

TESSA AFSHAR

A NOVEL



THE
HIDDEN
PRINCE

PRAISE FOR TESSA AFSHAR



JEWEL OF THE NILE

“Afshar’s excellent latest follows a young mixed-race woman in the first century CE as she embarks on a quest to find a father she thought long dead. . . . Exquisite plotting and outstanding historical details set this apart. Afshar’s fans will be overjoyed with this tale of love lost and found.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW

“Tessa Afshar’s novels are well worth waiting for and *Jewel of the Nile* is certainly no exception! What a lovely book and what a beautiful message.”

CHRISTIAN NOVEL REVIEW



DAUGHTER OF ROME

“With meticulous research and a vividly detailed narrative style, *Daughter of Rome* . . . is both an emotive biblical love story and an inherently fascinating journey through the world of first-century Rome and the city of Corinth.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“This is a lovely slow-burning, faith-filled exploration about overcoming trials and accepting past mistakes.”

HISTORICAL NOVELS REVIEW

“Afshar brings in a thoughtful consideration of whether or not there are behaviors that cannot ever be forgiven, and her intricate biblical setting will engross readers. This is [her] strongest, most complex scripture-based story yet.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Tessa Afshar inhabits the world of early Christians with refreshing clarity. From life under the threat of persecution to domestic details and her characters’ innermost thoughts, she makes early Christianity spark.”

FOREWORD REVIEWS

“Tessa Afshar has the rare gift of seamlessly blending impeccable historical research and theological depth with lyrical prose and engaging characters.”

SHARON GARLOUGH BROWN, author of the *Sensible Shoes* series

“Tessa Afshar’s ability to transport readers into the culture and characters of the biblical novels is extraordinary. . . . *Daughter of Rome* is a feast for your imagination as well as balm for your soul.”

ROBIN JONES GUNN, bestselling author of *Becoming Us*



THIEF OF CORINTH

“Afshar again shows her amazing talent for packing action and intrigue into the biblical setting for modern readers.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“Lyrical . . . [with] superb momentum, exhilarating scenes, and moving themes of love and determination. . . . Afshar brings to life the gripping tale of one woman’s struggle to choose between rebellion and love.”

BOOKLIST

“Afshar’s well-drawn characters and lushly detailed setting vividly bring to life the ancient world of the Bible. A solid choice for fans of Francine Rivers and Bodie and Brock Thoene.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL



BREAD OF ANGELS

“Afshar continues to demonstrate an exquisite ability to bring the women of the Bible to life, this time shining a light on Lydia, the seller of purple, and skillfully balancing fact with imagination.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Afshar has created an unforgettable story of dedication, betrayal, and redemption that culminates in a rich testament to God’s mercies and miracles.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“With sublime writing and solid research, [Afshar] captures the distinctive experience of living at a time when Christianity was in its fledgling stages.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Readers who enjoy Francine Rivers’s Lineage of Grace series will love this stand-alone book.”

CHRISTIAN MARKET

“With its resourceful, resilient heroine and vibrant narrative, *Bread of Angels* offers an engrossing new look at a mysterious woman of faith.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE



LAND OF SILENCE

“Readers will be moved by Elianna’s faith, and Afshar’s elegant evocation of biblical life will keep them spellbound. An excellent choice for fans of Francine Rivers’s historical fiction and those who read for character.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Fans of biblical fiction will enjoy an absorbing and well-researched chariot ride.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“In perhaps her best novel to date, Afshar . . . grants a familiar [biblical] character not only a name, but also a poignant history to which many modern readers can relate. The wit, the romance, and the humanity make Elianna’s journey uplifting as well as soul touching.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, TOP PICK REVIEW

“Heartache and healing blend beautifully in this gem among Christian fiction.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“An impressively crafted, inherently appealing, consistently engaging, and compelling read from first page to last, *Land of Silence* is enthusiastically recommended for community library historical fiction collections.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEWS

“This captivating story of love, loss, faith, and hope gives a realistic glimpse of what life might have been like in ancient Palestine.”

WORLD MAGAZINE



THE
HIDDEN
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TESSA
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The Hidden Prince

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The Hidden Prince is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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To Laurence:

Brave. Loyal. Caring. Honest. True.

My beloved nephew.

You will always be a prince in my heart.

,

Y
-

-

REGIONAL MAP



PROLOGUE

Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.

Daniel 2:48, ESV

The Twenty-Ninth Year of King Nebuchadnezzar's Reign

My father tightened his grip on my hand as we hurried past the ziggurat, the golden shrine of Marduk at its top gleaming in the morning sun. He always felt uneasy when we came too close to one of Babylon's many temples. But this one, the most renowned and opulent, made his Jewish heart downright agitated.

The ziggurat had occupied the center of Babylon for centuries, growing dilapidated with the passage of time. When Nebuchadnezzar ascended the throne, he spent a fortune on repairs to the famous landmark, restoring the ziggurat to a magnificent height so that fifty men could stand upon one another's shoulders and still not touch the zenith. To stamp the monument with his personal seal of grandeur, the king had added the bejeweled shrine of the Babylonian god Marduk like a crown at the top of the lofty structure.

I stumbled as I stared over the walls, past the veil of palm fronds and verdant tree branches, following the slow progress of a white-clad priest as he ascended the ornate staircase, carrying a burning brazier.

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“Pay attention, Keren. Stop staring at that abomination.”

“Yes, Father,” I said, my gaze still glued to the priest.

“You must not allow your mind to wander when you begin your service in Daniel’s household. Stay your thoughts on the tasks given you.”

“Of course.”

“And do not ask impertinent questions.”

“Who? Me?” I asked, offended. “Grandfather says my questions are the sign of a quick mind.”

“As I said. Impertinent. You must quash that tendency.”

“Yes, Father.”

By now, we had left the main thoroughfare by crossing a bridge over one of the canals that watered the city and found our way to a narrow, unpaved lane. Most of Babylon’s roads were made of packed dirt, though some were wide enough to accommodate two chariots.

Without warning, Father stopped and turned to face me. I was tall for my age. But he still had to bend his head to look me in the eyes. “Keren,” he said, his voice growing faint. “You know we love you. Your mother and I.”

“And I love you. Stop worrying about me.”

“Daniel is a good man. You will be safe in his household.”

I patted my father’s shoulder reassuringly. Years ago, the king had elevated Lord Daniel to the position of chief amongst all the wise men, and governor over the province of Babylon, the wealthy capital of the nation of Babylonia. In one fell swoop, Nebuchadnezzar had made a young Jew ruler over many of his own countrymen.

Not all of us captives from Judah were so honored.

Many of my people served as slaves. Others had been sent to live in Babylonian lands previously uninhabited. Some, like my

father, occupied more menial positions in Babylon. My father's skills had earned him the post of assistant to a scribe. Though my mother and sisters wove baskets for a merchant in the market, and my brothers worked in the docks, my father's salary was the mainstay of our home. His meager income had to stretch eight ways and was never enough. In a moment of desperation, my father had borrowed from a money lender at an exorbitant rate. And now, he could not pay it back.

He had wept when he had approached his kinsman Daniel. Wept with sorrow and, I suspect, no little shame. Though he had my blessing, offering to sell his youngest daughter to his wealthy cousin nearly broke my father's heart. Of course, we all hoped that my family would save enough to redeem me within the year. But I suspected our hope to be more of a vain dream than a realistic plan. In all the years we had lived in Babylon, my family had yet to save a single silver shekel.

To our relief, Daniel had graciously offered to buy me from my father. Only to return me to my family, immediately, as a kinsman-redeemer would.

My father had hung his head. "We cannot afford to feed her, you see. We simply do not have enough. Would you allow her to work for you? She will earn her bread, I promise. Send her home to us every Sabbath so we can see her and rejoice."

Lord Daniel had agreed. He might have been a cousin to us, but he was as many times removed from my father's bloodlines as my fraying tunic was from the sheep that had been shorn to weave its fabric. Daniel did not have to act as my redeemer by Law, nor did he have to multiply his generosity by feeding and housing me at his own expense.

I understood how important it was that I repay my master's generosity with useful labor. I patted my father's shoulder again.

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“I will work hard, Father. You need not worry. I will not shame you and Mother.”

He laid his warm hand on my cheek. “We never worry about that.”

Lord Daniel’s house was everything you might expect in a nobleman’s residence. Years ago, he had lived at the palace, but he received permission from the king to move into his own house when his sons were born. Three stories tall, the building had walls of expensive oven-baked bricks, whitewashed to battle the brutal heat of Babylonian summers.

This palatial dwelling had little in common with our tiny rectangular reed home and its reed-mat doors. The front door of Daniel’s sumptuous home, along with its frame and lintels, was made of sturdy timber, a commodity Babylonia had to import at great expense.

“Cedars from Lebanon,” my father breathed, probably remembering another door from a home long since lost.

I had few such memories. My mother had barely weaned me when the siege of Jerusalem began. I had just turned four when it ended in a tide of fire and blood. Sometimes I fancied I could still hear the echo of hideous wailing in my dreams, the kind of grim, animal howls only a war can squeeze out of human throats.

I had come along when my mother had believed herself too old to bear more children. She named me Keren-happuch, after Job’s youngest daughter. I suppose everyone in Jerusalem had felt a little like Job by then. But, rather too hopefully as it turned out, she had chosen the name of a daughter conceived after Job’s troubles had ended. Ours were only about to begin.

Our family was one of the blessed. Save for my eldest brother, the rest of us had survived the butchery of angry Babylonian

soldiers who were fed up with Judah's repeated treachery. We had survived Nebuchadnezzar's sword, the fires of war, the gnaw of famine, the waves of pestilence.

Only to be carried to Babylon as captives.

Ten years had passed since the day my family sat by the waters of the Euphrates, exhausted by their long, merciless march, and wept for the home they would never see again. Some wounds cannot be healed by the passing of time. They fade, only to gape and bleed again at some unexpected provocation. Which was why my father would stand and stare at strange times, eyes welling up abruptly as they did now, coming face-to-face with memories trapped in a door made of rare cedars.

I pressed his hand in comfort. He smiled, trying to steady his quivering chin, and raised his knuckles to rap reverently upon the amber-colored planks. A slave dressed in a neat, short tunic invited us in. "The master is expecting you," he said with a bow of his head.

Though he spent most of his time at the palace, Lord Daniel had a whole chamber set aside for his work at home. Bent over a pile of clay documents on his otherwise neat table, he was so deep in thought that our entrance did not rouse him. We stood quietly near the door, waiting to be acknowledged. Behind him, a partitioned case housing numerous clay tablets and cylinders spanned the full length of the wall. In one corner of it, he had stacked scrolls of papyrus, which were not as popular in Babylonia as clay documents.

My fingers itched to look at those tablets, to try and decipher them and see how well Grandfather's teaching had served me. In Babylonia, girls were usually not taught how to read and write. But my grandfather had other notions.

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By the time I started to toddle, Grandfather had become afflicted with the start of his shaking disease and could no longer serve as a scribe. For the first time in his life, he had the luxury of free time. And he was bored. He discovered quickly that I found his stylus and tablets fascinating and began to teach me. We bonded together over what we both liked best. The knowledge and power of words. I would miss him, living away from home.

My new master lifted his head and blinked as if awakening from a dream. "Asa! Forgive me. I did not hear you come in." He rose from his seat, the folds of his long sea-green tunic falling about him in an orderly wave.

"And this must be Keren-happuch." He studied me with a glint of surprise. I was skinny for my age and as flat as the timber roof on his house. Womanhood, if it ever intended to visit me, had proven reluctant to bless me with any obvious charms. *Yet*, as my mother was fond of reminding me.

Father bowed his head. "We call her Keren, Master Daniel." My parents had realized early that if they wanted to keep me from getting into trouble, a shorter appellation would be necessary. I would be halfway down the road, chasing whatever had taken my latest fancy, before they pronounced the full cartload that was my given name. "You can trust her to work hard," Father added. "She is stronger than she looks."

I nodded to emphasize his words. My eyes fixed on the mounds of clay cylinders behind my new master. I wondered how many of them I could carry in my arms at one time.

"I am sure we will find something to suit her. Now, please receive this as a token of my appreciation for allowing your daughter to serve my household." Daniel dropped a cloth bag jingling with silver shekels into Father's palm. "I will arrange

for her to visit you at home every Sabbath. We wouldn't want her mother to miss her too much, would we?"

The door swung open behind us and the most elegant woman I had ever seen entered on sandaled feet. Her long, royal-blue tunic danced at her ankles as she walked deeper into the room to stand next to Daniel. Two pale-blue shawls decorated with the golden fringe so admired by Babylonians draped diagonally across one shoulder, held in place by a jeweled belt. Someone had arranged her hair into a perfect, ornamented creation of loops and crimps, adorned by gold rings. But by far the most glamorous thing about her was her face, with its sharp, short nose, cool brown eyes darkened with kohl, and curved lips that dipped into a deep wedge at the center.

Those lips betrayed no expression when Lord Daniel introduced me. "Mahlah, my dear," Daniel said with a smile. "Here is your new charge, Keren. I am sure you will find some useful task for her around the house."

This, then, was my mistress. I would not be spending my time serving Lord Daniel in his study, it seemed. I hid my disappointment and bowed respectfully before the elegant woman.

My new mistress regarded me in silence. If she were a scroll, I was illiterate. I could read nothing from her expression, which remained bland as she scrutinized me. "Let us try the kitchens," she said.

My heart sank. This might not be an auspicious beginning. My mother and sisters rarely allowed me near the place.

"Excellent idea," Daniel said, immediately returning to his pile of clay tablets, and I barely had time for a hurried goodbye embrace from my father before Lady Mahliah led me out of the chamber.

"My husband tells me you are fourteen," the mistress said as

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she guided me through the corridor into the rectangular courtyard. Above us, a partial roof of palm wood planks and packed earth kept the climbing sun at bay.

“Yes, mistress. I am tall for my age, and the rest of me still has to catch up.”

The elegant face remained impassive. But I fancied I saw the tiniest sparkle in the brown eyes as she turned to study me for a moment. “The kitchen is here” was all she said, leading me to a chamber in the far corner of the courtyard.

A rotund man with dark hair stood by the open door, sharpening his knife. He bowed when he spied the mistress. I kept an eye on him, worried he might poke his flesh on the point of his blade as he bent down. He proved dexterous, however, portly fingers nimbly tucking the knife away.

“My lady, how may I be of service?”

“I have brought you additional help, Manasseh. This is Keren. See if you can train her to be useful around the kitchen.”

“Yes, lady.” He bowed again, not straightening until the mistress began to walk away. I followed his example, though it seemed excessive. If I had to bow every time someone above my station came and went, I would spend the whole day bent over my shoes.

Manasseh sized me up. “Scrawny little rat, aren’t you?” He lifted a huge iron bowl full of unshelled, dried walnuts from a shelf and shoved it into my chest. I staggered under the weight, barely managing to hold on.

“Shell,” the cook barked. He pointed a corpulent finger toward the corner of the room where a hammer awaited on a stool. “When you finish, I have a bowl of almonds.”

I sat on the floor, the bowl tucked between my legs, and started breaking shells. It was dull work, and soon my attention

began to wander. On the low, three-legged stool where I had found the hammer, I spied a small clay cylinder resting on its wobbly side. A scrap of papyrus lay open near it.

Writing instruments held a great deal more charm for me than every manner of nut under the sun. I slowed my hammering as I slid to the right and craned my neck to have a better look. Enough light streamed through the door for me to make out the words.

The clay cylinder was a royal list of provisions. I recognized it immediately as resembling the ones my father sometimes prepared for the palace scribes. My brows knotted as I sounded out the wedge-shaped Akkadian syllables for oil, barley, dates, and flour.

Lord Daniel had been amongst the first wave of deportees from Judah—one of the talented young men of noble family that Nebuchadnezzar had carried off to Babylon nineteen years before the rest of us had been taken into captivity. As a high courtier in service to the king of Babylonia, he received monthly provisions of food and oil, of which the scribes kept careful records.

Next to the neatly prepared royal tablet lay a dirty scrap of papyrus with an additional list, this one in Aramaic. No royal scribe had prepared this atrociously spelled piece of workmanship. Quickly, I scanned the contents. Plums, emmer, prunes, fish, frankincense. It took some imagination to understand the words, they had been so mangled by poor penmanship.

My feet scabbled a little closer to the three-legged stool, the pot of walnuts entirely forgotten now. This list included purchase prices as well as weights. It wasn't my intention to be nosy. But my bored brain found the sums too inviting to resist. I added them up in my head, first the weights, then the prices. The total on the paper did not tally with my additions.

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The account became a wrinkle in my mind, a challenge I couldn't resist. I added the prices again more slowly, compared them with the weights, and went back over the list. It took only a moment to find three mistakes.

Scratching my nose, I stared at the cook's back, bent over as he vigorously pounded a piece of mutton. No doubt this list was his handiwork. As chief cook, he had charge over purchases beyond royal provisions. A household this large and wealthy would need to buy more than the basic staples the palace provided. But he had spent a lot less than he claimed on his list.

I bit my lip in thought. Judging by the man's inadequate writing skills, I assumed this was an honest mistake. Any half-educated scribe would be able to pick out his errors within moments, as I had. At best, he would find himself extremely embarrassed. More likely, he would be accused of attempted theft.

I cleared my throat. "Master?"

The cook's large head pivoted on his short neck. "Aren't you finished with those walnuts yet?"

"Not quite."

"Get a move on," he barked before returning to his pounding.

"It's only that . . . I have found a mistake, you see."

This time he turned more slowly, pinning me with an unblinking gaze. "Mistake?"

I nodded toward his list. "I couldn't help noticing. You added them wrong."

The portly cheeks, glistening with steam from a boiling pot, turned the color of the plums on his list. "You *read* my list?"

I shrank back. "I didn't mean to pry."

"You read *my* list?"

"The papyrus was practically under my nose." I scooted backward cautiously. "Naturally, I added the columns up. I can

show you where the mistakes are. We can correct them in a blink. Give me a bit of ink and . . .”

The corpulent finger pointed at me again. “Up!” he bel-
lowed. “Up!”

I scrambled to my feet. “I only meant to help.”

“Out of my kitchen! *Out*, I say!” The bellows were getting louder. Now the other hand lifted, waving a bronze mallet stained by blood and mutton gore.

I gulped. My feet stumbled over themselves as I turned to obey the cook. I must not have moved fast enough for his liking. A booted heel landed squarely on my bottom and shoved hard. I tripped, lurching through the door, and, barely regaining my balance, dashed out of the kitchens as fast as my skinny legs could carry me.

Unsure where to go, I headed for the main house, looking over my shoulder every few steps to ensure Manasseh had not followed me with his bloody mallet. I had barely walked through the door when I collided with something soft, wafting with the perfume of roses.

The mistress.

She steadied me with an arm. “What is this uproar?” she asked calmly. “I heard shouting from the kitchens. Why are you not where I left you?”

“The cook requested my departure, mistress.”

She gave me a look that scared me more than Manasseh’s gruesome mallet. “And why is that?”

“I tried to help him,” I squeaked.

“You tried to cook?”

“No, mistress! That would not be advisable for anyone’s health.” My mouth turned dry. “I tried to . . . That is, I made a suggestion.”

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One perfectly shaped brow rose. “Don’t take a step until I return.”

I stood motionless, sweat staining my woolen tunic. A few moments later the mistress reappeared from the direction of the kitchens, her golden fringes flapping against her soft leather sandals.

“He refuses to have you back,” she said, her face blank of expression.

My heart sank. I wondered if she would return me to my father’s house, disgraced, after less than half a day in her service. But she merely said, “Come. We will find you a new place to serve.”

She led me into the bowels of the house, guiding me to a chamber in the south end of the property. My eyes widened as for the first time in my life I saw a bathing room—a whole chamber set aside for the purpose of personal ablution. I had heard of such places but had never had occasion to enter one. In my home, when we needed to bathe, we headed for the river.

With interest, I noted that the tiled floor sloped slightly toward the center of the room. Before I had time to examine this oddity further, a faint movement in a dark corner of the room made me hop back in alarm. I realized that the mistress and I were not alone in the chamber.

A woman walked toward us from the shadows. She had a round face, flushed and beaded with sweat, wisps of dark hair sticking to her forehead. Her arms were bare and pink. It dawned on me that she must be the household washerwoman.

She bowed to the mistress before picking up a wide bronze bowl full of water and emptying it upon the tiled floor. As the contents of her bowl flowed toward us, I took another hasty step away, worried that the foul water would seep into my only

pair of sandals. But the water merely rolled into the center of the floor and disappeared down a small hole I had not noticed until then.

“Why, it’s a marvel!” I cried.

“I am glad you approve,” the mistress said dryly.

“Is that drain attached to a pipe, mistress? It must lead away from the foundations of the house. Where does it go? My guess would be into a canal, and there . . .”

The mistress held up a hand and I managed to swallow the rest of my words. “You don’t need to figure out the architecture of it, girl. You merely have to make use of it.” She turned to address the woman with the pink arms. “Rachel, this is Keren. Our new servant. I am placing her under your tutelage. See if you can make a good laundress of her.”

“Yes, lady.” Once the mistress withdrew, Rachel said, “I’m glad you are here. “My daughter used to help me with the heavy loads. But she is big with child and cannot manage it anymore.” She fetched a load of wet garments from the corner of the chamber and, dropping them into her now empty bowl, handed them to me. “Follow me.”

I shifted the bowl and found it not as heavy as I had expected. At one end of the courtyard, someone had strung up a length of rope, and Rachel helped me quickly hang the garments from it in an orderly row. A few linen tunics and short skirts such as those women wore under their garments, a dozen men’s loin-cloths, and light summer shawls.

I smiled to myself. If this was the heavy work, my job as the laundress’s helper would be simple.

“Come,” she said. “Time to fetch the bedding.”

“Bedding?”

She nodded. “Once a month, we wash the sheets and blankets.

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Every blessed one. We start with the master and mistress's bed, followed by their sons' beds, and then the bedding used by guests. And there are always guests! Of course, we set aside another day for the servants' bedding."

I gulped, realizing that what we had just hung on the line was the lightest load I would likely encounter in this household. It took Rachel and me a good hour to strip the beds and gather the wool and linen fabric in two baskets. I thought she would head back to the bathing chamber. Instead, she headed for the street.

"Where are we going?"

"To the river," she said. "These are too big to wash indoors. I only launder the family's clothing there. The mistress is very particular and does not wish her intimate garments flapping in the wind by the banks of the Euphrates for everyone to ogle."

I did not answer. I could not. I had already grown winded from carrying the enormous basket, which contained more linens than I had ever seen in one place. When we arrived by the river, I collapsed on the shore and took a relieved breath. I could have taken a nap right there on those sheets, be they washed or not.

Rachel pulled out one sheet and showed me how to look for stains and to treat them with a bar made of fat boiled with ashes. After soaking the sheet in the river, she beat it with a smooth rock to remove the dirt.

"Now take this and rinse it," she instructed. "Then you can start on the next one."

I nodded as I took the sheet a little deeper into the river to allow the water to rinse over the linen. My eyes widened as I spotted a clump of reeds. I noticed amongst them several stems that would yield a perfect stylus for writing on clay.

If a reed was too thick, it yielded poor symbols; if too thin, it broke easily. If it was too old, the nib would shatter under pressure. It took experience to pick just the right reed. I loosened my hold on the sheet, reaching with one hand to the stem closest to me. My father would appreciate the gift of a sturdy reed for a new stylus. The stem proved stubborn, and I twisted further toward it to take a firmer grasp.

The unthinkable happened.

I lost hold of the sheet and it began to float, carried away by the currents of the river.

“Gah! The sheet! The sheet!” Rachel shouted from the shore, gesturing wildly with her arm.

My attention might have been a little lacking, but at least I knew how to move quickly. I ran down the shallow riverbed before the undulating sheet could go too far and lunged. A smooth stone jutting from the sands hit me squarely in the chest, and for a moment I lost all the breath in my lungs. But my fingertips twisted into the linen and I managed to grab it and pull.

I came to my knees, panting and wet. With a shaking arm, I lifted the sheet into the air. “I have it,” I called.

Rachel patted me on the head as she retrieved the runaway linen. “Good thing you run fast.”

After that, she would not let me come anywhere near the river with the laundry. She had me sit in the sun and apply her lump of boiled fat and ashes to any stains I found.

As I rubbed, I berated myself. How could I have been so inattentive? Why had I not kept my mind on the task at hand?

We ran into the mistress when we returned to Daniel’s house.

“How did she do?” the mistress asked Rachel.

The laundress shook her head. “She is a good girl and she

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works hard. But she was not meant to be a laundress. No doubt, you will find something more suitable to her talents." To Rachel's credit, she did not divulge my stupidity.

The mistress raised a perfectly plucked brow after the laundress left us. "What did you do? Make another suggestion?"

"No, mistress." I dropped my head. "I let go of the sheet in the river."

"One of my embroidered ones?"

"I fear so."

"Then you can help embroider another to replace it."

"You won't need to replace it. I caught it before it swam too far."

"In that fast current?"

I rubbed my chest. "I dove after it."

Again, I thought I caught the palest twinkle in her cool brown eyes before she signaled me to follow. "I trust you will have no need of diving with my weaver."

I swallowed a groan. Weaving, sewing, and embroidering were not my strong suit. But I was determined to do better. This time, I would not disappoint my mistress.

The weaver, Haggith, had the responsibility not only for weaving fabric, but also for sewing new tunics, repairing old garments, embroidery, and ornamentation for the whole family. She spoke Aramaic with the distinctive Hebrew accent that tinged my father's and mother's speech.

It dawned on me that most of the master's servants were from our country. Some, like the cook, out of religious necessity; others, no doubt like me, here because of an act of kindness. Who knew how many of us they had saved from starvation or prevented from falling into the hands of cruel overseers.

"Do you have experience?" Haggith asked, lifting her head

from the vermilion tunic that lay before her on the sheet she had spread over the carpet. Expertly, her fingers gathered the loose, delicate threads fringing the hem and tied them in exactly equal segments.

I bit my cheeks. “Not so you would notice. I am willing to learn.”

“Let’s see what you can do.” She handed me a man’s tunic with a tear near the hem. “Can you mend that?”

I took the ivory needle she offered me and did my best to bring the tear together with tiny stitches. The fabric bunched as I pulled the thread. Looking over my shoulder, Haggith shook her head. “Don’t pull so tight.”

I loosened the thread with the next few stitches, and the fabric gaped. “Not so loose!” the weaver snapped and took the tunic from me.

“Let’s begin with something simpler.” She laid a handkerchief on the sheet next to the vermilion dress. “Hem that. Keep it spread on the sheet so you can see what you are doing.”

I nodded. Placing my fingers where she had shown me, I began to take tiny stitches, pretending to wield a stylus on wet clay. In truth, writing Akkadian was much more complicated than taking even stitches. It required a delicate touch, rendered in syllables rather than with an alphabet like my mother tongue. I told myself anyone who could write the complex Babylonian symbols could certainly hem a simple kerchief.

Bending low over the square of gray linen, I took tiny stitches and kept a close eye on the gauge of my thread. I left the kerchief flat on the sheet to ensure the fabric did not grow bunched and sewed with more patience than I had ever shown my mother at home.

“Finished?” Haggith asked.

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I leaned away so she could examine my handiwork. She frowned and tried to pick up the kerchief. The sheet came up with it. I had sewn the seam all the way through to the sheet. I might have been given another chance if the red dress had not also grown trapped by my stitches, which had picked up a few of the delicate strands of the fringe.

After that, Haggith consigned me to a corner of the chamber as far away from her as possible. Giving me a hank of freshly dyed yarn, she ordered me to wind it into a neat ball.

“My mother usually assigns me the same task,” I said morosely, fingers twining the yarn round and round. The ball was finished by the time the mistress came to ask after my progress.

Once again, I followed her down the long corridor of the main house. I did not dare ask if she intended to send me home. She came to a stop before Lord Daniel’s chamber and after a brief knock entered with me in tow.

Daniel lifted his head from his work and gave her a slow smile. “Mahlah! Is it dinnertime already?”

“Not quite.” She drew me forward. “I am returning this one to you. I have tried everything under my purview and found no fit. See if you can do something with her.”

“I?” Daniel seemed lost for words.

Mistress Mahlah did not smile, exactly. But her eyes danced. “You, my lord. I will leave you to it.” And promptly, she turned on her heel and left the chamber, leaving me standing like a tent pole in the middle of the room.

Daniel stared at me for a moment. Then, waving a hand, he motioned me to sit before returning his attention to what lay before him. I realized he was writing on a small tablet of wet clay no larger than the palm of his hand. Halfway through the first line, the nib of his stylus snapped.

“Not again!” he murmured. Pulling forward an alabaster cup full of reeds, he searched for a fresh stylus. Finding them all in disrepair, he expelled a long sigh before retrieving a short knife from the cup.

Gingerly, I came to my feet. “My lord? May I sharpen that nib for you?”

He looked up as if he had forgotten my existence. “I can repair your stylus,” I said. “My grandfather taught me.”

Daniel studied me for a moment. Without a word, he extended the broken stylus to me. He hesitated a little before handing me the knife as well. “You aren’t going to cut off your finger, are you?”

In answer, I took the broken stylus and examined it in the light of the lamp. “The reed is poor quality. It keeps breaking because its walls are too thin and cannot bear the pressure of your hand.” I pointed toward the middle. “If I cut it down to here, will you still be able to wield it comfortably? The reed walls thicken here.”

Master Daniel nodded. I pulled the clay tile sitting on the corner of his table toward me and laid the reed’s broken tip on it. Taking a firm hold of the stylus, I made a clean, diagonal cut across the top. Satisfied with the result, I made a few quick slashes, until the reed had the right contours at the tip, perfect for creating the wedge-shaped symbols of Akkadian.

The wet clay of the tablet had been marred when the nib had broken. I pointed to the damaged clay. “Would you like me to repair the tablet as well, my lord?”

Daniel pushed it toward me without comment. I dipped the tip of the stylus into the cup of water resting near the master’s hand and carefully applied the wet, polished curve to the surface of the clay, smoothing it out with a few swift strokes.

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“Will that serve?” I asked, washing the clay from the nib before passing the stylus to him.

He examined the freshly cut stylus. “Admirably. My thanks.” Without comment, he returned to his writing, dipping the tip in water and wiping off excess clay on the rag he kept for that purpose. He had not dismissed me, so I sat on the carpet and waited in silence. When he finished, he pushed the tablet aside and turned his attention to me.

“It seems you know your writing implements.” he said. “The stylus worked well.”

I scrambled to my feet. “I saw a sturdy patch of reeds by the river earlier this morning. I didn’t have a chance to examine them closely, but I suspect they would yield at least a dozen fine styli. Would you like me to fetch them in the morning? I could sharpen them, ready for your use.”

Daniel frowned. “You can’t go alone. I will send one of our men with you.”

I could have clapped. His consent meant I wasn’t being sent home. Tonight, anyway. “Thank you, master.”

He hesitated. “Can you read and write?”

“Yes, lord. Though my Aramaic is better than my Akkadian.”

“Everyone’s Aramaic is better than their Akkadian,” he said dryly, making me laugh.

Most people in Babylon spoke Aramaic, but the language of the court, and therefore of scribes, remained Akkadian, the archaic tongue belonging to ancient Babylonians and Assyrians. Aramaic was a simpler language to write, because like Hebrew, it had an alphabet, whereas Akkadian used six hundred syllabic symbols, requiring the memorization of a dizzying array of combinations.

“How do you know so much? Most women cannot read, let alone sharpen a stylus.”

“My grandfather was a royal scribe in Judah.” I smiled. “He is the talented one in the family. But he contracted the shaking disease and can no longer use his skills. I am fortunate that he passed some of his knowledge to me.”

“Has he not trained any of your brothers?”

“They were too old and set in their ways before he had time to teach them.” I shrugged. “He trained my father. But Father’s fluency in Akkadian is limited, so he serves as an assistant to a senior scribe.” In Babylonia, a well-trained scribe could grow wealthy working for one of the temples or the palace. An assistant scribe only scraped by.

Daniel pointed to the chair facing him across the table, and I lowered myself to the edge of the cushioned seat. He plunked something before me. I swallowed when I realized what it was.

A wooden tablet, covered with soft wax—the kind scribes used for writing a rough draft. On top, he laid a bronze stylus. “Write,” he commanded.

I drew the tablet toward me and picked up the stylus, holding it at the ready. “My lord.”

He began dictating Akkadian words in quick succession, faster than I could inscribe on the wax, so that I had to retain the memory of each in order to write all the words in the sequence he had spoken. *Eat. Drink. Earth. Heaven. Joy. Plough. Pig.*

I realized quickly why he had chosen this seemingly random list for his dictation. The word for *eat* required a combination of the symbols for *mouth* and *food*, a rather fiddly grouping of lines and triangles. The word for *drink* was very similar and could easily be mistaken for the first. The word for *pig* required sixteen different symbols. He was testing my dexterity as well as my knowledge.

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He reached for the tablet when I finished and glanced at my handiwork. “No mistakes. And legible, which is no mean feat.”

From the wooden case behind him, he fetched a small roll of papyrus along with a brush and a pot of black ink. “Now, let us test your Aramaic.”

The hot, arid conditions of Babylon were not kind to papyrus. The clay from which the city’s skeleton had risen, on the other hand, had proven the perfect foil for the climate of the valley lying between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. That was one of the main reasons for the popularity of clay tablets.

My grandfather had taught me how to write Aramaic on papyrus. But in Babylonia, papyrus was relegated to the drab business of everyday life, not used for important documents. I was surprised that Daniel wished to test my knowledge of it.

“Ready?”

“Yes, master.”

He began to dictate, his Aramaic crisp and cultivated. This time, I kept up with him more easily, though he dictated a rather complicated passage concerning astronomy. I finished the last word with a flourish and handed the papyrus back to him.

He raised a dark brow. “Neat hand.”

Desperate to prove myself truly useful so that he would not send me back home, I cleared my throat and said, “Your ink is low. Would you like me to make some?”

He looked up. “You know how to make ink, too?”

I nodded. “Red and black.”

“You’re quite accomplished for fourteen.”

I beamed. “My grandfather trained me well.”

Daniel leaned back in his chair. “It seems my wife could not find a good fit for you in the household.”

I gulped. “I can try harder. If you give me another chance . . .”

Daniel held up a palm. “I have several Babylonian scribes who work for me at the palace. But I rarely invite them to my home. This is my place of rest. My personal refuge. Having palace officials underfoot does not suit me. Which means I have no one to help me when I work here.” He leaned forward. “How would you like to work for *me*, Keren? It would require long hours of training as well as service.”

I jumped to my feet and almost shouted *hallelujah*. “I would like that very much!” I cried. In my excitement, I slapped my hand on the table, right where the wax tablet lay. My index finger went through the soft wax. I looked down and saw that in my eagerness, I had obliterated the word *joy*.

Daniel rose, grasping a walking stick. Most Babylonian noblemen carried one, with jewel-embellished heads and carvings that symbolized power, like lion heads or flying eagles. Daniel’s had been made simply, devoid of precious stones, the head carved in the likeness of a deer.

Seeing me looking at it, he smiled faintly. “*The Sovereign Lord is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights.*”

“The prophet Habakkuk?” I guessed.

“Indeed. Do you understand it?”

“No, my lord.”

“You will.” He tipped that carved deer at me, indicating that I should to follow.

“I have no time to train you,” he explained as he walked down the hallway with me shadowing his heels. “And clever as you are, you shall need a great deal more tuition. I have a solution to that problem. My two sons and their friend receive private tutoring at the tablet house we have set up for them.”

Babylonians used the term *tablet house* in reference to public

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schools that served the sons of the nobility. There, wealthy young men learned literacy as well as incantations, prayers, astronomy, and numeracy. Daniel had set up a private one in his own home.

“In the mornings,” he said casually, “you will work for me. In the afternoons, you will attend their classes.”

“*Their* classes?” I squeaked, trying to imagine myself fitting in with three aristocratic boys. “But . . .” Babylonians did not train their women formally, save for a princess or two, destined to become priestesses at some high temple. “I mean to say, my lord, I am not a man!”

Daniel waved a dismissive hand. “The God who called Deborah to be a judge can surely provide for a girl in a tablet house.” He came to a sudden stop and waved his stick at me. “Why do you think I have a deer carved on my cane?”

“To remind you of that verse every time you hold it.”

“To remind me of that *promise* every time I hold it. I am leading you to one of those impossible places that life sometimes demands of you. A hard, precipitous path you have to ascend. A tablet house for a Jewish girl.

“The question is, will you let God give you the strength to climb this mountain? Will you trust him to give you feet like those of the deer?”

Before I could respond, he pulled a door open and greeted the thin man standing at the front of a long chamber.

“Forgive my intrusion, Azarel. This is Keren. She will be working for me in the mornings and joining your tablet house in the afternoons.” The master delivered this truncated introduction without so much as a blink, before leaving me to my fate.

My throat constricted as the teacher turned to me. I tried

to stand straight and look like I belonged. To give him his due, Azarel's meek face betrayed no annoyance. If he felt any qualm at having to instruct a young woman, he did not show it.

Daniel's eldest son, Johanan, had his mother's good looks and enigmatic face. His younger brother, Abel, scrutinized me openly, not bothering to hide his curiosity. But his smile was friendly when Azarel introduced me.

Their friend Jared, lounging comfortably next to Johanan, looked the youngest of the group. I guessed him to be shorter than me by a head, and boyishly slim, with a face as smooth as an egg. I slipped onto the bench behind him, thinking him to be the safest occupant.

He turned to face me fully. "What kind of girl attends a tablet house?"

My eyes widened at this unexpected challenge before I even had time to settle. "My kind."

Azarel banged the tips of his fingers on the edge of his desk. "Attention, please." I ignored Jared's stare and glued my eyes to the teacher. Azarel had drawn the outline of an irregular piece of land on a tablet and was showing us how to calculate the yield of the apple trees growing upon it.

"Now, here is another piece of land bearing apple trees," the teacher said, giving us various measurements. "Who can calculate the land area and the yield of its fruit?"

"Ask the girl to do it, Principal Azarel," Jared said, turning his impish grin on me. "Let's see if she can keep up."

The scribe nodded slowly. He handed me a wooden practice tablet with clean wax. "Do you think you can try?"

"Yes, Teacher." My desire to prove myself to my classmates, who had by now turned fully in their seats to study me with undisguised interest, added speed to my calculations.

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Principal Azarel examined my work over my shoulder. “Excellent work, Keren. Well done.” From a basket in the corner of the room he fetched an apple, red enough to tempt a water buffalo. “Here is your prize. Since the others watched you as you worked, you can now take a well-earned rest while they figure out the problem for themselves.”

I feared my smile lacked humility. I took a great bite of my apple, taunting Jared as I chewed with relish. He grinned, undeterred by my complacent expression, and turned to his tablet. The three boys were obviously competent, for in no time at all, they arrived at the correct answer.

By the end of the afternoon, we all had the measure of each other. Accustomed to brothers and sisters who had more love for the outdoors than the studious work of scribes, I found the competence of my new companions a refreshing challenge.

When the teacher left for the day, Johanan addressed the others. “Ruben is not coming today. We’re short one man for sword practice.”

“I can help,” I said.

Johanan raised a brow. “You have proven you have a supple mind when it comes to numeracy, girl. Be content. Leave swordplay to us.”

I shrugged. “I only wanted to lend a hand. My brothers taught me the rudiments since there are three of them and they are permanently short of a fourth.”

Johanan came to his feet. In spite of my height, he towered over me. His younger brother, Abel, stood up next to him, topping him by two fingers. “Still think you can ply your sword against us?” Johanan said.

“You? Maybe not. But I can practice against him.” I pointed my chin at Jared.

The boy rose slowly. His head only reached my chest. “You can try.”

I nodded. “I can try.” My brows furrowed in thought. “How old are you, anyway?” I did not want to press him too hard if he turned out to be younger than twelve.

“Sixteen.”

I blinked. His amber eyes had a fierce cast to them, as if daring me to tease him about the lag in his body’s growth. I had no desire to. Having looked like a tree trunk for a whole year when other girls my age had turned all soft and cushiony had taught me many a worthy lesson in humility.

“I’m fourteen,” I said. “I hope to live to see fifteen. So don’t wield your sword too savagely at me.”

Jared flashed a brilliant smile. “I will show you mercy.”

And a good thing he did. For Jared proved a wily opponent, as ferocious as he was small. Though nature had thus far withheld from him the advantages of manhood, he made up for his lack of stature and muscle with speed, employing a swift and sly strategy the likes of which I had never seen.

The third time my wooden sword went flying into the air, with the dull edge of Jared’s sword at my throat, I held up my hands in good-natured surrender. “I see I need a lot of practice,” I said, massaging my bruised hand.

Jared examined my sword. “This hilt is not a good fit for your fist. You see?” He pointed to the rounded grip. “The wood is too thick. I have an old one at home that will fit you better. I will bring it for you.”

He kept his promise. The next day he showed up with a practice weapon that fit my small hand perfectly and spent a few moments demonstrating several new maneuvers. Before leaving for home, he taught me how to wrap my hand with

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scraps of fabric to protect it from the worst of the blisters that had started to form. Watching him ride away on his well-tended horse that afternoon, I had a startling realization.

God had sent me a friend to accompany me on my high places.



PART ONE

Babylon



CHAPTER ONE

*Guard your heart above all else,
for it determines the course of your life.*

Proverbs 4:23, NLT

Three Years Later

The Thirty-Second Year of King Nebuchadnezzar's Reign

I awoke before sunrise per my custom, for my master was an early riser and on his knees by the windows of his upper chamber, already in prayer, by dawn. It took no more than a few moments to fold my sheets and blanket, roll up my pallet, and tuck everything in a chest, which sat in a corner of Lord Daniel's workroom. Like the other servants in the house, I did not have my own chamber. But I fared better than most since I had the privilege of sleeping in my master's airy room and did not have to share it with a snoring mate.

Sorting through the day's tablets, I placed them in order upon Daniel's desk. He had dictated several letters the previous day, and I sat at my chair to make him additional copies for his

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personal records. By the lunch hour, when he arrived from the palace, I had completed my tasks.

Daniel always tried to eat at home. On the occasions when sharing the king's table became unavoidable, he had made arrangements to be served vegetables, grain, and water only, lest he break the Law of the Lord. My master ruled *in* Babylon, a world utterly counter to our faith. But he was not a man *of* Babylon.

He examined my work, made a few minor corrections, and dismissed me for the day. Making my way to the kitchen, I knocked on the open door.

"Shalom, Manasseh!" I called and dropped the list I had prepared for him on the counter.

Without comment, he swept up the neat roll of papyrus and placed it in a pocket before shoving a clay plate toward me. The smell of warm barley bread and chickpeas spiced with cumin, coriander, and leek made my belly rumble with hunger. Manasseh stretched a hand and added a pale-blue, hard-boiled duck egg to the plate.

I grinned. "You spoil me." We had long since made up our differences. Seeing that the master trusted me with his own sensitive documents, Manasseh had learned to seek my help with his lists and expenditures. It was an arrangement the mistress had welcomed with relief.

"You're still too skinny," he said.

I pushed the tail of my bronze stylus into his belly. "We can't all be so well-cushioned."

"Go on with you." He threw a green fig at me, which I managed to catch in midair. Stuffing the fruit wholesale, peel and all, into my mouth, I made my way to the opposite side of the courtyard. Sitting in a corner, I made quick work of Manasseh's delicious repast, dipping the last of the warm bread into the

aromatic chickpeas. I looked at the angle of the sun and sighed. I would be late for Azarel's class if I did not hurry.

For three years, every afternoon I had attended the tablet house alongside Johanan, Abel, and Jared. But Jared and Johanan rarely attended our classes anymore, having both secured important positions in the city several months earlier. Only upon rare occasions, when their work allowed, did the two friends join us for an hour or two of learning.

My belly did an odd little flip when I saw Jared occupying his old seat. Quietly, I slipped into my sun-brightened bench behind him.

"You have a piece of lettuce hanging between your teeth," he whispered, turning toward me. "Right here." He pointed at his front tooth and shook his head as if in despair, amber eyes full of laughter.

I did not fall for the bait. I had eaten no lettuce. Besides, teasing me was Jared's favorite pastime. Since the first day when I had walked through the door of the tablet house and occupied the same seat, I had received an endless supply of good-natured harassment.

I stared at the broad shoulders and tall torso that blocked half the room in front of me and smiled. Jared looked nothing like the runt of a boy I had first met. Sometime that year, he had started to shoot up with the swiftness of an arrow. Over the months, his short, willowy stature had caught up to his age, growing enough height and muscle to now interrupt my view of Principal Azarel as I sat behind him.

I flipped a coil of his fashionably long hair. "Move your pretty curls. You're in my way."

He shook his hair and shifted his bulk so that he blocked me worse than before. "Not my fault you're a shrimp."

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A blatant lie. I was still tall for a woman, though I had finally received those feminine blessings which had eluded me for so long. And while I could not claim to be quite as blessed as some, I had learned to be grateful for what I did have.

Johanán, sitting on the other side of Jared's bench, swiveled his head and hushed us. I offered him a dazzling view of the full set of my teeth and he rolled his eyes. Having recently celebrated his betrothal, he considered himself too grown-up for our juvenile teasing.

The one thing that drew Johanán back to the tablet house in spite of his newfound solemnity was his fondness for languages, and a talent for them that rivaled mine. Whenever Principal Azarel offered a class on advanced Sumerian or Akkadian, Johanán tried to make an appearance.

Since he and Jared had been inseparable from childhood, Jared always came along, though he preferred mathematics to technical vocabulary. Jared's loyalty anchored him to his bench when he would rather have spent his rare hour off riding or engaged in an exciting hunt somewhere in the wilderness.

One thing that their age and elevated status had not changed was their weekly weapons practice. "Bow and arrow," Johanán said in his usual pithy manner when our lesson on classic Sumerian concluded.

"You free?" Jared pointed his chin at me.

"I am."

"Let's start with swords, then."

I smiled my thanks. In spite of no lack of enthusiasm on my part, I had never mastered the bow and arrow. Its composite formation of glued wood, bone, and sinew made its tensile strength too much for my arms. I could pull the string. But my aim betrayed me. Fortunately, my companions still

welcomed me for basic sword practice, where I could prove useful in helping them maintain form and speed. But they had outgrown and outmatched me long ago in most other weaponry.

“How is your brother?” I asked. Jared’s younger brother, Joseph, had turned seven a few weeks ago. I had seldom seen a more doting brother than Jared. It was as if he intended to make up for the mother the child had lost, and the father who paid him little attention.

Jared smiled. “Joseph is growing like a weed. He is definitely taller than I was at his age.”

“You have more than made up for it.”

“Yes. But it took me a year to grow accustomed to my fast-changing size and stop knocking into things.”

I laughed. “We were all relieved when you ceased to break everything in your path.”

Jared tied his hair back with a strip of hide, his attention on the cluster of shields hanging from the wall. “I can still break things.” He threw me a look of mock threat.

I ran my finger along the shaft of an iron-tipped spear. “You can try.” I grasped the slender wooden sword I always used just as he reached for a heavy, round shield. For a moment, our arms connected from shoulder to elbow. A jolt of reaction shot through me. I jumped away, feeling breathless and hot.

Jared inhaled sharply. His lips tightened for a moment. “It’s too cold for that tunic. You need a shawl.” Turning, he flung a sword to Johanan. “You, with me.”

I felt my cheeks flame. I knew my tunic had grown ragged and thin, its short sleeves reduced to mere flaps over the curves of my shoulders. I could neither afford a better one nor purchase a shawl. When my mistress had given me one of hers, I

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had gifted it to my mother, whose garments were even more frayed than mine.

Abel twirled his sword in my face, gesturing me forward with a wave. He had donned armor not because he felt afraid of the nicks and bruises I might give him, but because he needed to grow accustomed to the added weight of the hammered metal. I found myself too distracted to give Abel much challenge, my eyes following Jared as he thrust and parried against Johanan.

If I could kick myself, I would. For months I had been gazing at that man like a motherless puppy, unable to stop myself. He made my heart do odd things in my chest. Blood rushed to my face at the strangest moments. For three years, he had been my friend. A companion for my soul. Then without warning, something had shifted, and I could not press it back to the way it had been.

I suspected his absence from my life had altered the way I saw him. When he had been a regular part of my days, I barely spared him a thought. Now that he was gone, I had learned to long for him.

In spite of myself, I turned my gaze to Jared again, and for a tiny moment our eyes caught and held. My mouth turned dry. Jared flushed. Something whacked into my ribs.

“Ahh!” I doubled over, holding my side.

“Your mind is wandering.” Abel shrugged. “That should have been an easy block.”

I rubbed my side. “I am done for the day.”

“So am I,” Jared said, replacing his sword neatly in its slot against the wall.

“A few quick shots for target practice, before we return to work?” Johanan selected a bow and grabbed a quiver of arrows.

Jared nodded. The two of them had been appointed to the

position of canal supervisors, an important post for men so young. The system of canals that irrigated the city of Babylon and its surrounding farmlands kept the capital alive. But the waterways tended to become clogged with rushes and water weeds and mineral deposits, leading to disastrous flooding. Even the Euphrates, which divided the city of Babylon into two, silted up regularly, withholding its bounty from the thirsty city. Officials such as Johanan and Jared were appointed to supervise the waterways, protecting the residents from terrible floods.

I lingered to watch them practice with their bows, all three deadly accurate with each shot in the relatively short distance that the garden allowed, though I had seen Jared maintain perfect aim from a distance five times as long.

As he was leaving, he hesitated in front of me. His mouth opened and closed. His jaw tightened, emitting no sound. He blew out a long breath and left without a word. At times like this, I wondered if he had become as addled as me.

Then I remembered who Jared was. Son of the aristocracy, his father a minor prince of Judah, with the blood of kings in his veins. He had no room in his life for a girl like me, barely above a slave, and that by Daniel's grace. The miracle was that he had offered me friendship. Anything else belonged to the realm of dreams.

Guard your heart above all else, Lord Daniel had drilled into me from the first week of my employment. Good advice for those who could manage it. Somewhere, I had lost my way to those wise words.