a narrow table whose occupants were about to leave, she headed in that direction, Arta in tow.

The innkeeper’s wife brought over a wooden platter piled with flat, steaming bread alongside two round plates she balanced with one hand, one full of soft white cheese and another bearing a little hill of dates. She bent to set down the bread when the sound of a scream, followed by loud shouting, brought the cheerful hubbub in the dining hall to a standstill.

One of the outdoor servants who had helped them upon arrival ran inside, his gaze searching until it fell upon Arta. With

an abrupt motion, he signaled for Arta to follow him. “Stay here.” Arta’s voice emerged a croak. “I’ll see what’s happened.”

A knot twisted in Shoshanah’s belly. Without a word, she rose to follow him. Seeing the expression on her face, he jerked his chin into a nod and led the way.

Outside, a nightmare awaited them. A few steps from their cart, her parents lay in the rutted road, limbs bent at odd angles, moaning.

A scream clawed up Shoshanah’s throat but emerged only as a strangled whimper. She threw herself next to her mother, reaching out a hand to her father’s shoulder.

“I didn’t dare move them,” the servant boy said to Arta. “Feared I’d do them more harm.”

Arta fell to his knees. “Lord’s mercy! What happened here?”

“They were standing on the edge of the road, taking some baggage out of the cart.” The boy’s voice shook as he recounted what he had witnessed. “Out of nowhere, I saw a wagon hurtling toward them. The driver did not even try to stop. I cried out to warn them. But they stood no chance.”

The innkeeper had now arrived upon the scene, shaking his head. “The driver must have been drunk. Where did he go? Where is the dog who mowed them down?”

“He drove off, master. Never even gave a backward glance.”

Shoshanah did not care. All that mattered now was that her parents should recover.

“Ima! Ima, can you hear me?”

With some heroic effort, her mother opened her eyes. “My daughter. My sweet child.” She swallowed, a stray tear disappearing into her tangled hair. “I love you,” she rasped. “Never forget. I’m proud of you.”

“Ima!”

She coughed, and a thin thread of blood stained the side of her lip. “Arta.”

Arta sobbed. “Yes, Elihana?”

"You are my own brother. Dear . . . dear to me. I trust you with our treasures. Raise my daughter well. Cherish her."

Arta took off his felt hat, his head dropping over his chest. "Yes, Elihana. As long as I have breath."

She reached a trembling hand to her husband. For a moment, bloody fingers grasped bloody fingers. "Love you . . ."

"Always," Bani said, his chest shaking.

She went still as a dew drop on a blade of grass. Still and peaceful.

"Oh, Abba! Is she . . . ?"

"Gone from us, child. As I will be soon. How I love you, dear heart."

"No," she moaned. "No, no. Don't say it. Don't say goodbye."

"Forgive me. I know you wished to stay in our home. But it wasn't safe."

"Don't worry about that now."

"I place you in Arta's charge. Be good to him. He has never raised a child." He managed a pained smile. "Arta?"

Arta choked on his breath. "Yes, Bani?"

"My girl is your girl now."

Arta's tears rolled down his cheeks. Mutely, he nodded.

"With the money from the sale of the workshop, buy a house where you can be safe in Susa," her father said. "Look after them, Arta. Keep them secure with your life."

Arta squeezed his friend's bloody hand. "I promise, Bani. I will give my life for them."

Her father took a deep, gurgling breath. She could see each inhalation had become an effort. Still, he held on to her and gave a small smile. "My beautiful girl. You have been a joy to me."

He lingered for another half hour, though he spoke no more words. Shoshanah abided with him in anguished silence, her heart in her eyes. Love, she found, did not always need words.



1

Sazana

As one whom his mother comforts,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted . . .

Isaiah 66:13

TWELVE YEARS LATER

THE TWELFTH YEAR OF KING XERXES'S RULE

THE TWELFTH DAY OF SPRING

The full moon looked pockmarked, its pale light creating shadows on the pottery wheel, giving its flat surface a sinister cast. Drawing her lamp closer to dispel the gloom, Sazana tried to ignore the spasm of pain that shot up her back. She might only be twenty-three, but in the wake of an endless day, she felt like an old woman.

She exhaled. Two more pieces and she could stop.

Across from her, the boy whose head had started nodding into his chest straightened hastily at her gesture and set the

wheel into motion with several powerful turns. To his delight, Arash had been promoted to the post of her wheel boy three months ago after serving for a year in the grueling clay yard. She grinned. A fifteen-hour day like today might cause him to regret the privilege.

At least she had sent Cambyz and Rashda home at a reasonable hour. The two youths who reported to her in the fine ware section of the workshop had completed enough pieces to meet their quota for the day. They had not reached her level of mastery at the wheel, which left her with the lion's share of the more complex pieces for which the workshop had become famous.

Wetting her hands in a bowl of water, Sazana cradled the ball of clay she had placed at the center of the wheel. Under the knowing pressure of her hands, the clay rose quickly into a cone. Her fingers curved over the point she had just created and pressed until the clay became round and flat. Twice more she built up the mound, only to demolish it. The clay, fine as it was, needed this brutal rising and falling before it could be shaped, else it would not be centered, producing an uneven vessel.

The jar she had to make, though no larger than the length of her forearm, presented several challenges. For one thing, its fluted design required a thicker wall. At the same time, the clay could not be so thick as to make the vessel ungainly. She wet her hands again, and hooking her left foot in the lowest rung of her stool, tucked an elbow against her thigh to keep her arm steady, and began the part of her labor that was more art than craft. Again and again, her fingers traveled up and down the clay, until the shapeless mass transformed into the hollowed body of a delicate jug with a long, slender neck.

With a sigh, she sat back and signaled Arash to let the wheel slow to a stop. Using a wire cutter, she separated the base of the jug from the stone wheel. Tomorrow, when the clay turned leather-hard, she would carve out the flutes and attach the handles at the same time. Those handles needed to be shaped

tonight, though, or the difference of moisture in the clay would cause them to break in the kiln.

She moved to her table to roll out the clay, shaping thin tubes into two matching arcs, decorated on top with a tiny swirl. Wiping her hands on a damp rag, she told the boy to carry the fragile wet jug and newly fashioned handles to the drying shelf reserved for Sazana's pieces.

Her arms had started to tremble with exhaustion. She stretched, trying to restore her strained muscles. As usual, Sazana's hair, straight and slippery, had fallen loose from its tie. She bundled the thick mass into a knot at the base of her neck and secured it with a leather strip.

A large hand settled on her shoulder. "Enough," Arta said in his gravelly voice. "You're done for the day."

She flashed him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Just one more. I can do it."

"No." His thick brows knotted over his prominent nose. "You're too exhausted. He can wait an extra day."

It took her a moment to form her answer. Even now, irritated as he was, Arta did not interrupt her, but waited patiently for her words to come.

She shot him a grateful smile, then swung her head backward, the Persian signal for no. "Lord Haman, wait?"

It would only land Arta in trouble if she did not complete the order. As the foreman of the workshop, he carried the responsibility for every failure and received none of the praise from its owner. Since Lord Haman had requisitioned the order for his own private use, he would consider it a personal affront if they fell short by even one vessel.

Arta hissed a frustrated breath. "It's an unreasonable request. That many complicated vessels in so short a time. I may just give that man a piece of my mind."

"The only piece we'll give him is made of pottery. I told you. I can do it."

"I don't suppose Lord Haman would put up with even a hint of complaint from me. But once this order is finished, you will have a whole day to yourself."

She gave him an appreciative nod. To her, Arta was a father first, then a foreman, protecting her where he could.

Before she settled at the wheel to begin the final piece, she reached for the instinctual comfort of the clay oval that lay snug under the fabric of her tunic.

Her mother's seal.

Those dear hands must have wrapped around the smooth-edged oval a thousand times as she put her stamp into every pot she had made. As always, the touch soothed Sazana like balm. The seal's Hebrew words flashed through her mind.

Elihana, daughter of Shaphan.

The name and lineage were followed by a discrete second line that featured a single word: *Potter*. As a workshop owner and expert potter, her mother had had the right to her own seal.

She would have been no stranger to days like this. Days that lasted too long at the never-ending turn of the wheel. She, too, had ached, back and shoulders sore from bending. But she had persisted until her vessels were formed before pressing that oval seal into the wet clay.

It had been twelve years since the seal had made its mark on clay. Now it had become a hidden object, a secret consolation rather than a public declaration.

Sazana signaled the boy to start the wheel and began to shape the last piece. Like her mother before her, she would fulfill her duty.

By the time she completed the final vessel in Lord Haman's order, Sazana longed to crawl into bed and not rise for ten hours. Not that she would have that luxury. Sunrise would arrive too soon, and with it, more labor. Tomorrow, she planned to carve delicate flutes into the vessels she had prepared today.

A longer delay in Susa's hot, dry climate, and the clay would become too hard to carve.

Dismissing Arash to his home and waiting mother, she placed the final piece on the drying rack. In passing, she drew a soft finger down the side of a jug, her touch as tender as a mother's hand on a toddler's sleeping head. Tired as she was, she could not suppress a smile of satisfaction. The row of jugs she had thrown that day stood next to one another, perfect in height and thickness, their walls smooth and unmarred.

Hearing a loud noise behind her, she spun around. Her toe caught on the edge of the reed mat, causing her to lose her balance, pitching her forward. She stretched out her arms to keep from tumbling to the floor. Coming to a teetering stop, she took a deep breath.

That could have been a disaster! She could have shattered a whole row of pottery with that kind of careless floundering.

She winced at the sight of the muscular man who seemed to have appeared out of thin air, watching her with an unfriendly expression, arms crossed over a massive chest. "Nabonassar?" Why was he sniffing around the fine ware section so late at night?

"You sound surprised to see me," he said in his thick Babylonian accent. "Who did you think it would be? The satrap of Bactria come to carry you away to his golden palace?"

It took her too long to form an answer for Nabonassar's liking, and he decided whatever she had to say wasn't worth the wait. "You are making such a commotion in here, I could not sleep."

She scowled. The man slept in an alcove all the way on the opposite end of the workshop, and her wheel was not noisy enough to keep him awake. More likely, he had come to spy on her. As Haman's not-so-secret informer, he reported every detail of the workshop to his master. For his pain, he had been elevated to head potter in the common ware section, where he

and eighteen other men made rough vessels for food and wine storage. Next to Arta, that gave him the highest rank in the place, though his skill hardly merited such a position.

"As you see, I am finished now." She moved to walk past him.

A thick hand snaked out to wrap around her arm. "What's that?"

Before Sazana could step away, greedy fingers grabbed the chain at her neck. Her seal! It must have slipped out of her tunic when she stumbled.

"Let go!" A sheen of sweat dampened the top of her lips. She tried to pull away, but Nabonassar held fast.

"What have we here? Is this a love token? Do you have a sweetheart, girl?" He pulled the seal toward him, studying it with inquisitive eyes.

The Hebrew letters were written backward, since it would be their mirror image that would be stamped into the clay. She prayed the reverse alphabet would baffle Nabonassar. She knew her prayers had not been answered when a slow smile dawned on the man's handsome face. "Well, well. What are you doing with a Hebrew seal hanging from your scrawny neck, eh?"

Sazana had grown up at the potter's wheel and had the toned physique to prove it. She knocked the seal out of the man's hand, and stepping away, tucked it back inside her tunic.

"What goes on here?" Arta growled.

Nabonassar faced the foreman. "She is a Jew, this one. You must have known."

A dull flush spread from Arta's neck to his pate. "What nonsense is this?"

"She wears a Hebrew seal around her neck. Saw it with my own eyes, just now. Lord Haman will be very interested in that news."

"Don't be ridiculous, man," Arta said, trying to sound casual and failing miserably. "You will only make yourself look like a fool if you carry such empty tales to the master."

Nabonassar laughed as he walked away. "We'll see."

Sazana swallowed hard. "I can't believe I let him see it."

Arta put a comforting arm around her shoulder. "I can't believe he has the wit to figure out what it is."

Her watery laugh dried up quickly. "Arta, I've gone and ruined us."

"Your mother used to laugh just like that, all white teeth and sweetness." He tapped her on the cheek. "And we are not ruined. At worst, we may find ourselves without employment. But there will be other workshops that will jump at the chance to hire you."

"There are no other pottery workshops in Susa that produce fine ware. I would be reduced to making rough amphora for grain storage."

"We can seek work in Ecbatana or Persepolis."

"They don't know me, Arta. My name is only known here, in Susa."

"Which is why Haman would never let you go. Your fine pottery earns him a small fortune. He won't dismiss you merely because he disapproves of your heritage. He'll growl and sneer for a season and then forget about it."

She shook a finger at him. "If those words were a pot, they would crack at the first sight of the furnace."

Arta rubbed the back of his neck. "I suppose." He exhaled. "What's done is done, in any case. Let's go home and sleep for a few hours. Tomorrow will come soon enough."

"I'm sorry Arta."

"For what?"

"For insisting on wearing my mother's seal. If I had left it at home, this would never have happened."

"You did nothing wrong. You have every right to cling to a precious keepsake. The Lord knows you've lost too much already. I would never expect you to give up so small a comfort as well, Shoshanah."

She felt her shoulders ease at the sound of that name. The one she had been born with, Hebrew like her blood.

She poked a finger in his arm. "You'll find yourself without a job because of me."

He waved a dismissive hand. "After twelve years, I was tired of working for the man, anyway."

"Are you tired of eating too?" The position of foreman was an honored and highly competitive one. Vacancies did not come around every day.

Arta drew her close. "It won't come to that, my dear. I have a little bit set aside for just such a day. Besides, I haven't forgotten how to throw a pot."

Sazana rewarded him with a wan smile. She loved the way Arta always saw the hope in every situation. Which was why she did not remind him that making common ware was young men's work. Arta might have the technique, but he no longer had the strength.

But she did. She would find work in one of the other workshops. Coarse or fine, it made no difference. She would look after Arta the way he had always looked after her.



2



Jadon

But to you also the cup will be passed . . .

Lamentations 4:21 NIV

Jadon surveyed the stale bread and shriveled cheese sitting on his shelf and covered them again with a piece of cloth. He was not that hungry.

He had just returned from a village north of Susa where the queen owned a prosperous farm. She had sent him to verify the overseer's claim that poor soil and disease meant they expected a much smaller crop of barley this year.

Jadon had arrived at the overseer's door disguised as the servant of a Lydian merchant, seeking to purchase barley at a generous rate.

"Lydia has been struck by a terrible famine," he told the overseer. "You are fortunate to have charge of such good land. The price of grain will likely double and triple soon."

The overseer's eyes took on a gleam Jadon did not like. "Will it?"

Jadon nodded. "My master is willing to be generous if your barley is good quality."

"You will not find better." The overseer emptied a bag on the table between them. "Here is a sample from last harvest."

Jadon waved a hand. "This could be from anywhere. Show me your fields, and I will decide for myself."

The overseer obliged. For an hour, they rode their donkeys from one end of the expansive field to another, tasting from the ripening crop.

"Nothing wrong with this grain," Jadon said, examining the green head of barley that sat in the palm of his hand. Clearly the man's claim that the barley would not yield a rich harvest that spring had been false. A ploy to pocket the difference in income between what he declared and what he actually sold the grain for.

The overseer missed the irony in Jadon's voice. "As I said, this is the finest grain you'll find anywhere."

"Someone from my master's household will contact you soon." They certainly would, though not in the way the overseer expected.

Now Jadon settled behind his desk, preparing to write a report to the queen's chief steward, Hathach. Before he had a chance to dip his stylus into ink, a polite knock sounded at the main entrance. He peeked through the slats of the window and, recognizing the man outside, pulled the bar free from the door.

"Benjamin!" It had been a few months since he had seen the carpenter who had built his writing desk for him.

Benjamin drew a sheepish hand down his beard. "Forgive the intrusion. I know the hour is late. I came earlier but found no one at home."

"Not at all. Come in."

Benjamin thanked him, taking the cushion Jadon offered.

For a few moments, he spoke of mundane concerns: the oppressive heat, unusual so early in spring; the rising price of wine; his daughter's approaching wedding. But Jadon could tell that the man had something particular on his mind and decided to put the carpenter out of his misery.

"How can I help you, Benjamin?"

His guest colored. "You remember Jacob? My youngest?"

"The boy who could climb trees faster than a squirrel?"

Benjamin grinned. "That's the one." He leaned close. "Well, Jacob has his heart set on going to the palace school."

"Ah." It was a point of Persian pride that any boy could enter the exclusive school that taught its pupils reading, writing, ethics, basic medicine, and the art of war. Commoners as well as aristocrats could reap the rewards of this privileged education. "Have you applied?"

Benjamin's smile held a world of satisfaction. "Applied and accepted."

"That is a great accomplishment. My congratulations."

Jadon leaned back. Young Jacob now faced another hurdle, in some ways more challenging than the first. The palace school, though open to all, cost a fortune. Students had to have their own horse and pay for its keep and fodder as well as pay for their clothes, their weapons, and their armor. Few commoners could afford all the expenses.

"I have saved enough to buy him a horse," Benjamin said. "Nothing like the beasts the gentry can afford. But it has four legs and knows how to trot. His grandfather will pay the stable fees. But the weapons . . ." Leaving the sentence unfinished, the proud father dropped his head.

"Say no more. I would be happy to help. My kit, though old, is still usable. Your son is welcome to it."

"Bless you, Jadon!" Benjamin cried. "I will repay you, somehow."

Jadon waved a hand, embarrassed. "It's not as if I use it. Wait here. I will go and fetch what he will need."

In his chamber, Jadon lifted the lid of the ancient chest he kept in a curtained alcove. The hinges creaked in protest, reminding him that it had been a long while since they had been used.

He sifted through a lifetime of keepsakes. His father's cloak. His own formal garments that he used to wear in the days he had served as an Immortal. A gold-embroidered bedcover. Underneath, he found the cache of his boyhood weapons and armor.

His father, a minor Persian lord who had fallen in love with a Jewess and become a follower of the Lord before marrying her, had insisted on this one Persian tradition: that his son attend the palace school. Which was why Jadon could now help Benjamin's son.

As he drew out the fat bundle from the bottom of the chest, a silver object clattered against the side and rolled to a stop. He went still, staring at the goblet.

So many threads of memory clung to each intricate line and serpentine carving of that cup. His grandmother's laughter turning into a knot of anger. His mother's pale face, silent and combative.

And Shoshanah. Shoshanah smiling that ravishing smile. Shoshanah teasing him, her silky black hair slipping free from its knot to frame a face he had never managed to forget. Shoshanah staring at him with a love that melted his bones.

Shoshanah, white with hurt.

He slammed the chest shut and shoved his bundle under one arm, bolting to the front room.