



Chapter One

SUSA, CAPITAL OF PERSIA, IN THE TWENTIETH
YEAR OF THE REIGN OF KING ARTAXERXES
FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF HIS FATHER XERXES



My Dearest Sister in Spirit Leah,

I write you in some anxiousness tonight. I even waited until after the sun had set and the shadows here in the harem had grown long, my candle had burned low, and the halls fell quiet. You may consider me overcautious, for even though my position in Persia as Queen Regent is an exalted one, no position is safe from danger right now. So I take up stylus in reply to the intriguing yet potentially dangerous information in your recent letter.

The rumors are true.

That is why, as much as I long to see you again and give you the warm embrace of a sister, it is too dangerous at the moment to see you in person. So I must write you from my quarters, even though we find ourselves behind the same palace walls.

Queen Mother Amestris, who as you know recently resurfaced as my palace nemesis, has posted her spies everywhere, and now even many of the guard have turned against me. There is so much rumor and so many threats spoken and unspoken. Most of what circulates about Commander Megabyzos, I am sorry to say, is true. Far from being a loyalist general, he is actually a hidden leader of the rebellion.

What's worse, I fear some of what they have said about my beloved Xerxes is true. I'm sure you also heard some of this gossip in ensuing years, but you never heard it from me—until now. How I wish he were here to explain his actions! All those lingering questions only compound the pain of my loneliness.

Nehemiah, along with our Jewish people's success with the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the walls, has set everyone and everything in Persia on edge. As a result, I fear that even your painful predicament with the King and your politically motivated rejection have become guarded knowledge at court. Even passion must sometimes submit to politics, I fear. And the result is unrequited love. I know personally how much that hurts.

On top of all this, King Artaxerxes is in mortal peril, and as goes his fate, so will that of all the Jews. Do you recall your first letter to me, not so long ago? Yu began it with the words, "My dear friend, I am in trouble." Well tonight, my dear friend, I fear we are *all* in trouble.

Thinking of all of this, I feel an invisible band tighten about my heart. It almost feels like a return of the dark days I once wrote you about, the times of my own great dangers and sorrow. I feel that I risk my life every time I pass a cordon of the royal guardians, the Immortals, or even ordinary soldiers. My heart beats faster within me and I avert my gaze from theirs. For years I only felt security and comfort within the walls of the palace. Now I imagine that every time I venture into the innermost halls of the court I may well again stumble upon a headless body sprawled across a dais or a bodyguard holding a bloody scimitar. I try to consciously soften my breathing and unbolden my gaze, to make myself less recognized. Most of all, to conceal my inner defiance. But I saw far too much during those murderous days, and I can feel the fear return like a stench in the air.

As a result I now live under a self-imposed house arrest and dare not come to speak with you directly about this matter. That is why I asked Onesi to carry this to you herself. She is utterly trustworthy, I think you would agree, and knows all the back ways of the palace. I pray that she reaches you without being accosted or arousing suspicion.

Leah, you and I are very blessed to be able to communicate in this way—most unusual for women, as you know. My beloved poppa certainly was going against tradition when he taught me to read and write

as I was growing up. And your more recent tutelage has been most fortuitous, particularly now when it is dangerous for us to meet in person. You yourself must be so careful, even more so than your new confidant, my adopted father Mordecai, would urge. I'm afraid that as prudent as he has always been, even he is becoming bolder and less cautious of late than I would wish.

While protocol dictates that I sign this in my official capacity, our common blood covenant makes me long to close this simply as your sister, Hadassah. Sending this under the seal of Queen Regent may offer some small protection of respect were this letter to fall into the wrong hands.

I must go—please be careful and strong and obedient to G-d.

Your friend Esther, Queen Regent of Persia





Chapter Two

AL HILLAH, IRAQ—PRESENT DAY.
TWO IN THE MORNING, IRAQI TIME

T*he commandos struck* precisely three minutes after the moon had melted across the desert horizon and plunged Al Hillah into a darkness nearly as sudden as the flicking of a switch.

Hours had passed since the day's last, fading echo of small-arms fire. Despite the late hour, Basra Street had only begun to cool, for even in autumn the Euphrates Valley remained a blistering cauldron—day or night. A stray dog pawed through gutter trash beneath the glow of a lone streetlamp. The scrawny beast was the only living thing along a sidewalk barren of all but two dented Mercedes and a dozen withered palm stumps.

The shadow of a nearby wall rippled across a row of camouflage-shirted chests and a row of tightly clasped guns. One of the faces, features smeared with black, leaned forward to glance up at a second-story window.

Nearly hidden by a parted curtain hovered the striking face of a young girl. Flawless light brown skin set off luminous green eyes, which searched the sidewalk until they finally met the commando leader's stare.

She started and her eyes widened. She gave an exaggerated nod and pointed almost shyly toward the other side of the street—

—toward a large white villa, shrouded in palm trees and thick bushes and encircled by a thick stucco wall.

The lovely face disappeared from the window. Leaning back, the commando leader pointed his thumb toward the villa and straightened a wire microphone around to his mouth. His barked order crackled in a dozen hidden earpieces.

“*Sciopero!*”

The dog cocked its head toward the sky and uttered a soft whine.

Less than a quarter mile away, a whirl of rotor blades rose above the desert wind, and an A129 “Little Bird” Mongoose helicopter nudged its canopy over a jagged rooftop silhouette. The chopper’s bubble window swiveled sideways, its pilot scanning the streetscape through twin, side-mounted infrared scopes.

The quiet of the street was shattered by the groan and a metallic shriek of a heavily chained gate crashing inward. The noise drew a shout from the home’s balcony and the trademark staccato of a guard’s Kalashnikov shooting on full automatic. From the opposite shadows, a single flash responded along with the *click* of a silenced gunshot. A low groan floated out—the guard’s bulk flopped over the railing and plunged into deep bushes.

Shouts and a high wail rose from inside the sprawling Mediterranean-style villa. A light flicked on in an upstairs window while rumbles of falling furniture filled the air.

Then came a deafening crack. A battering ram had shattered the front door.

The camouflaged commandos holding Beretta semi-automatics raced in a crouch toward the open door’s glare. Called *Viper 5*, they were the Italian Carabinieri’s elite commando artifacts-recovery team—and they had breached their evening’s target twelve seconds ahead of schedule.

At once the Mongoose shot up from its protective hover and was over Basra Street with a roar. The dog ran away, its howls muted by the descending thunder. Everything now seemed to happen with a stunning suddenness—the runners touched ground, men leaped from open doors, one of them in civilian garb, and the aircraft lifted away.

Another explosion, louder and heavier, lashed forward.

And the helicopter thrashed into pieces amidst a white-hot cloud of fire.

Flames billowed across the roadway. The chopper's metal carcass plummeted to earth, struck pavement, and flattened in a blinding spray of sparks and secondary detonations.

There were more screams, now rending the air in Italian, not Arabic. New splatters of automatic fire lit up corners of the property—a pinpoint counterattack, triggered by the rocket strike.

The civilian ducked away from the heat and launched himself across the trunk of the nearest parked sedan. The smoke and stench of burning fuel felt as though it was scorching his lungs. The air was so roasting hot he feared he would incinerate—flames pursued him over the barrier and licked at the back of his head as he landed hard and twisted his ankle in the opposite gutter. Panting heavily, he swerved around to a new fear—he had now exposed himself to sniper fire from the open driveway. With a single leap, he lunged toward the shelter of the wall and huddled against its pitted plaster.

A long barrage of automatic fire pummeled his ears. The fighting was growing more fierce. All around him, ricocheting bullets whined and whistled—a scream of agony from somewhere at his left sent a fierce shiver up his spine. A dying groan drifted up from the other side of the wall where he crouched. Fighting to catch his breath, he found himself reeling from combat frenzy and shook his head in disbelief. *This scene is flying apart!* There had been resistance before—the men who stole and smuggled ancient artifacts rarely failed to guard them. *But this?* They were fighting as though . . . as though something far more important than money was at stake.

He glanced across the street to a window where the wide-eyed young girl had made her brave appearance. Her face flashed there once more, aglow with morbid fascination. *How out of place she looks*, the man thought, *with those porcelain features and dark, piercing eyes*. He had a flashback, in one of those odd, inappropriate thoughts people conjure up in moments of great stress, and noted that her haunting look reminded him of that famous *National Geographic* cover of the young Afghani girl with the striking eyes.

Surely her father, a former guard who had led the Italians here, would prevail over her curiosity and whisk her out of danger, far from

the scene. But no—there she was, stealing another glance at the chaos unfolding below her. *Get out of there!* he found himself yelling inwardly.

“Run,” he shouted, out loud now, as if she could hear him. “Get as far away as you can!”

He whirled back to his surroundings. Finally, a pause. The man breathed out and willed his balled muscles to relax, although he knew from the pit of his stomach that this was the most dangerous moment—the lull when incautious types tended to let their guard down and stand.

And earn themselves a bullet through the head.

No, even though his thighs burned from the unaccustomed crouch, he resolved to stay in his safe hideaway and make certain. A full minute or more passed. One lone shot rang out just as he started to rise. He cringed and sank down again but no more followed. At last he heard shouts in Italian and stood, grimacing from the sudden circulation to his cramped muscles.

The counterattack was over, suppressed by the commandos’ overwhelming firepower.

He jogged briskly toward the home’s driveway, crossing the dead guard’s blood trail with a hop and turning away from the sullen stare of another dead insurgent on the patch of dirt that passed for a front lawn.

I’m not here to imbibe the local ambiance, he reminded himself with an inner shudder. He was here in the guise of a scholar on patrol—Dr. Clive Osborn, British-born antiquities expert, bearer of all the requisite credentials, volunteer rescuer of rare *objets d’histoire* from the crosshairs of modern warfare.

He wasn’t even supposed to be at these raids, he reminded himself with a shrug. His official, approved role came into play at base, when all was secure and the ancient contraband carted back in for a type of “antique triage.”

Yet he had learned the hard way that it was best to be there on site, while evaluations were still being made and priceless bits of archaeology could still be saved from being overlooked—or, worse yet, crunched under errant army boots. *You never know what’s really important unless you’re there to see it!* At least, that’s what he’d shouted at his Italian liaison only two nights before.

He hurried into a narrow hallway choked with a cloud of plaster dust. Even without maps, he rarely found it difficult to find his destina-

tion after these raids—*simple, really: you just follow the lights and the sounds of clunking combat boots.*

He turned left into a large, cluttered room whose interior contents, in the glare of a makeshift spotlight, struck him as instantly and tragically familiar. Even without craning his neck, he saw stacks of Persian pottery, a shard of Babylonian *bas relief*, the statue of a small horse complete with a thin Greek saddle. Easy enough, he assured himself. Large and easily identified, these items were in no great danger. In rooms like these, his eyes always strayed toward the corners—the low, dimly lit places lying shrouded in layers of ancient grime. That’s where his real objectives usually awaited him.

He saw only a pile of old rifles and a scattering of dusty ammo bandoliers, still full. A stack of thin, barkless kindling. A broken chair, sized for a child. And—

—*a pile of documents.* Leather bindings, thick, torn pages, engraved spines, a few scrolls.

He was standing over the stack without even knowing how he’d reached it, bending down, carefully picking up the first piece. Realizing that the parchment might be brittle, he silently reminded himself to proceed cautiously. It was a lone scroll, missing its center dowel, frayed about the edges. He slowly unrolled it and strained his eyes. He blew hard, the clichéd reflex of the archaeologist. He squinted against the thick dust he’d aroused.

His heart gave a small jump. He read for a moment. Then he frowned, took a long breath, and caught himself. He needed to be discreet. Yet he could hardly believe it. After a quick glance to each side, he carefully slid the lone document inside a plastic bag, which he zipped tightly shut. It not only needed protection, he told himself, but would make a perfect examination sample.

He picked up the first of the remaining bound papers, read it briefly, shook his head again, and laid it down on the stack with the others.

He exhaled slowly, carefully.

Hebrew.

And more, so much more.

The signature percussive throb announced the arrival of a new helicopter. He looked around him and stepped out of the room. For a moment, he fought an impulse to rush back to headquarters as fast as his

lungs and legs would allow. His work in this place had just begun.

He breathed in deeply. The hours ahead would bring him endless heavy lifting, careful digging, and constant maintaining of appearances. *Cleaning up and moving out*, he'd heard one master sergeant call it. He looked around him and forced his face to relax.

Go. Work. And try to act like your world hasn't just been turned on its head.



Chapter Three

AL-SAYED IMPORT-EXPORT
COMPANY, BAGHDAD—FIVE HOURS LATER

T*he man known to the Italian army as Dr. Clive Osborn* briskly entered the front office of the Al-Sayed Import-Export Company, pulling behind him a small wheeled cart loaded with canvas bags. Once inside, he glanced briefly around the vestibule and, like a familiar vendor making a scheduled delivery, shrugged and walked past the front counter to disappear behind a curtain.

At the end of a narrow hallway, a lanky young man with cropped brown hair stared at the newcomer and his load, his hand jerking reflexively in the direction of a telltale lump beneath untucked shirttails. His gaze softened immediately in recognition, and he nodded his welcome.

Osborn turned sideways to pass the sentry and shouldered his way through a nondescript doorway, painted green to match the walls.

He emerged in a large room brightly lit from overhead xenon lights, its ceiling vaulted to the building's entire two-story height. Automatic weapons and handguns of a dozen varieties overhung countertops strewn with electronics. In one corner, four video monitors lay stacked, each flickering a different black-and-white angle of the street traffic outside and the passageways through which he had just emerged.

A young man wearing a small machine pistol tucked into his belt

looked up quickly from his work, eyes flashing alarm. At the sight of Osborn, he nodded amiably, his expression transformed just like the other man's, and he turned back to his task.

Osborn hiked himself up onto a work stool and ran his fingers through dusty hair. He reached down, unbuttoned a side pocket, and pulled out a *yarmulke*, a thin black skullcap that he quickly flipped onto the top of his head with an almost rebellious flair. *Let the Imams come*, he told himself, narrowing his eyes fiercely. *If they kill me, at least it will be for the right reasons.*

"Osborn" had already put in four hours at the Italian base across town, evaluating thousands of fairly ordinary artifacts recovered in the raid and making a complete copy of the Hebrew documents, facsimiles that he now carried with him concealed under the usual pieces. But in this room, completely unknown to the Italians, he relaxed and allowed his true identity to wash back over him—Ari Meyer, British-born yet actually an Israeli citizen. Less loyal to "Osborn's" Manchester University than to the *ha-Mossad le-Modiin ule-Tafkidim Meyuhadim*, the Institute for Information and Special Operations—or simply as the world called it, the Mossad. Israel's feared and revered international police force.

The Al-Sayed Import-Export Company was actually Mossad's main Iraqi safehouse.

Meyer's liaison cover with the Italian army was not entirely dishonest, he reminded himself. He truly *was* intent on the safe recovery of stolen and smuggled artifacts. Except his interest in Gentile specimens was academic at best, feigned at worst. It was documents of the Jewish variety he was truly interested in. Meyer was actually in Iraq as part of a vast Mossad operation to save the last remaining Jews in the country, a number officially hovering around forty, as well as to intercept and save Jewish artifacts before they could be destroyed or held for ransom on world markets. Throughout the country at that moment, his fellow *katzas*, as Mossad operatives were called, combed warehouses and black market alleys for Torahs, Menorahs, and other precious antiques stolen from Iraq's once-prominent Jewish population. Once found, they would be bought at market price, ransomed, or if the situation required it, confiscated by force.

Exhaling loudly, he turned to the man at the other workstation. "I may need the SAT phone to call Tel Aviv," he said in a weary voice. "The one with the level five encryption."

“Yeah, I know the one,” interrupted the other, sounding slightly irritated.

“This could really be something.”

Meyer said it with no expectation of a reply from his colleague. Idle conversation was rare in this place. Everyone performed two or three jobs in the Iraqi war zone, and tensions were part of the ambiance of the place. Right outside the walls lived five million people who would eagerly tear them limb from limb if they ever discovered Al-Sayed’s true function.

Without turning, the younger man reached over to a shelf, grabbed the phone, and offered it behind him with a deft, one-handed flip of the wrist.

Meyer snatched the device and laid it on the table, leaned from his stool to heave the bags to the counter, and slit the topmost open with a box cutter. Pulling out the first bound document, he sighed and began a thorough examination.

Five minutes later, sweat broke out across his brow. If his colleague had looked, he would have seen eyes narrowed into a worried, somber gaze. Ari let his fingers wander and grip the metallic edge of the secure Iridium satellite telephone lying beside him. The phone was a flip-top resembling a common cellular design, yet far thicker and crowned by a wide antenna nearly a foot long. He slipped off the stool and walked over to a nearby skylight, brought the phone to his ear, and flicked on the power. Frowning, he glanced up to check his position. It irritated him that despite all their customized technology, even the Mossad’s satellite phones still required a scrap of open sky in order to secure their connection. He found it a strange vulnerability—not being able to communicate with headquarters without searching out a patch of the outdoors.

“Tel Aviv,” he said in a low, strong voice.

Meyer did not worry about anyone eavesdropping, for the satellite phone and the surrounding building were completely secure, protected by spy-proof construction materials. The phone’s proprietary signal was scrambled and further safeguarded by incredibly dense computer encryption programmed by the *yabalomin*—Mossad teams tasked with establishing secure communications between the agency’s network of safehouses. The young *katza* working across the room was one of those.

He waited for five seconds, then spoke again.

“It’s Ari. *Shalom*. Listen, I struck pay dirt, but the news is not good.”

He took a deep breath. “Well, I found the Battaween genealogy.”

He exhaled slowly.

“Yes. *The* one. And it looks to be complete. It must have been hidden well, because if it had been discovered before now, there wouldn’t be a Jew left. It’s just like they said. The document lists every family that ever went underground, along with its lineage. And that’s not all. I found traces of duplicate lists. The men who stole the list apparently made copies. That means each and every Jewish family that ever assimilated into Iraqi society is known to the government, subject to being leaked who knows where. They’re all in mortal danger. Understand what I’m saying? There’s going to be a bloodbath. Not *if*—but *when*.”

He held out the phone and peered at it with a puzzled look—his party had hung up. He chuckled wryly, for he understood why. The lack of courtesy wasn’t meant as a slight, merely a sign of how urgently his news had been received. Folks in the Mossad didn’t stand on ceremony. And given the bombshell he had just dropped, false tact was even less in order than usual.

He sighed, laid down the phone, and retrieved a small glass wand scanner from a corner of the room. For the next thirty minutes, he painstakingly scanned every page of the genealogy into a nearby laptop. Then, after burning a disc of his results, he reached into his pocket to stow it away and came across the single unbound document he had stashed away for personal inspection.

Reaching precariously to his left, he picked up a large black rifle and unscrewed its ornate infrared scope. Then he held it to his eye, aimed the far end downward, and bent over the document. For nearly an hour he leaned over the table, peering through the lens and translating the fragment from ancient Hebrew, pausing only to wipe his brow in the uncooled Iraqi swelter.

The young man left. The light grew long and dim. The late-afternoon heat subsided. The cool of the evening crept into the room.

Completely motionless, he sat at the desk and, nearly unblinking, worked through to the translation of the signature.

He leaned back, engrossed in his reading. His breathing stopped for a long moment, as air from his lungs whistled past tense lips like a quickly deflating tire.



Chapter Four

PERSEPOLIS, THE EIGHTEENTH
YEAR OF KING ARTAXERXES' REIGN



Dear Esther,

My dear friend, I am in trouble, and I desperately need your counsel.

I hope that despite your being so far away, and the many months since you left for the Promised Land, that you have not forgotten me, your little Leah of the Susa harem. For my part, I miss you dearly—in fact, hardly an hour goes by that your name and your wonderful instructions to me do not cross my mind. I wanted to write you because I miss you, but also, I must admit, for a more immediate reason.

Esther, my night with the King has come and gone. And I do not think you would have yet learned of its outcome from Mordecai. You see, the most shocking and unexpected thing has happened. In fact, I must admit the truth I have sought to conceal from all others. My heart is broken. I have not stopped weeping for days. I have not slept, I have not eaten. I do not know if I can bear this strain much longer. And while I know your reply will not arrive for a very long time, just knowing that I have reached out to you already has eased my suffering.

You see, when I entered the bedchamber of King Artaxerxes, I held out only faint hope for a favorable outcome and, at the same time,

braced myself for the harsh reality of palace politics. I really did not want to be there, and felt as though I was sucked into a whirlpool beyond my control. Truth be told, the King was simply hunting for a bride, and I was easy prey.

I use those words because I was fully prepared to have nothing of lasting significance occur, no extraordinary bond develop, and to be rejected as queen. That is a natural outcome, which I would have understood.

That is most definitely *not* what has taken place.

Esther, knowing that you went through the same exact process with King Artaxerxes' father, your beloved Xerxes, I followed your advice to the letter, and much happened because I did. I will attempt to take my emotions in my hand and give you this full account of what took place that evening. A description certainly more complete than I have accorded anyone else.

During the final weeks leading up to that day, I found parts of your admonitions easy enough to carry out. Indeed, I felt that my whole year of preparation was a wonderful time of growing, both in body and spirit. For instance, paying special heed to the wisdom in the counsel of the King's chamberlain was hardly difficult, as he is Jesse, better known around the palace as Hathach, your lifelong friend and my new one as well. As I will describe, I found your advice about focusing on the King's preferences rather than my own to be a revelation, one which definitely set me apart from the other candidates as markedly as it distinguished you.

And of course dear Mordecai, as you know him even better than I, provided both wise counsel and encouragement during that year. The private meetings I shared with you and Mordecai kept the spirit of my Jewish heritage alive and abated my loneliness. From our first meeting, I had always felt a little awed in his presence, for he is, of course, the second most famous man in the empire, the Prime Minister and the King's Master of the Audiences, a figure with enormous royal favor and public adulation. Truly, both of your names have been on the lips of my family and community since the day I was born. As I'm sure I've told you, tales of your mutual courage during our people's near-annihilation flowed throughout my childhood.

Yet from my arrival, I had discovered you to be less intimidating

than I would have expected—perhaps because you had so kindly sought me out. I will never forget the long letter and its account of your life that you wrote to me. During that year of preparation following your departure for Jerusalem, I clung to your words like a drowning man to a floating log! I intend to keep it with me forever.

However, it could have been the simple fact that you are also a woman. And that Mordecai seemed to act a bit aloof toward me at first. But for whatever reason, I still found your uncle a bit formidable until he and Jesse began to coach me in earnest. Then, as he was called upon to display his incredible knowledge of the palace and all that lay ahead for me, Mordecai quickly became a warm, witty, and wise counselor. He made me laugh as I seldom have in my life; certainly since being taken to the palace. As Exilarch and leader of the Jews in exile, he knew my family well, especially given its royal lineage, and spoke of them often to me, always raising my spirits in the process. Although I still missed my family terribly and spent many of my nights weeping for all I had lost, I was comforted by a growing sense that a new, improbable family was growing up around me, consisting of no less than the King's prime minister and chief chamberlain—two of the empire's most powerful men.

After you left for Jerusalem, this family-of-sorts always seemed to be missing a member, and your name was often spoken in wistful, even sad tones. But even with that absence forever before us, I began to see Mordecai in a whole new light: beyond his incredible power and renown and simply as a sometimes lonely, yet always fascinating and endearing, man. His lightheartedness makes him seem far younger than he is. I cannot imagine how many Jewish girls pursued him in his youth, yet he never married. He would have presented quite a catch, I am sure.

But the disappointment of that year was your absence. I had always expected that when the preparation began, you would stand beside me every step of the way, giving me even more of your wonderful advice.

On the day Jesse appeared at my door in all his palace finery, that smile of anticipation playing upon his lips, I felt calm, prepared, and within the bounds of divine providence, in spite of your being so far away.

Thanks to you, my friend. To you and the new family you brought into my life.

My approach to the palace was surely less visually enthralling than the one you described in your earlier letter. That is mainly due to the harem's placement this season here at Persepolis—instead of a long march through each of Susa's majestic inner courtyards, my new harem room lay deep inside the palace complex, requiring only a short walk across the courtyard to a corridor leading into the palace of Artaxerxes.

Yet I'm sure my emotions soared and dipped just as wildly as yours did. I had never ventured to the other side of the courtyard opposite my room; Jesse had most emphatically announced that the opposite doors sheltered the palaces of the King himself and were to be given a wide, fearful berth. Once my fellow harem-dwellers and I saw the gleaming lances and sword-edges of the Immortals guarding His Majesty, we had no trouble heeding the warnings.

Mine was perhaps a cooler day, especially as we are in the mountains of northern Persia instead of Susa of the southern deserts. In fact, the palace walls towered so high around me that they blocked direct sunlight. All I could see, framed between the stone rooftops, was a patch of deep blue afternoon sky. I remember drawing a breath as my foot struck its first step of courtyard marble and feeling a rush of excitement flood my veins. It truly did feel as though I was being ushered to the core of all that is splendid and opulent on this earth.

And, Esther, how beautiful I felt—my feet shod in gold-threaded sandals, my hair woven with rare purple lilies, my gown of iridescent red silk, my face intricately painted with Egyptian hues, my body seeming to travel within its own fragrant cloud of myrrh and incense. I'm sure I floated across that courtyard and in through the King's massive gold-leafed doors, although the truth is, I hardly remember the walk at all.

What a relief it was to be met at the door by none other than Mordecai, rather than some unfamiliar and perhaps unsympathetic Master of Audiences. And an additional solace to realize that King Artaxerxes is an altogether different man than his father, Xerxes, when you first met him. The son is young, less world-weary, and, forgive me, appears to be more like a sympathetic figure than the Xerxes of old. I expected

him to be a good man simply because I know the woman who largely raised him.

I'll never forget the creak of those huge doors opening and that eternal walk across the marble floor to his bedchamber. He stared at me the whole time with an appraising smile upon his face. I worked very hard to meet that gaze and experience the joy of presenting him with the most precious gift I could give—that of myself.

I stood him before him, and his smile was so broad and infectious I simply stood in its warmth for a long moment.

"You're very beautiful . . . Leah, I believe your name is," he said. And then, almost catching himself, he added, "I do not say this to every woman who enters my chamber. In fact, I may have never uttered this before."

I did not know whether or not to believe him. "Thank you, Your Majesty," I said with a small bow. "You are quite . . . thrilling to behold yourself."

This reply seemed to please him, for he smiled wider, even chuckled a bit. "Oh, really? Am I? Now, would you have said this if I had been a sixty-year-old hunchback, as some of my ancestors who shall remain nameless?"

I thought for a moment. "Your Majesty, I hope I would have found some diplomatic way to frame an honest reply."

His eyebrows rose at that. "Ah. Wisdom and intelligence mixed with *beauty*. Leah may prove a formidable candidate for queen," he added, as if addressing an unseen throng.

"I do not believe in attempting anything halfway."

"So, determined as well. It is a rare quality in one so young."

"I am twenty years old, Your Majesty. But I am old enough to know that His Majesty would not be served by a spineless and silent queen."

"Oh, you are, are you?" he said with a raised eyebrow and a chuckle. "And what harem gossips have passed on these insights to you?"

I felt my face grow warm and looked down to search for an appropriate reply. "I know there are older women in the harem," I replied at last. "But I have received wise counsel since I arrived there, and I have listened closely."

"Have you become a favorite of my chamberlain, Hathach?"

"I count him as a friend, Your Majesty. As I do Her Highness, Queen Esther."

"You mean Queen-Regent *Hadassah*!" he queried with a knowing nod. "Surely you know of her retaking her childhood name."

"Yes, I do. I also know that she is an astute observer of the ways between kings and queens."

"Or kings and queen-candidates? You have not won yet, you know, Leah."

"No, but I place myself at your service," I said with another small bow.

He took a deep, portentous breath and met my gaze with a glint of awe in his look. He took two bold steps and embraced me.

Having never been with a man before, I was quite shocked at the sensations that swept over me. A flood tide of emotions I had held in check for years came rushing forth and simply overwhelmed my senses.

One part of me was thrilled to be plunging headlong into the tumbling well of passion that can grow between a man and a woman.

Another part of me felt guilt, having repressed these feelings for so long. I know that as Mordecai had taught me, I was not to accept any pangs of guilt. I really had no choice. Refusing this fate would have meant immediate death for me and my family alike. Just as I was taken forcefully into the palace, so was I taken to the King's bed. My mind understands that if I had no choice, I should feel no shame. Yet my heart struggled with mixed emotions over the pleasurable sensations now overwhelming my body.

Esther, it was almost as if I were a spectator, observing all that happened, attempting to pass judgment over right and wrong.

Thankfully, I need not elaborate for you what happened next, except to say that it was as wonderful, as frightening, and as pleasurable as you had led me to believe. And since I have heard of alternate outcomes from older concubines, I am very grateful for this fact: thanks to your advice, I must have pleased him, although I have nothing against which to compare that belief.

Several times during that night, Artaxerxes gave me looks of astonishment and even wonder. At one time during my upbringing I might have believed that behavior of this sort was a sign of wanton-

ness or low character, but thanks to you and Mordecai, I was able to dismiss such perspectives in my current situation.

When our passion was expended, I thought I had slain him, or at least wounded him in some dreadful way. But after lying motionless for a terrifying moment, he opened his eyes, smiled at me, and raised himself to lean against the pillows. Upon seeing the fright on my face, he caressed my cheek and proceeded to reassure me that his stillness was actually due to a state of ecstasy, not of injury. In fact, rather than causing his demise, I had created delight.

That moment of brief repose was one item of sexual knowledge you failed to impart to me, my friend.

And then he and I gazed into each other's eyes for a very long time, longer than I can estimate, as a veil of incredible ease, warmth, and conversation seemed to float down upon us. He genuinely seemed as intrigued about my life as he was about my body. I opened my heart to him, although, because of Mordecai's warnings, I remained coy about my Jewish heritage.

On the surface I felt incredibly happy, even thrilled at all the things I felt coursing through my senses and my heart. Yet deeper down I continued to struggle with feelings of shame and remorse. As I have told you, I knew that I had no choice in the matter, and that my lack of choice absolved me from ultimate guilt. But something about how much I enjoyed this night ignited continued turmoil within me.

Finally, he spoke with the question that nearly became my undoing.

"Leah, what is so special about you? What sort of spell are you weaving about me?"

I laughed at those words and flashed him a meaningful glance through the corners of my eyes.

"Come here," he said, raising up one arm. So I snuggled in beside him, marveling at the intimacy of his whole skin upon mine, and laid my head upon his shoulder.

And we fell asleep.

I woke up to the sight of his face, shrouded in shadow, raised up and close to mine. Watching me with both passion and tenderness.

"Hello, Leah," he said in a low voice.

Momentarily startled, I replied. "Hello, Your Majesty."

He shook his head. "No, please, call me Artaxerxes."

And that is when the most extraordinary part of the evening began. The King began to talk without prodding, this time about his own history, and when I stopped him with thoughtful questions and observations, he began to open up even further. I learned more about the kingdom of Persia during that brief conversation than anyone could possibly imagine. Esther, your advice in this area of conversation proved more valuable than all my months of training. I became privy to things I really wish I did not know. His voice hardly rose above a whisper, and I couldn't tell if it was from some abiding fear of being overheard or an inbred caution. But his tone helped create a sense of intimacy around the words we shared. He spoke about being raised by strangers, believing that his mother was dead of natural causes, and then being told during his adolescence that she had been ordered murdered by his *own father*. He described the layers of jealousy and intrigue that existed between him and his brothers, most notably Darius II, the eldest and first in line to the throne, who had hoped to rule like his namesake grandfather.

Upon mentioning that name, he began to weep. And that is when I made my mistake.

I reached out to comfort him, stroked his face, and whispered, "It was not your fault. It was not your fault."

At once his eyes opened, the tears stopped, and he stared at me.

"What do you mean, not my fault?" he asked suspiciously.

And that is when I realized that I had betrayed knowledge of things unknown to anyone but you and Mordecai. Few in the world knew the truth about Darius' death.

Inside, my thoughts careened into an avalanche of desperate invention.

"I only meant, Your Majesty—I mean, Artaxerxes—only to soothe your grief. To reassure you that just because you ascended to the throne as a result of blood shed that night, it does not mean you wished it upon anyone."

My words tumbled over each other and he seemed satisfied, for his expression resumed its previous languid state and his taut muscles relaxed once more. I took note of this heightened sensitivity and realized its danger. Artaxerxes could be like the sea: calm and placid on the surface, but like any other sea, concealing treacherous rocks and

shoals. The subjects of ascending to the throne and retaining rulership were clearly dangerous.

I breathed deeply again myself as he began to talk about the frustration of watching long-lost relatives resurface upon his ascension to vie for influence and complicate his life.

Throughout our conversation your name arose often and with great favor. Artaxerxes clearly does think of you as his truest and first mother. I guess you, of all people, would know how to treat an adopted child as a true and loving parent would.

He confessed the awesome strain of satisfying, placating, and defending himself against so many various factions within Persia. The threats to his throne.

At one point he stopped and looked into my eyes again.

"I never thought I would ever share these things with anyone," he said. "If candor is a result of love, then, Leah, I believe I am falling in love with you."

I smiled outwardly and trembled inwardly, for I could not forget stories of commoners perishing for their knowledge of such palace intrigues and secrets.

"And I with you, my dear Artaxerxes," I replied, displaying outward calm in spite of my fears.

Again I experienced that divided, spectatorlike sensation. Was this common? Did Artaxerxes the King say these things to all the concubines? Were these mere words meant to accompany another meaningless night of royal passion?

Despite these misgivings, what frightened me most of all was the growing certainty, deep within me, that his words of affection for me were true!

Yet even that inner spark could not convince me to believe the whispered affirmations. I could live with anything except a broken heart, I knew. I could bear the isolation of the women's quarters, tolerate the gossip and political backbiting. But to *believe* I was truly loved and then be ignored—that frightened me. Inwardly I began to harden myself against that possibility, even as outwardly I became more tender. The specter of rejection began to haunt my mind.

We kissed, long and warmly, after which he asked me more about myself. And I told him what was acceptable to tell—of my warm, com-

fortable upbringing in Susa, my loving parents and one brother. I did not tell him, of course, anything of my Hebrew heritage. Or of the fact that my great-great-grandfather was Jeconiah, the Jewish king and first leader of the Exile, carried as a captive here to this region. Nor of the terror that ransacked my senses when the soldiers seized me by force and whisked me into the palace. Of all the things I withheld from him, the one I felt most keenly at that moment was my familiarity with all things royal because of you, Esther.

Halfway through, I mercifully heard a light snore and allowed myself to fall asleep for a second time.

And then I awoke, as you had described from your own experience, to the slamming open of doors and the whole array of royal aides pouring into the room, oblivious to my presence. I am so glad you told me of this, for without your forewarning, I would have been just as appalled and confused as you were at the sudden end to our intimate tryst.

Furthermore, thanks to your descriptions, I was prepared for the letdown of being escorted back across those huge terraces and returned to the harem. Of course, Jesse and Mordecai awaited me with discreet and respectful inquiries about my evening.

I'm sure I looked as embarrassed as I felt as I hinted to them I might be their next queen. The two deflected glances to each other and shrugged to pass off the comment. Yet I felt my fear suddenly leave me; I knew the truth of what had transpired that night with the King. He loved me, of this I was certain. While my head did fear, my heart felt the truth of what had transpired that night.

So, my beloved Esther, we come to the one thing for which your cherished letter did not prepare me—nor could it have. The arrival of Mordecai on the fourth morning after my night with the King, a stricken and unhealthy pall upon his face. He sat beside me and informed me, in a level and grave voice, that I had been summarily rejected as queen.

The chill of my fear returned like a vengeful flood. I really have no idea what to do, which is why I await your response, my dear Queen Esther . . .



MOSSAD HEADQUARTERS,
BAGHDAD—LATER THAT AFTERNOON

Meyer backed up abruptly and knocked over his stool with a clatter.

For a long moment, he simply stood and stared at the last two words of his translation, then back at the Hebrew letters signifying the name and title.

Queen Esther!

His mind began to connect the dots. To run across the name *Esther*, a derivative of the Mesopotamian goddess *Ishtar*, could be coincidental, even within the Royal Records. But *Queen Esther*?

Without moving his gaze from the manuscript, he reached over to the desk's edge and fumbled for the phone amidst the jumble of papers and personal effects.

He should have seen it coming. Hints at the royal personage to whom the letter was addressed lay scattered throughout the document. But to find these comments, along with references to the Exilarch, ruler of the Jews in exile, on the same page together—it took his breath away.

He tried to calm the heaving of his chest and slow the frantic darting of his eyes but found his shock simply too powerful to suppress. He had to get out of there, he told himself, but without arousing suspicion. He knew that cameras and monitoring devices were everywhere—far more than what was needed to merely protect him. And the multitude of cameras he could detect were only a fraction of the total.

He made himself look away from the two documents on the desk and glanced around him again, as though someone might have sneaked in behind him during the preceding seconds. Frowning, he picked up the phone as casually as he could, yanked off his skullcap, and exited the room through a back door. He returned a moment later carrying a case, into which he slid the documents with a studied casualness, then left for good.

The only observer of his exit was an old street beggar who had taken up permanent residence in the alley. The rag-swathed body did not budge from its grimy crossed-legged position on the ground, but its oddly young eyes locked on to Ari's immediately, far more alert than an old man's drunken gaze should have.

Ari nodded and, after a moment's flicker of recognition, so did the "beggar." Ari turned away from the safehouse's outermost and most cunningly disguised security layer, then launched himself into the street.

A wild blend of car horns, racing engines, and human shouts engulfed him at once. Without expression, the bearded "Osborn" elbowed his way through the Arab crowd to his car, a carefully disheveled Toyota truck, placed the case on the seat, started the engine with a long crank of the key, slammed it into gear, and sped into the streets of southern Baghdad like the proverbial drunken sheikh.

Through the crowded, claustrophobic lanes of the southern Aalam district he raced, crazily fighting a combination of shock, relief, and panic. He weaved and ducked into a side street, peering anxiously into his rearview mirror to make sure he was not being followed, finally south onto the broad lanes of Yafa Street, then into the lawns of Zawra Park, Baghdad's largest greenbelt.

There, barely twenty yards out of the cloverleaf that marked the park's entrance, he saw what he needed. He swerved over and brought the truck to a screeching halt. In a second the door slammed and locked, and he was out, crossing the grass with long strides and holding the phone back up to his ear. He looked around him, saw no one paying any attention, and took a deep breath.

Finally, a place he knew to be safe from electronic eavesdropping—from either side.

He dialed and spoke one word into the phone, low but strong.

For a minute, Osborn's eyes danced along with the cadence of the beeps and whistles rushing past his ear. Then he began to speak in a breathless rant.

"No, Father—I'm in Baghdad. Everything's fine. Except—and this is why I'm calling you—I've found something big. No, not even that. It's bigger, it's the motherlode, a two in one. Both of the pieces we've been searching for, praying for, in a single haul."

He waited while a deep, ponderous voice spoke quickly through the earpiece.

"Yes. You guessed it. I think it's authentic. It'll take the lab in Jerusalem to confirm it for certain, and maybe a comparison. All I had was a quick pass with my makeshift infrared."

He paused and turned around to make sure he was still far from the nearest park stroller.

“That’s right. Hadassah, and the Exilarch bloodline, together. Our guesses could be validated. The Exilarch *did* start long before Alexander the Great.” He laughed, then sobered quickly. “I *told* you it was the motherlode. I’m nearly one hundred percent sure. But I’ll have to go to her, to validate them. The time has come. And then you’ll be able to go public, except . . . well, you’ve already gone public. But wait. There’s also a bad side to this. Some very bad news, I’m afraid.”