

## The Reluctant Queen —The Story of Esther

*“You should submit to the strong man; you should humble yourself before the man who wields power.”*

Persian Fire Tom Holland

*And the letters were sent by posts to all the King's provinces, to destroy, kill, and to cause to perish all Jews, both young and old, little children and women in one day even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to use the spoil of them for a prey.*

The Book of Esther

*A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created man, who created peace for man; who made Xerxes King, one King of many, one lord of many.*

Thermopylae: The Battle for the West

*Even if it is not true, you need to believe in ancient history.*

Xenophon

## 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. *Ahura Mazda...Angra Mainu*. The faith of my husband and his people was haunting my dreams.

Sweat pouring off my body, I willed myself out of the nightmare, leaped out of bed, and stood trembling 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, enunciating clearly, aware that I was not a native speaker of Persian.

"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 had experienced this nightmare weekly. But in this previous week, nightly. I shivered in the cool desert morning air, more from fear than chill. Thinking of asura and daevas competing for power, I closed my eyes and prayed, *Hallelujah*.

*I praise the LORD with all my heart in the assembled congregation of the upright. The works of the LORD are great, within reach of all who desire them. His deeds are splendid and glorious; His beneficence is everlasting; He has won renown for His wonders. The LORD is gracious and compassionate; He gives food to those who fear Him; He is ever mindful of His covenant.*

*He revealed to His people His powerful works, in giving them the heritage of nations. His handiwork is truth and justice; all His precepts are enduring, well-founded for all eternity, wrought of truth and equity. He sent redemption to His people; He ordained His covenant for all time; His name is holy and awesome. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the LORD; all who practice it gain sound understanding. Praise of Him is everlasting.*

I could feel the anxiety from the nightmare drain away as the thoughts of lesser gods—even of Haman— were banished from my mind.

Suddenly I was aware that Hathach was speaking rapidly; his voice had risen in volume. I could not understand his words. “Evidently, you have been talking to me and did not reply. I apologize, Hathach. I was ...” I hesitated. *Stick to the truth.* “I was praying and therefore distracted. Can you repeat what you were saying but far more slowly, please?”

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

"Yes, of course, your Highness, I am wondering if you wish 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."

*Here is the sign.*

*Three days of fasting and prayer... were they enough?*

*Have I ever been as terrified? No, not even when I was a child, alone with my desperately ill and dying mother.*

I was paralyzed. The peace from my earlier prayer had been engulfed by panic. My breath stuck in my throat, and the heaviness in my chest expanded, vise-like. Although Xerxes was my husband, he had not summoned me in over a month...my maidservants made sure I knew that he had not been alone in his bed. Instead, during most of those nights, he had been with a fifteen-year-old beauty from Mede.

This is the man who calls himself the King of Kings. The man who spent four years fighting to avenge his father's war with Greece and failed. The man who commanded that the Aegean waters be lashed 300 times and then be shackled when Greece's bridge was destroyed. I had not seen him since he had returned from these awful battles. Oddly, I understood why he had no desire to see me, his wife.

I was about to appear unsummoned in his court, an act which warrants execution unless he chooses to extend his scepter to spare me. Feeling the almost painful hammering of my heart, I slipped to the ground, prostrate.

Profound sorrow mixed with regret poured through me as I prayed, "Lord, I am not a fit servant. I have lost count of the Shabbats I have not prayed and the Passovers not honored. Only through Your good graces have I been able to fast from the unclean foods of the pagan feasts. Although I have no right to speak, to beg your ear, I do so anyway because I am desperate.

"You have exiled us through justice. But Lord of the Universe hear me now as I speak Moses' words to you, for indeed, Babylon is the new Egypt:

"It has been heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of these people; you Lord who plainly reveal yourself! Your cloud stands over them, and you go before them in a column of cloud and by night in a column of fire. If now, you slay these people through Haman's hand, the nations will hear that the Lord abandoned His Chosen ones. Pardon then the wickedness of your people in keeping with your great kindness, even as you have forgiven them in Egypt until now.' "

Then I whispered:

*God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, blessed are you. Help me, who am alone and have no help but you, for I am taking my life in my hand. As a child I used to hear from the books of our forefathers, that you, O Lord, always free those who are pleasing to you. Now help me who am alone and have no one but you, O Lord, my God.*

After waiting a few moments for my reply, Hathach spoke into my silence, "Perhaps I overstep, your Highness, forgive me if I do so."

I looked around at the room's opulence, the thick, luxurious rugs on elaborately decorated mosaic floors, the ornate gold and brass lanterns and figurines. Exhaling quietly, I shook my head. *Would I live to see this room again?*

I knew Hathach had noticed the untouched food and drink for the last three days. The man missed nothing. But he was loyal; I did not believe that he had said anything to any of the court about my prolonged fast.

*It's time for you to be a queen, be brave and steadfast, just as Moses commands.*

Hathach was correct—to ready myself for the King, 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 Xerxes 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 missed Her Majesty Atossa, my husband's mother...my mother had died. 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 terror. 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." *For I will go to him just before sundown.*

## CHAPTER ONE

*Fourteen years earlier, Susa, Persia*

It was just Mama and me. Papa had left many days ago and had not returned. I learned quickly not to ask where he was because Mama cried when I mentioned his name. She cried most of the time, actually. Especially when I told her I was hungry. I pretended I was full when I could not recall the last time I'd had anything to eat.

But I did know how to get to the well. Papa began taking me with him on my fourth birthday. Each day we went together to the well. Each day Mama objected. Father would smile at her when Mama cried, "Jonathan! She is too young to go down there!"

Very gently, he would pat her big stomach and say, "Rachel, you have no need to worry about Esther. You just rest and take care of our boy. I'll not take my eyes off our princess."

He would then reach down to lift me up on his shoulders and sing as we left our house. Father had a beautiful voice and knew all the psalms by heart.

*I will sing praise so that I might know the highest Essence of Divine Existence and Justice and Impeccability are Foundations of Your Throne: Fire will go before You.*

Within a few days, I knew enough to sing along with him, loving the sound of our voices and, at the same time, learning the psalms. But Papa was clever too in practical ways: He used song to teach me how to get water.

In the middle of the psalms, he would call out the directions to the well. In a sing-song voice, “Esther, left at the house of Ish-Shalom, remember your friend Rebecca?”

Father put me down as we took the left so I would walk it. Then as we continued down that road, we would sing, “left at the house of Ish-Shalom” until we got to the next turn and the next. There were four turns in all. Soon I could tell him how to get to the well. I know now that Papa had forewarning about the accident which would kill him. Why else would he have taken his small girl and taught her how to fetch water from the well?

When we arrived at the village, we always stopped at the inn for lunch and to bring food back to Mama, who spent most of the time in bed. She had grown huge with the baby who had not come yet.

I played outside in the courtyard when Mother came to the door to tell me to run and get the midwife. But then all the blood came, and she collapsed. Mama’s frighteningly white face. And the blood. And so I ran, faster than I had ever run in my life.

I do not know how long I ran through the warren of kuchehs, which crisscrossed our neighborhood, avoiding grabbing hands. And shouting as loudly as I could, “My Mama needs a midwife! Please help her!”

When I ran straight into the woman.

“Please, please, help my momma.”

When she bent down to pick me up, I almost let her. She had a kindly face with eyes that seemed to glow, but then the image of Mama lying there came into my mind and I managed to extricate myself from her arms. Once back on the ground again, I shouted out my plea for

help. I was only four but could see she could not understand what I was saying, so I turned back around and started to run toward home. Momentarily, I stopped to turn back. *Were they coming?*

The woman was speaking with a very tall, bearded man who had suddenly come up behind her. The woman's hands were moving wildly, and she was talking in a language I did not understand to the man who towered over her. His head quickly moved up and down, listening, then he grabbed her arm to follow me. Apparently, she was protesting because he wrapped his arm around her and pulled until they were both walking rapidly beside me. Only years later, when Abba brought me back through the maze of the high walled adobe and brick kuchehs to the house that I had led him and Imma to, did I realize the extent of the miraculous guidance I had been given. The distance was over a mile—I had never before been that far away from my house before.

*Finally, we are here!* I raced through the courtyard and into the entrance of our red brick house and stopped short. *What is that terrible smell? Mama, Mama!!*

Even my childish mind could tell she was dead. There were oceans of blood about her body. Where before, the blood had been between her legs when she had collapsed, now it was a vast pool. Her arms were stretched above her head as if she were trying to swim out of it. I stood staring, stupefied. This time I did not resist when the woman's hands picked me up and held me. When she clasped me to her soft breast, I squirmed to get away because I could feel her tears soaking my hair and the trembling of her body with her sobs.

I heard the man's voice speaking softly. I did not understand what he said, but when he took me from her to gather me against his chest, I looked up at his face. He looked like my Papa!

His eyes were dark with lights in them, and his eyebrows sat like caterpillars over them.

Fluffy caterpillars. He had a turban on his head that was very dusty, and he had a beard. Just like Papa's only with white in it.

I sighed, closed my eyes, and fell into a deep sleep. I felt safe in those arms.