Prologue

The tumult and noise, quaking of the earth, thunder and lightning filled the sky as far as I could see—suddenly they were there—two gigantic dragons positioned at each end of the sky roaring, roaring, roaring. At their cries, all nations prepared for war--Poised to fight against the nation of the just.

Sweat pouring off my body, I willed myself out of the dream, leaped out of bed, and stood shaking from head to foot, wishing that I was again a child of four years, safe in Abba Mordecai's house.

"Are you all right, your highness?" Hathach spoke slowly and clearly, aware that I was not a native speaker of Farsi.

"Yes, I am fine, thank you, Hathach. I am sorry I disturbed you." I said the words because it was a considerate thing to say, but I don't think Hathach ever slept. Regardless of the time of day or night, any unusual sound from my suite of rooms evoked his watchful presence. I should be grateful for such protection, I know, but I feel a weight rather than gratitude—one which grows more oppressive each day. The dream was portentous: Order and Chaos. These last three months, I experienced this nightmare weekly. But in this previous week, nightly. I shivered in the cool desert morning air, more from fear than chill.

Hathach said something, but I did not understand his words.

In addition to teaching me the rudiments of Zarathrustra and the religion embraced by the Persians, Abba Mordecai was fluent in over thirty languages and had taught me many of them. But Farsi was difficult because of its alphabet, which for some reason, I readily confused with Aramaic. As a result, my Farsi sometimes mixed with Aramaic without my knowing it. I learned this while overhearing two of my maidservants' laughter—my cheeks still burn from the humiliation.

As if reading my mind, the soft voice sounded again. "Would you like me to summon Hegai and Thriti? Although it is not yet dawn, the King may wish to see you this day. He has invited guests of honor from the entire kingdom to partake of a feast."

After waiting a few moments for a reply, Hathach spoke into my silence, "Perhaps I overstep, your Highness, forgive me if I do so." I blinked several times in a futile attempt to clear my mind—rid myself of the effects of that terrible dream. Looking around at the room's opulence, the thick, luxurious rugs on elaborately decorated tile floors, the ornate gold, and brass lanterns and figurines, I exhaled quietly and shook my head. Would I ever stop feeling like an imposter?

The King's latest campaign had ended in disaster; therefore, he was enjoined to return to Greece; to preserve his empire's honor. As an administrator for the kingdom's treasury, Abba needed to understand the kings he served: Darius and now Xerxes, my husband. And he had taught me as well—therefore, I understood the exigency of righting King Darius's horrific humiliation at the Battle of Marathon.

Hathach was correct—I would need to soak in rosemary water and saffron, then be massaged by at least six women supervised by Hegai and Thriti. The unguents and lotions they would use on my skin and body were far too numerous for me to remember. And of course, choosing the gown would take hours—sometimes there were ten or twelve to be tried on before the ladies deemed me worthy to approach my King.

Forcing myself to speak, "Of course you have not overstepped, Hathach; I appreciate your counsel. I know how much King Ahasuerus values you. After all, you know him better than almost anyone now that his mother has died." My voice cracked as I spoke those last few words. How I would miss Her Majesty Atossa, my husband's mother…my mother had died before my third birthday. From our first meeting, the daughter of Cyrus the Great had been like a mentor. No, not mentor but mother. Blinking the tears from my eyes, I strode barefoot through my bedroom, opened the heavy double doors, and opened them.

For just a moment, Hathach's studiedly neutral expression collapsed. The sight of his widened eyes and darkened cheeks at his Queen in her bedtime attire was just what I needed to shake me out of my melancholy. Faking a cough to cover my giggles, I said, "Please do summon Hegai and Thriti—I will begin readying myself should the King call for me."