

TESSA  
AFSHAR

"An engrossing,  
achingly beautiful tale."

TOSCA LEE

— *USA* —

New York Times  
bestselling author

*a novel*

JEWEL

*of the*

NILE

# PRAISE FOR TESSA AFSHAR



## *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*

*Jewel of the Nile*



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*For Ariana:*

*Bright, funny, gorgeous, persevering.*

*My precious niece,*

*you will always be a jewel in my heart.*



*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;*

*I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

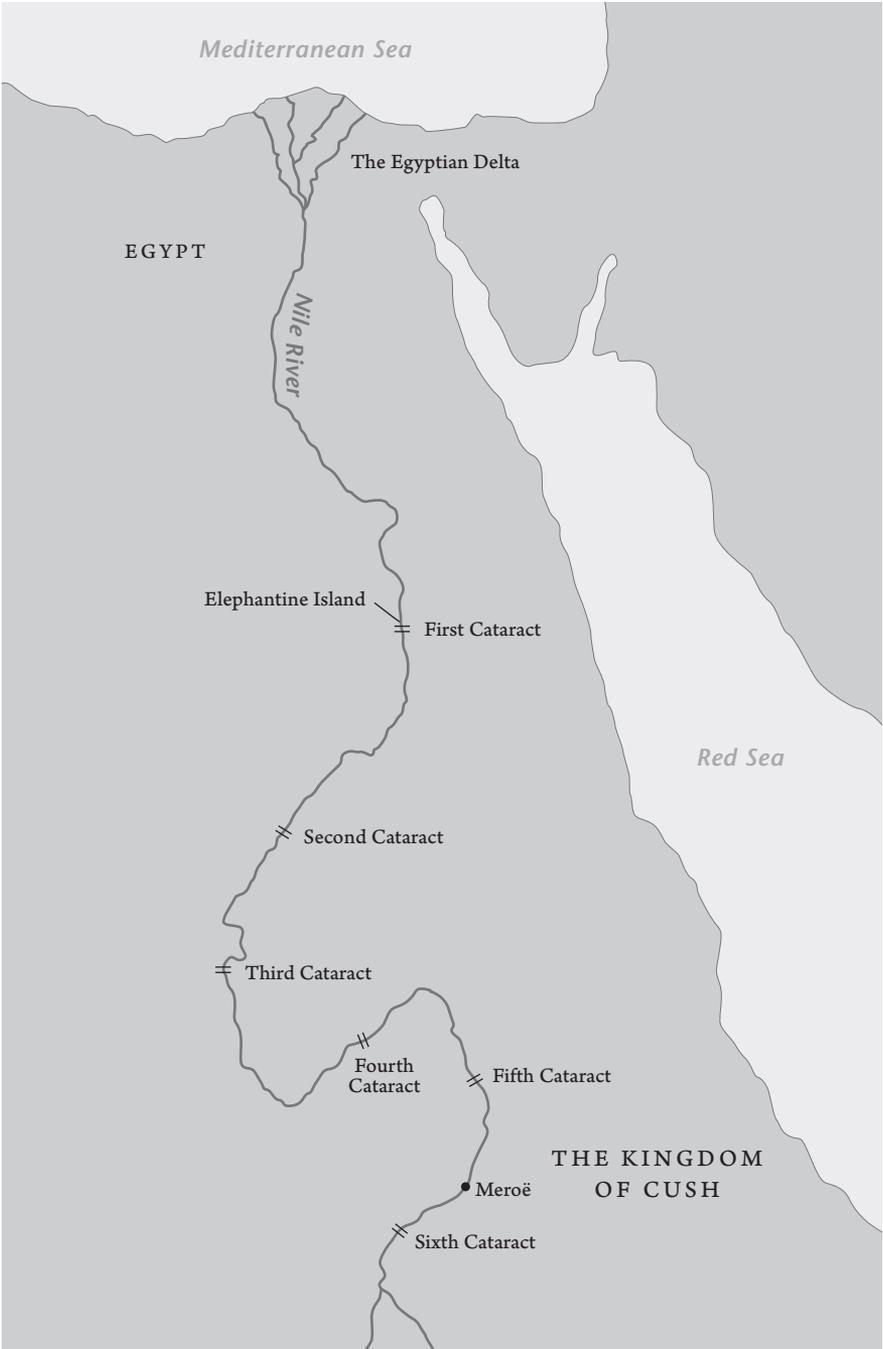
*Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,*

*Which must be curbed with bit and bridle.*

PSALM 32:8-9

THE WORLD OF JEWEL OF THE NILE







# PROLOGUE



*Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God.*

PSALM 68:31

AD 31

He took one last aching look outside the crumbling window; the Nile was molten gold in the light of the rising sun, a sparkling coil winding its way into the horizon. Forcing himself to turn away, he came to kneel by the pallet where his bride lay sleeping. To have this woman, he would have to give up the lush beauty of his land, give up his family and heritage. He smiled. She was worth all the loss. For his sake, she had given up as much and more.

“Time to wake up, love.”

She groaned something incoherent, more asleep than awake.

“Come now, lazy. Open those enchanting sea-green eyes. We can’t linger here. They will have discovered our absence by now.”

He spoke in a light tone, making sure none of his mounting anxiety leaked into his voice. Still, the reminder of their vulnerability was enough to banish the last vestiges of her sleep. She snapped her eyes open and sat up in one smooth motion, holding the sheet to her throat. "How long have we been here?"

"Too long." He motioned to the window. "The sun is rising."

She turned to place a hand on his cheek. "I love you, Husband."

For an infinitesimal moment, time stood still, fears banished, their pursuers vanished, and it was just the two of them in the whole expanse of this world. Her complexion so impossibly fair resting against his dark skin, a weaving of two beautiful threads into one exotic tapestry. His chest welled up with joy and he leaned to kiss her softly. It seemed astonishing that she was his, truly and irrevocably his.

"I love you, Gemina." He said the words in Latin, the language of her birth, the language of her heart. And then broke the spell by pulling away to grab his cloak. They could not afford to remain at the dilapidated inn for another moment.

"I will settle our account with the innkeeper while you dress," he said, already pulling open the door.

He paid the surly landlord an extra coin, a fat silver one that made the bloodshot eyes widen. "For your discretion," he said.

Unsmiling, the man pocketed the coins in a dirty purse and went to fetch their camels.

He turned to look into the horizon. His chest tightened at the sight of a band of riders, approaching fast from the south.

Shading his eyes against the piercing sun, he squinted for a better view. Seven, he counted. No, eight. The camels were moving in long, smooth strides, their hooves spraying dust as they pounded the track.

His throat turned dry. They could be traders, he told himself. Merchants. Travelers making their way to Egypt. A dozen different possibilities, none of them menacing. Then he saw the flash of metal strapped to the riders' sides. Swords. He raced up the stairs that led to their room. Gemina was already exiting the chamber. Without a word, he grabbed her hand and pulled her behind him down the stairs.

"What?" she asked, breathless.

"Riders."

"How far?"

"At the rate they are traveling, not far enough. They'll be here soon."

They came to a stop at the edge of the inn's back wall where they could not be spotted from the road. The innkeeper had brought out the camels from their pen but had not bothered to saddle them in spite of his instructions.

He should have fetched the camels sooner, he thought, berating himself for a fool as he started to saddle the first beast.

Their landlord made no move to help. Instead, striding to the middle of the dirt road, he gazed into the distance. Spotting the approaching riders, he shook his head and spat into the dirt. "I knew when I clapped my eyes on you that you would bring trouble to my door."

Ignoring the innkeeper, he cinched the first saddle. He plucked a rough woolen cape out of a saddlebag and threw it to Gemina, hurriedly donning a similar garment himself.

“Pull it up over your hair,” he instructed. Garbed in the fraying cotton, from the back at least, they should look like two old nomads.

His heart sank as he saddled the second camel, noting the dirt that still clung to its haunches. Clearly, the innkeeper had not bothered to rub down the beast. He threw the man a narrowed look and received a sneer in return. There was no time for an altercation. He shoved away his irritation and completed the task before him with agile fingers. He could only hope that the innkeeper had fed and watered the animals. Riding dirty camels was one thing. But riding hungry, thirsting beasts when pursued by fast, armed men . . . Sweat drenched his back in the cool morning air.

He should have seen to the camels himself. Instead, drunk on love, he had retired inside with his bride, leaving the work to a sullen stranger.

He pulled on the camel’s neck to make it kneel. “Come,” he said to Gemina. She approached timidly, unused to the dromedary. Encircling her waist with his hands, he lifted her into the saddle.

“We’ll be traveling fast. Hold tight.”

She nodded, looking pale. He gave her a reassuring smile before climbing his own beast. Using his stick, he prodded the camels into a trot, before urging them to gallop. The beasts lengthened their strides, their hard humps making for an uncomfortable trek. A fast camel ride felt nothing like the thrill of a horse race. It made your teeth rattle and your brain jar.

He cut across the rough track and made for the pale green river. The queen’s men who shadowed them would not anticipate them crossing the Nile. Their pursuers would expect him

to push north for the safety of Egypt. Or east for the traders who could help them navigate the desert in order to reach the lands beyond the Red Sea. He hoped that the nomads' cloaks they had donned along with their unexpected heading might fool the guards into giving up the chase. Might convince them that they were not the two lovesick runaways who had braved a queen's wrath to be together. He pushed the camels harder toward the river. The riders were gaining behind them.

As they drew close to the banks of the river, three of the riders peeled away from the rest and veered behind them. Three was better than eight. Three, he might be able to deal with, even though they were the Kandake's own guards. At least she hadn't sent Roman centurions after them.

He urged the camels on, noticing that they were already waning in speed. No matter. They did not have far to go. He led them to a deserted spot in the river's verdant shore and brought the camels to a stop. Hastily, he helped Gemina down and grabbed one of the saddlebags, leaving the other on the camel. He spared a look over his shoulder.

His breath hitched when, in the distance, he saw the other five riders swerve from the inn and follow in their wake. They must have spoken to the landlord. His silver had failed to buy the man's silence.

All his hopes for a stealthy getaway shattered in one crashing heap.

"To the boat!" he cried.

"But my clothes are in the other bag."

"No time, Gemina. Run!"

He grabbed her hand, helping her over the rushes and down the embankment. Water squished into his leather sandals and

over his ankles. He wasted precious moments uncovering the skiff, which he had hidden under large palm fronds. Helping Gemina inside, he shoved the boat into deeper water and leapt in behind her.

“Stop!” a voice roared too close. “Stop or die!”

He grabbed the oars from the bottom of the boat and began pulling with all his strength. A hissing sound whistled by his ear, then another.

“Gods! They are shooting arrows at us!” Gemina gasped.

He shoved her head with one hand until she lay facedown on the papyrus reeds, his other still pulling frantically at the oar. The skiff was too modest to have a cabin where he could hide her. Cush was famed for its swift acacia-wood barges, but for this trip he had needed secrecy, not luxury, and had settled on a simple Egyptian fishing skiff.

“Keep down,” he said as another iron-tipped arrow flew by his head. He was fairly certain the Kandake’s soldiers were not aiming to kill them. Certainly not Gemina, anyway. He pulled harder on the oars, propelling the little boat against the drag of the wind that wanted to drive them south.

He might have lost the advantage of secrecy. But he still had a few winning tricks up his sleeve. It would take time for the guards to secure a boat with which to pursue them. He had purposely hidden his skiff far from any fishing villages where boats could be acquired with ease. And on the other side of the river, he had arranged for his own Libyan guide, a half nomad who knew all the hidden alleyways that would bring them into Egypt undetected.

The Nile spread wide here, and it cost him a long fight against the currents to get to the middle of the river. But it

was far enough to keep them out of range of the arrows. A quick glance over his shoulder showed eight men standing on the shores of the east bank, staring after him, bows and arrows hanging uselessly from their limp arms. His chest expanded with the joy of victory.

“They have given up,” he told Gemina, grinning. “We are safe.”

But the relief proved short-lived.

He glanced back again, brows furrowing. Why were the guards so still? They should be scrambling to find a boat. They should be in desperate pursuit. The Kandake did not put up with failure. Why tarry passively by the river? Were they hoping he would simply drown? A fist twisted inside his stomach. Something smelled fishier than the Nile. Frantically, his eyes skimmed over the papyrus reeds of the little skiff. Had they found his boat beforehand and damaged it? It seemed sound enough. Surely, if they had punctured a hole somewhere, the water would have bubbled up by now?

He examined the western shoreline, thick with date palms and vegetation, and blew out a relieved sigh when he spotted a familiar thin figure.

“He is here,” he told Gemina and she turned.

The nomad waved at them, his arm an enthusiastic banner pumping in the sky.

Gemina smiled. “He seems friendly.”

“His mother was a nomad. They like Cushites.”

He pushed away the knot of worry that twisted and turned in his gut. They were almost free. Before the skiff hit the bank, he jumped out, water dancing at his thighs, black mud

sucking at his feet. The nomad came to his aid, and together, they pulled the boat onto the shore.

“I see you made it,” the thin man said, his smile revealing two rows of dazzling white teeth.

“Barely,” he said, pointing to the row of guards, still standing immobile on the opposite shore.

“What are they doing? Making sure you don’t return?”

“I suppose.” He helped Gemina out and shouldered the heavy saddlebag containing all their worldly goods.

“Pretty skiff,” the nomad said, pointing.

“She’s yours. We won’t be able to lug her on our backs as we travel into Egypt.”

“That’s what I was hoping you would say.” Their guide flashed another happy smile and bent to cover the boat with reeds. An odd, strangled sound escaped his lips. Without warning, the thin body pitched over and sprawled facedown into the shallows of the Nile. A long iron-tipped spear protruded from his back.

Gemina screamed.

He swerved, hand reaching for his sword. Twelve armed guards stepped forward from the shadows of the palm trees in a precise, symmetrical line. The sun glanced off their bare arms, turning flesh into ebony statuary.

A tall woman slithered through the unmoving rank, her muscular body covered in an ankle-length white gown, decorated with a pleated sash that draped across her right shoulder. Henna stained her long fingernails and hair, flashing red under the sun. On her head, she wore a metal skullcap, which supported a royal diadem.

“You did not really think you could outsmart me?” she drawled.

The manners of a lifetime transcended his shock, and he fell to his knee, arm at his breast. “Kandake.”

She took a long spear from one of the guards and shoved the sharp iron point under his chin, making him wince. Blood dripped onto his tunic.

“Don’t!” Gemina shouted, scampering toward him. One of the guards moved, his toned body a blur of motion, and captured her before she could reach him. Or the queen.

“Be silent, girl,” the Kandake growled.

Gemina struggled harder, and the guard clenched her arms, his fingers turning vicious.

He forgot about the point of the spear at his throat when he saw her skin turning red, bruising under the guard’s rough handling. With a twist of his torso, he freed himself from the queen’s weapon and leapt to Gemina’s defense.

“Leave my wife alone!” His voice sounded strange in his own ears, a lion’s roar rather than his usually soft intonation.

He managed one step, evaded two guards to take a second, almost reaching Gemina. But a wall of hard-muscled bodies met his next stride. Fists pummeled him to the ground, knees bruising his ribs until his breath became trapped in his chest and he turned dizzy. In the background, he could hear Gemina weeping hysterically.

The Kandake’s face filled the sky as she stared down at him. “*Wife*, is it?”

“We are married,” he said through swelling lips. “Nothing you can do about it now.”

“Is that so?” She gave him a narrow-eyed stare. “I can make her a widow.”

“You wouldn’t!”

She had been like an aunt to him all his life. His mother had been her closest friend. A trusted confidante in a world filled with enemies. Would she kill him because he had married without her permission? Married the daughter of a Roman official?

“You embarrassed me. I have killed men for less,” she said, as though reading his thoughts.

“Forgive me, my queen.”

She nodded to one of her men, and before he had time to take another breath, the royal guard had uncovered two barges from their hiding place in the reeds. They trussed him up like a captive slave, his ankles and elbows in iron chains, bound together behind his back so that his whole body folded painfully into itself, his calves pressed into his thighs, his feet touching his elbows. His muscles screamed in protest as two guards picked him up like a sack of grain and threw him into the barge. A greater agony seared his heart as he watched them drag Gemina into the second royal ship.

At the last moment, the queen stepped into the barge that carried him and signaled their departure. She would not want to be discovered on this side of the Nile. The Libyans had gained a strong foothold on the west shores of the river and had no love for her. If they caught her surrounded by so few men, they would treat her with no more compassion than she was treating him.

“Please, Kandake,” he begged.

Dark eyes fixed on him. She was his senior by sixteen years,

only. But the mantle of authority had added to her what years could not. She seemed at once ancient and ageless as she considered him, her lips a ruthless line.

She held up a finger. "First, she is a Roman." Another finger rose in the air. "Second, she is betrothed to some highborn Roman idiot who sits seething in my throne room at this very moment." Another finger. "Third, her father is the emperor's own official, now frothing at the mouth, flinging threats at me." Another finger. "Fourth, you sneaking little snake, you went behind my back." Another finger. "Fifth, you set a bad example for all the young men in my palace. In my kingdom." She kicked him in his exposed side, the hard point of her leather shoe making him grunt in pain. "I am running out of fingers, you fool. And I still have to deal with that blockhead father of hers."

He took a deep breath. She hadn't killed him yet. That seemed hopeful. "We should have asked your permission."

"You think so?"

"We should have asked for your help."

She gave a bitter laugh. "No, you should not. If you had dared breathe a word to me, I would have slapped you so hard, your brains would have fallen out of your skull."

"Help us now, Kandake!"

"Help you? I'd as soon squeeze the life out of you. Don't you understand? Rome is sitting at our door like a hungry lion. We barely hang by a thread, holding on to some measure of autonomy, staving them off with our rich taxes. All they need is an excuse to swallow us whole. What you did could hand them that excuse."

He squeezed his eyes shut. Once, Cush had been a

powerful nation. Seven hundred years earlier, its kings had ruled over Egypt. For a whole century, the two kingdoms had been united under the banner of Cushite monarchs. Those days were long gone now. Cush's mines and jewels as well as its wily queen had managed to hold off the sticky, acquisitive fingers of Rome from snatching them up entirely. They still had their independence, of sorts. Their riches bought them, if not the power of old, then certainly enough influence to count.

"The girl is her father's affair," the Kandake said. "But you. You are mine to deal with. And trust me when I tell you this: I will mete out a punishment you will never forget. You will learn to put your nation before your heart."

"I love this land. But I also love Gemina. I am *married* to her," he insisted.

"And how will one pathetic, hastily performed rite stand against the might of your queen and the grievance of Rome?" Again, she held him in her implacable stare. He had seen that look on her face before. The look she gave when she had made up her mind. The look that meant no power on earth would move her. The look that came before blood spilled.

Whatever kernel of hope he had held onto withered.

He turned his head painfully until he could see the other barge sailing just behind them. At least they did not seem to be mistreating Gemina. She sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, her back ramrod straight.

She would not know, yet, that she had parted from him forever.

*I love you*, he whispered soundlessly, knowing he would never say the words to her again. Knowing the Nile carried away his heart, and he could do nothing to stop it.

# CHAPTER 1



*Behold, if the river is turbulent he is not frightened.*

JOB 40:23

25 YEARS LATER

The boat glided past the famed statues of Pharaoh Amenhotep, two stone giants that had guarded the western shores of the Nile for over a thousand years. The first had been badly damaged by an earthquake, its face unrecognizable. But the second seemed to gaze upon Chariline with regal eyes, as if weighing her mettle. She gave the old pharaoh a lopsided smile. After years of Grandfather's baleful glares, Amenhotep could not intimidate her.

The vast breadth of the Nile spread before Chariline, its smoky blue waters as mysterious as the guardian statues of Memnon. She felt the rhythm of her pulse change, growing faster, harder, and a rush of heat that had nothing to do with the weather seeped beneath her skin. No matter how

many times she made this journey, traveling on the Nile never ceased to exhilarate her.

The river itself was a battlefield, its currents moving north while the wind blew south, and their vessel became the object of a tug of war between them. Chariline watched the white sail as it caught the breeze and bellowed tight, the winds proving stronger than the waves, carrying them determinedly away from Egypt.

Just as the sun was sinking, a golden orb turning the sky into flames of crimson, they came upon the island of Elephantine, a huge landmass that had once marked Egypt's most southerly border. They would dock in its modest pier and spend the night in the anchored boat.

Her aunt's pale face appeared at the door of the cabin built into the aft of the barge. "Are we stopping for the night?"

"Yes, Aunt Blandina."

Chariline helped her aunt off the boat, guiding her up the stone staircase that had been carved directly into the river as a means of measuring the water's levels. Some enterprising merchant had built Roman-style latrines in the marina. For a modest fee, Chariline and her aunt availed themselves of the facilities before returning to the narrow cabin to retire for the night. Chariline would have preferred to sleep on the deck under the bejeweled stars like most of the local passengers. But her aunt, who would have to make a full report of their journey to Grandfather, forbade what the old man would consider an indignity.

Chariline sighed and slipped into her pallet. Every year since she had turned ten, as soon as traveling by water became relatively safe after the ides of March, Chariline had traveled

from Caesarea to Cush to visit her grandparents for exactly two weeks. Fourteen days and not an hour longer. Grandfather had established those rules the first time he had sent for her. He had never wavered from them in the ensuing years.

Chariline had not wanted to change those rules either. Although she loved Cush and its capital city of Meroë, the company of her grandparents strained her nerves after the second hour. By the end of the second week, she felt as ready to take her leave as they were to be rid of her.

Her grandfather, a midranking civil official acting as an agent of Rome, had been assigned to Cush over twenty-five years ago. He had expected to rise in his career. Expected Cush to be a stepping stone to greater things. Instead, his career had stalled, and rather than a modest beginning, Cush had proven a dead end. He had become the one permanent fixture of Rome in a small kingdom. Men with greater potential and influence were sent to better posts in Egypt.

Whether his disappointment had caused Grandfather to become a sour man or his disposition had been the reason he had never risen high, she could not tell. She had tried to understand the man from the day she met him—and never succeeded.

Taking one last longing look at the indigo sky through the narrow window, Chariline closed her eyes with a sigh and fell asleep to the enthusiastic music of frogs.

The gentle sway of the boat as it raised anchor just before sunrise woke her. Careful not to disturb Aunt Blandina, she slid silently out of bed and made her way onto the deck. Even this early in the day, the wide, swirling waters of the Nile were host to a plethora of tiny and large vessels. Their

captains, familiar with the deceptive eddies and sandbanks hiding under the river's seemingly hospitable waters, guided their vessels with watchful expertise.

An hour later they came upon the First Cataract in the river. The cataracts, unnavigable sections of the Nile where boulders littered the surface of the river's bed, could not be crossed except during summer's flood season. The passengers had to disembark and walk on foot, while men carried the barge on the soggy banks with the help of two bony oxen.

After the boat resumed its journey south, a boy with jet skin and a beaming white smile approached Chariline. She recognized him as one of the hired hands on the boat. He had helped carry their baggage onboard and ran errands for the passengers. Thin, naked torso glistening in the sun, he crouched down, dropping twelve smooth stones between them. With a hand, he gestured an invitation. Chariline grinned back and, glancing over to ensure her aunt remained safely ensconced in the cabin, squatted to face the boy.

She had seen him play the stones with a handful of other passengers, his fingers nimble and lightning fast. He would beat her, she knew. And although, in general, she had an aversion to losing, she would not mind it this time. Losing meant she could give the boy a coin without violating his pride. A coin that would help feed him for a day or two.

"Your name?" she asked in Meroitic.

The boy's grin widened. "Arkamani," he said, pushing out his chest.

"I am Chariline."

They drew lots to determine who should begin the game. Arkamani won and started, throwing a single stone in the air

with a smooth motion. The object of the game was simple. Throw a stone in the air, pick up one from the ground, and catch the flying stone before it dropped. The next round, pick up two stones from the ground, then three, and so forth, until you held six in your palm. The second round, you threw two stones in the air and began again.

The game didn't change hands until the one playing fumbled. Arkamani did not drop a stone until the third round. Chariline held her own for a few throws, but she lacked the boy's agility and practice. With astonishing dexterity, he won the game in the next round. From her bag, Chariline extracted a small coin and one of Aunt Blandina's special cakes. "Honey," she said, indicating the pastry.

Arkamani's eyes rounded. He shoved the honey cake into his mouth, turning his cheeks into two round lumps. Chariline laughed.

"You need something in Meroë, you call me," the boy said, swallowing. "Call Arkamani." He slapped his narrow chest noisily. "I am your man, honey lady."

Chariline hid her smile. "You're a little too young to be my man."

"I'll grow," he assured her.

The captain yelled the boy's name. "Better go before you get into trouble, Arkamani." Chariline pointed her chin toward the captain.

The boy shrugged. "He is my uncle. No trouble, honey lady." Gathering his stones with care, he gave her another smile before running to do his uncle's bidding.

The next afternoon, her aunt emerged from the cabin to partake of a brief respite on the deck. The heat had turned

her delicate skin the color of a mature beet, and she waved her ostrich fan in front of her face with an air of desperation. "It feels too hot to breathe."

"It's cooler outside than in that stuffy cabin," Chariline said. "Stay with me and enjoy the breeze from the river." Chariline saw a sleek silhouette slither past, a good distance from where they stood leaning against the side of the boat. She drew a sharp breath. "Look, Aunt!" she pointed.

"Gods! Is that . . . ?"

"A crocodile. Yes! Isn't it wonderful?"

Blandina shuddered. "Monstrous. I can't wait to get off this contraption." She frowned as she turned to study her niece. "You will roast your skin in that sun. Hold your parasol higher."

By which she meant that Chariline's already dark skin would grow even darker. An unforgivable offense, as far as her grandparents were concerned. With a sigh, Chariline adjusted her parasol. It wasn't as if the little bit of papyrus and wood could magically transform her complexion to the same pale shade as her aunt's.

From the first time Chariline had looked in a mirror, she had known that she would never fit in with her family. Her skin looked like cinnamon with a hint of cream. Her tight brown curls with their sprinkling of dark gold refused to be tamed into a silky fall. Her full lips, long, toned limbs, and high cheekbones all set her apart from her chalk-white, fair-haired family. Perhaps that was why her grandfather never looked her in the eyes.

Even a short stroll through the narrow lanes of Meroë was enough to show that although her mother had been a Roman

through and through, half of Chariline belonged to Cush. Her mother must have met her father there.

All her life, Chariline had been told two things about her father: that he was dead, and that she was never to mention him. More than once, her curiosity had prompted her to ask the forbidden questions her heart could not set aside. Who was he? Had he known of her existence? How had he met her mother? Did he still have family living in Meroë? How did he die? An endless litany of questions that had never found an answer. In her grandfather, they had met with stony, disapproving silence. In her grandmother, a fearful and equally silent grief. Only her aunt had responded to her badgering.

“I never knew him, Chariline. I only know that your mother loved him dearly. And ran away to marry him without permission.”

That was the sum total of her knowledge of the man who had fathered her: That like her mother, he was dead. That he was a Cushite. And that her mother had loved him.

And now, she would likely not discover anything else about him. After over twenty-five years of unremarkable service to the empire, her grandfather had received his marching orders. He was to retire later that spring. Leave his house in Cush and begin a quiet life in the countryside of Italia somewhere. With his imminent departure, Chariline had to discard whatever hopes she had nurtured over the years of one day discovering her father's identity. Grandfather would never crack the wall of secrecy he had erected around her parents' marriage. And with Meroë far behind them, she would lose all access to any Cushite resources. Not that it really mattered. The man was dead, whether she knew his name or not.

Arkamani interrupted the dark train of her thoughts by sidling up, armed with his stones. "Come to thrash me again?" she said, cracking a small smile at the urchin's eager expression.

"If you insist, honey lady."

This time, Arkamani won even faster than before.

She studied his grinning face for a moment. "No one will play with you twice if you beat them too quickly," she warned.

"Apologies, honey lady. Uncle needs my help soon."

"Hold one moment." She withdrew another honey cake from her bag, which found its way into Arkamani's mouth as quickly as before.

Two days, four honey cakes, and several coins later, they arrived at the Fifth Cataract. The river, which flowed narrower this far south, had turned a pale willow green, heralding their proximity to the city of Meroë. The capital of Cush occupied a gentle bend on the banks of the Nile between the Fifth and Sixth Cataracts.

After they navigated the rocks and piled back into the boat, Aunt Blandina lingered for a rare moment with Chariline. "Not far now," she said, wrapping the edges of her stola closer about her. Never talkative, she became quieter still in Cush.

"Grandmother will be happy to see you."

Aunt Blandina made a noncommittal sound.

"I love Meroë. I don't understand why Grandfather loathes it here. If he were a little less demanding, he might find himself enjoying the place."

Aunt Blandina bit her lip. "Don't let him hear you say that." She allowed herself a tiny smile. "You sound like your mother. She, too, loved Cush."

“Did she?” Chariline pressed eagerly, hoping to hear more about the mother of whom she knew so little.

A curtain drew over her aunt’s face, wiping away every trace of warmth. “Hold up your parasol,” she admonished before turning her back and heading for the cabin.

Fishing her roll of papyrus out of her bag, and grabbing her inkpot and stylus, Chariline settled down to work on the palace she had been designing for her friend Natemahar.

It had become a tradition between them. Every year when she came to Cush, she designed an opulent building for him. He loved her designs and told her she had rare talent. He was one of the few who did. Most believed a woman had no business wanting to be an architect. Wanting to learn engineering and construction. But Natemahar encouraged her to pursue her training. Over the years, he had sent her seven of Vitruvius’s ten famed books on architecture. They had become the foundation of her growing knowledge.

The reminder of Natemahar’s extraordinary support made her heart lift. She might not have been blessed with the love of a proper family, but when it came to friendships, God had more than favored her.

A few hours later, as the boat navigated a sharp bend, Chariline’s attention was captured by movement on the bank. A black-and-white ibis pecked at the dark mud with its long beak. In the distance, something red caught Chariline’s eye on the eastern shore. Setting her drawing aside, she leaned forward to catch a better glimpse. There it was, the first pyramid of Meroë, coming into view, followed by dozens more in bright reds, yellows, and ochres. They were nothing more than a cemetery. A burial ground for the aristocracy and royalty of

the kingdom. But the pyramids of Meroë held a fascination for her that went far beyond their prosaic function. Their curious construction and enduring mystery never ceased to captivate her. Not long after, the sailors began to lower the sails and prepare to drop anchor.

Chariline headed for the cabin. "Aunt Blandina, we have arrived at the port."

Blandina came to her feet carefully, frowning at the sharp rocking motion of the boat. Signaling the captain, she arranged for their luggage to be carried to the city gate and led the way gingerly to the narrow wooden pier.

Stout walls constructed of dressed stone encircled the whole city of Meroë. At the main gate, two angular stone towers jutted out like stubborn jaws, flanking the entrance into the city, giving the guards a better vantage point as they monitored the river that brought life and goods past their city.

Chariline and her aunt entered the massive wood-and-iron gates after the soldiers gave their papers a cursory examination. Past the tower, they sat by the wall, leaning against their piled baggage, and prepared for a long wait.

Chariline stretched her neck, surveying the crowd. She knew better than to look for her grandfather. He would not meet them for another hour. He never left work until the afternoon regardless of the time of their arrival. Since their boat often anchored at Meroë earlier, they were expected to tarry at the gate and wait for him patiently.

Chariline searched through the busy throng, trying to spot her friend Natemahar. She swallowed a smile when she caught sight of him striding toward them. Not once, in all the years of her visits to Cush, had he missed her arrival. He stepped in

front of Aunt Blandina and gave her a formal nod of acknowledgment. His rich clothing, as well as the young servant who stood deferentially at his side, carrying a carved alabaster box, declared him an important official.

Aunt Blandina's eyes widened a little. Natemahar smiled reassuringly. Every year, he arranged for this charade, and every year Blandina forgot.

"A small gift for the daughter and granddaughter of our honored Roman official, Quintus Blandinus Geminus," Natemahar said in perfect Latin, his words made more exotic by his soft, musical accent. "Compliments of the great Kandake of Cush." He managed to say the words with a straight face, though his ebony eyes sparkled.

Chariline bit her lip. The Kandake, or Candace as the Greeks and Romans referred to her, was the title of the queen mother who exerted more power in Cush than her own son. And if the Kandake had ever sent a present to her grandfather, Chariline was willing to eat her leather sandals. The queen had never shown the Roman official any special favors. But as her chief treasurer, Natemahar had the authority to impart gifts in her name.

"Thank you." Blandina reached for the box. She flipped the lid open and gave a faint smile. "Oh. How nice." Dried fruits and nuts had been packed in a precise pattern of arcs and triangles. Dates, figs, raisins, peaches, and almonds had been turned into an edible painting.

"That's beautiful!" Chariline exclaimed and reached for a plump date. "And delicious. Our thanks to your most thoughtful and gracious Kandake."

Natemahar bowed to her, enveloping her in the warmth

of his smile. “I am honored you are pleased, mistress.” Was there more gray at his temples? Deeper lines radiating from the corners of his eyes? Had he been unwell? None of his letters had mentioned an illness. But she knew that Natemahar often struggled with his health, a lingering side effect of the procedure that had rendered him a eunuch so long ago, when he was a boy.

Chariline could not help worrying for him. Hiding her anxiety behind a smile, she said, “I couldn’t imagine a better welcome to your delightful land, my lord.”

“And I couldn’t imagine a lovelier addition to our ancient kingdom.”

This hidden dance of words had become one of Chariline’s favorite games. Every time they met in public, they had to pretend not to know each other, and yet find ways to communicate. Natemahar had a genius for it, she had discovered. A byproduct of spending his life in the complexities of a scheming royal court.

“May I offer you ladies my chariot?” Natemahar suggested politely.

“Thank you. My father will be here shortly,” Blandina said.

“In that case, I will take my leave of you.” He bowed with the grace of a lifelong courtier and melted into the crowd. He would not be far, Chariline knew, but hide himself close enough to keep an eye on them lest someone in the packed press of people should attempt to accost them.

“Who is that man?” Aunt Blandina asked. “He seems familiar.”

“I believe he is one of the Kandake’s officials. He delivered a welcome gift to us last year, you may recall.” And the year

before. And the year before that. Fourteen years of imaginative welcomes.

“Oh yes. Now that you mention it. What a good memory you have, Chariline.”

“Thank you, Aunt.”

Then again, since Chariline had known Natemahar from the age of seven, and they had been communicating via secret letters for years, she was not likely to forget him.