



## Chapter One

### The Eighth Year of King Artaxerxes' Reign\* Persia

**O**n my twelfth birthday, my father discovered that I could read.

He came home long before the supper hour that night, an occurrence so rare that in my shock I forgot to greet him. Instead, I sat stupefied, clutching a forbidden clay tablet.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his gaze arrested by the sight of the tablet clasped to my chest.

My father, a royal scribe in the Persian court, treated his writing tools as if they were the holy objects from the Ark of the Covenant. Before I had learned to walk or speak, I had learned never to go near his scrolls and tablets for fear I might damage them.

\* 457 BC

“You know better than to touch this,” he said, when I didn’t respond right away.

I swallowed the ball of gathering dread in my throat, knowing myself caught. Truth seemed my only option. “I was reading,” I said, as I replaced the tablet on the floor with extravagant care.

He studied me from beneath lowered brows. “Even if you could read—which you cannot—you should not be anywhere near my scribal supplies. It is very wrong of you to lie, Sarah.”

“I am not lying, Father.”

He heaved a sigh. Spreading his hand in mock invitation toward the tablet, he said, “Demonstrate.”

The tablet was in Persian, one of the most complicated languages of the world. I could have chosen to teach myself Aramaic, a simpler language for a beginner and more appropriate for a Jew. But most Aramaic documents were recorded on parchment, and I had decided that there would be fewer chances of accidentally damaging clay or stone tablets than fragile parchment scrolls.

Licking my lips, I concentrated on the complex alphabet before me. The symbols looked like a series of delicate nails standing upright or lying sideways, an occasional incomplete triangle thrown in for confusion. With halting accuracy I began to read the first line from left to right. Then the second and the third.

My father sank to the carpet next to me, his movements slow. He was silent for a long moment. Then he asked, “Who taught you to read Persian?”

“Nobody. I learned by myself. I’ve been studying for five months.”

He seemed speechless. Then, with jerky movements, he fetched three small clay cylinders and placed them before me.

“What’s this word? And this? Can you make out this sentence?”

We must have sat there for hours as he tested my knowledge, corrected my pronunciation, and demonstrated grammatical rules. He forgot about my months-long transgression of secretly handling his scribal supplies. He forgot to remonstrate with me for having taught myself to read without his permission.

But then he also forgot to ask me *why* I had wanted to learn. Although I was surprised by his lack of anger at my behavior, his lack of interest was all too familiar. In the years since my mother’s death when I was seven, my father had rarely spoken to me of anything save mundane household matters, and even that was rare. My desires, my motives, my hopes, held no appeal to him.

Late that night, after so many hours of his company, when I crawled onto my thin cotton-filled mattress, my mouth spread in a wide smile. I had finally found a way to hold my father’s attention. He had spent more time with me on this one night than he was wont to do in a fortnight. Months of hard work had won me the desire of my heart; he had found something in me worth his while.



After we lost my mother, Aunt Leah, my mother’s only sister, began coming once a week to our home to help us with the housework. She tried to show me how to sew and clean and cook. Our conversations around these topics tended toward frustration—for her—and pain for me.

“Weren’t you paying attention when I showed you how to pluck the chicken?”

“No, Aunt Leah. I beg your pardon.”

“You can’t use a broom like that, Sarah. You only move the

dust from one spot to another. That's not called cleaning. That's a migration of dirt."

"Yes, Aunt Leah. I beg your pardon."

"This pot won't clean itself just by you staring at it and sighing."

Silence seemed the best response at times like this. I could not offend my only aunt by telling her the truth: that I would rather hit my head with the pot and make myself lose consciousness than have to face the frustrating boredom of scrubbing its black bottom.

My one consolation was that our house was small—four rooms and a hallway with a tiny garden the size of a large carpet in the back, so there wasn't much to clean. The few rugs we had were woven rather than knotted, and I just beat them against the stone hedge outside. Our furniture, modest to start with, had served my family a good twenty years; even my impatient treatment of the pieces could not ruin them more than they already had been.

Aunt Leah came to visit the day after my twelfth birthday and discovered me practicing the Persian alphabet on a fresh clay tablet. The tablet fit comfortably in the palm of my hand; I held one blunt end with my thumb and used a stylus to carve new words on its wet surface. Since my father had uncovered my secret and seemed to sanction it, I felt no reason to keep it hidden any longer.

Aunt Leah slapped a hand against the crown of her head. "Are you writing now?"

"I am," I said with pride, stretching my cramping legs on the crude carpet.

"It's a scandal. What will your father say?"

"He is teaching me."

"It's a scandal," she repeated. She made me put the tablet

and stylus away and help her with the laundry until my father arrived.

Although I was dismissed from the room so that they might hold a private discussion, I could hear snatches of their conversation through the drawn curtain that separated the rectangular room into two parts. My heart beat an uncomfortable rhythm as I considered the possibility that Aunt Leah might convince my father to stop teaching me. I waited with fuming resentment, barely able to keep myself from marching in and demanding that she stop interfering with the first good thing that had happened to me in years.

“The child just wants to learn to read and write, Leah. There’s no shame in that. She even shows a glimmer of talent.” I was surprised to hear my father defend me; I couldn’t remember his ever doing so before. The simple words soothed my rising anger.

“The child is a girl.”

“Literate women are not unknown. The queen reads as well as any scribe, they say.”

“Sarah is not a royal Persian woman. She’s a simple Jewish maiden.”

I could not make out my father’s answer. Aunt Leah’s response came heated and fast, though. “No good will come of this, Simeon. You mark my words. Your stubborn refusal to listen to reason will cause that child nothing but harm.”

She stormed out of the house, not taking the time to put her shoes on right. As soon as she left, I gathered my practice tablet and borrowed tools and walked into my father’s room. He sat on the floor, his head bent, a hand covering his eyes.

With care I laid my bundle in front of him. “Would you like to see what I did today, Father? It’s not much; Aunt Leah interrupted my practice.”

This was new for me, this bold approach to my father. I had known for years that I was a bother to him. He found my conversation trying; my presence aggravated him. But my literary endeavor had given me a new confidence. I knew my father loved his work. *I* might be a nuisance, but the work wasn't. I thought he would bear with me as long as we had a clay tablet between us.

He lifted his head and focused on me for a long moment. One corner of his mouth lifted. I let out my breath when he made no protest. "Let's see what you have accomplished, then."



Aunt Leah came back with mighty reinforcements the following week. I had met my cousin Nehemiah years before during the time of my mother's sickness. But in recent times I only heard the stories of his great accomplishments at court. He had risen to the position of cupbearer to the king.

In Persia, rank was measured by proximity to the person of the king. Only those of consequence were given positions that placed them in constant contact with royalty. Nehemiah tasted the king's wine as a human shield against poison. But he also acted as one of his advisors, for it was common for the king to ask the opinion of those closest to him. Even I, a child of twelve, knew that Artaxerxes held him in high regard. This was enough to make him a frightening visitor. However, the fact that he came with his pomp and circumstance in the wake of my aunt petrified me. Had she persuaded him to intervene against my desire to become literate? If so, he was too great a man to be denied.

"Bring Lord Nehemiah some refreshments, Sarah," my aunt ordered as I stood gaping at them in the hallway.

“No, no, I need nothing. Let the child join us, Leah. It’s been an age since I saw her. You have grown up into quite a young lady.”

He was a tall man with startling dark red hair and flawless manners. Even his fingernails were trimmed and neat, so different from my father’s stained, rough hands. I made an awkward bow, unused to palace protocol. “Welcome, my lord. This way, please,” I said, my voice faint with anxiety. “I shall fetch my father for you,” I added and slipped out, glad to escape his august presence.

My father rushed out of his cramped chamber. “You honor us,” he said, addressing Nehemiah and sparing Aunt Leah a short nod. He motioned everyone to sit on our skinny cushions, which had been arranged along the floor.

“It’s been too long, Simeon, since I came to your home. You know how the palace drains one’s time. But that is no good excuse; forgive my long absence. I am glad to see you.”

“And I you, my lord. Though I fear that my sister-in-law has bothered you needlessly with the small matters of my household.”

“As a matter of fact, Leah did mention something about an urgent matter concerning Sarah.”

I rolled my eyes. My father only said, “Indeed?”

My aunt bristled, sitting up straighter and raising her voice. “A Jewish maiden has no business reading and writing Persian. She needs to learn womanly graces, not stuff her head with knowledge that will be of no benefit to her.”

I grew hot at her words. “How can it be of no benefit if I can help Father with his work? Or keep the household accounts and relieve him of one more duty?”

“Keep your tongue, Sarah,” my father ordered, his voice sounding tired.

“Let us hear from the child. This concerns her most, it seems to me.” The sharp brown gaze of my cousin landed on me, making me squirm. “Tell me, Sarah, do you want to learn?”

“Oh yes, my lord. More than anything. And I am very good at it. Ask my father. I taught myself how to read Persian.”

“You see?” Aunt Leah struck her hand palm-up into the air for emphasis. “She has already forgotten the value of humility.”

“It’s only the truth,” I said, my voice trailing.

Nehemiah covered his mouth with his elegant hand for a moment. The faint lines around his eyes deepened. I wondered if he might be smiling beneath the cover of his fingers, but when he lowered his hand, his expression was serious. “If the Lord has gifted the child, then perhaps it’s because He has a plan for her life that requires such skills. And who are we to stand in the way of the Lord?”

“The *Lord*?” My aunt’s voice sounded like a broken shepherd’s pipe.

Nehemiah ignored the interjection. “Leah, do you remember Queen Esther?”

Every Jew in Persia knew about Esther. Only one generation ago the entire Jewish population of Persia would have been wiped out if not for her courage and ingenuity. We celebrated Purim in honor of her victory.

“Of course I remember Queen Esther.”

“She had the gift of extraordinary beauty. Yet what struck one most about her was her sweetness. I met her once when I was a boy, you know. An unforgettable woman.” Nehemiah’s face became inscrutable for a moment and I wondered if his memories had become more real than our company. When he spoke again, his voice seemed softer.

“Her intelligence and grace made her queen of the greatest empire the world has known. But it was God who placed

her on that throne. The Lord who knew the danger to His people, groomed her for that very position.”

“I don’t understand,” my aunt interjected, looking as though she had been sucking on sour cherries. “What has Esther to do with this situation?”

“My point is that we must be ready to follow the Lord wherever He leads us. Esther came into royal position not knowing that one day her gifts and influence would be needed for God’s great plan of salvation for His people. We must walk through the small doors that the Lord opens for us, in case they lead to a greater path. I say again: who are we to stand in the way of the Lord’s plans for Sarah? If her gifts prove a useful tool in His hand, then we must build them up, not crush them.”

I brightened as it sank into my brain that Nehemiah was championing me. I tried to wipe the smile from my face, knowing my aunt would take exception to my smug victory. Inside I felt like jumping up and dancing. Outwardly I schooled my features to reflect a modicum of the humility I had lacked earlier.

“Lord Nehemiah, you want a Jewish girl to learn to be a scribe?” Aunt Leah finally burst out.

“I want a Jewish girl to fulfill her destiny. I don’t know what that is. But I want her to be prepared for whatever God may send her way.”

At that pronouncement we all fell silent. I felt the weight of his words with a new insight. Nehemiah’s interpretation of my childish desires was concerned much more with the will of God than the will of Sarah. This was too disturbing a concept to grasp; with the ease of youth, I buried it somewhere in the recesses of my heart. It was more pleasant to focus on the fact that I was about to receive my dearest dream.

“So then, Sarah, you must promise to study hard and hone your talent,” Nehemiah said to me.

He might as well be making a child promise to eat rich honey cakes. Unable to stop the grin from spreading across my face, I said, “I promise, my lord.”



My father began to teach me in earnest after that. By the time I was sixteen, in addition to Persian I knew how to read and write Akkadian, another complicated language practiced only by royal scribes for the keeping of important administrative records.

Ironically, the most popular tongue in the Persian Empire was not Persian—a language too complex for the common folk of foreign nations to learn. Aramaic, simpler to understand and record, and already practiced by the many peoples displaced through the Assyrian and Babylonian wars for the past two hundred years, grew more popular than other tongues in the Eastern empire. So I became proficient in Aramaic also.

I learned how to write on tablets of clay using a sharp reed to carve into their wet, unfired surface. Father would also bring me parchment made of calf or sheepskin, alkalinized and stretched on a wooden frame to render its surface smooth for easy writing. Sometimes, he would even give me a large roll of papyrus, which was the most fragile of the writing materials, susceptible to both moisture and heat.

Becoming a proficient keeper of records in an empire that relied on its administrative skill to prosper made me a valuable commodity to my father. I developed the ability to speak and interpret several languages in a kingdom that faced multitudes of linguistic barriers, and daily needed to overcome them in order to function. I also learned to practice the art of accounts keeping. I could now help my father increase his commissions.

Aunt Leah visited less and less often once I began to apply myself to learning. I suspect she never fully reconciled herself to Cousin Nehemiah's pronouncement. Yet it was more than that. As I gained free access to the scribe's world, I grew less tolerant of hers. I spent fewer hours in her company. My intense work schedule gave me a reasonable excuse to escape her attempts at drawing me into her woman's world. My father hired a servant to help with housekeeping once a week, and I did my best to care for our daily needs.

Once my aunt would have fought me and brought me under some form of discipline. But I think the combination of my father, Nehemiah, and me was too much for her.

I doubt my cousin had intended that I should grow into womanhood with no feminine influences. Yet that is what I managed to accomplish by my stubborn refusal to give my aunt room in my life. By the time I was twenty, I was more scribe than woman. My aunt, tired out by my constant rejections, finally gave up.



Cousin Nehemiah would visit us on occasion to check on my progress. Once he brought his own parchment and asked me to read. I unrolled the fragile papyrus on my father's small desk to find a beautifully crafted Hebrew text.

"I cannot read this, my lord."

"You do not read Hebrew?" He raised one eyebrow. "The language of your own people?"

I shrugged. "It's of little use in court documents."

He pressed his lips. "Perhaps you remember the words. I will read a few lines for you:

*God is our refuge and strength,  
A very present help in trouble.*

I remembered them well, though it was a painful recollection I would as soon forget. I wondered what had provoked him to bring this particular psalm to me. Shying away from the emotions that were tethered to the words, I merely said, "I remember."

"I once heard you recite the whole psalm when you were a little girl. Did you know that?"

"No, my lord."

He lowered his head. "It was when your mother was sick. She had been my favorite cousin growing up and I was sorely grieved at her illness. I visited your home often in those days, praying for a miracle.

"Once, toward the end, I walked into her room. You were alone with her. She held your little hand. Neither of you had noticed me come in, and I remained silent, hoping not to disturb you. That's when I heard you recite this psalm to her. You did it from beginning to end without flaw. You could not have been more than eight."

"I was seven."

He nodded. "Her eyes were closed. She was emaciated by then, and yet somehow still lovely. In those moments, there seemed to be such holiness about her. An utter lack of fear. I thought, *God has truly become her refuge and her strength*. Even that vile sickness could not rob her of her tranquility."

I cleared my throat and stared at the floor. How nice for him to have happy recollections of my mother's illness. I could not share them.

"Do you still remember the words to the entire psalm?"

"Yes, my lord."

“You believed them then. Do you believe them now? Do you believe that God is your very present help in trouble?”

I looked up. “No, my lord.”

He had the kind of face that reflected his emotions. Disappointment settled on his features like a light veil. “I suspected as much. It’s hard to see those we love suffer without questioning God.”

“I haven’t become an idolater,” I said in quick defense of my feelings. “I believe in the Lord. It’s only that these lavish promises have lost their meaning for me. Perhaps we are meant to help ourselves by our own efforts. Perhaps God is too busy to bother with our daily needs.”

“I have never come across that principle in the Torah.”

“That may be. But I have come across it in life.”

He left shortly after this conversation. I wondered if my forthright admission had cost me his favor. But he came again for other visits, acting as though we had never spoken of my mother’s favorite psalm. And he made certain that I learned how to read and write Hebrew after that.



My scribal work occupied my days to such a degree that I had little opportunity to enjoy the typical pleasures of young women. I never whiled away the hours in the company of girls my own age. I had no interest in what I considered to be their superficial pastimes. Few invitations came to my father and me, and our social life shrank to a few obligatory annual feasts.

My world grew narrow and inward as a result. Father never noticed the lack, but perhaps Nehemiah did, for with one swift stroke he chose to expand the boundaries of my life.

Nehemiah's visits, though infrequent, were common enough that his appearance at our door late one evening gave me no cause for alarm.

It was suppertime and I offered him barley soup and fresh bread. He examined the watery concoction I had prepared and declined.

"So how is Sarah progressing?" he asked my father.

Taking a slurping mouthful from his bowl, my father hesitated. "She is a dismal cook, but her skills as a scribe now surpass mine. What she lacks in experience, she makes up for in knowledge."

Nehemiah smiled. "That should satisfy."

"Satisfy whom?" I asked quickly, pleased at the thought of being satisfactory to anyone.

"The queen."

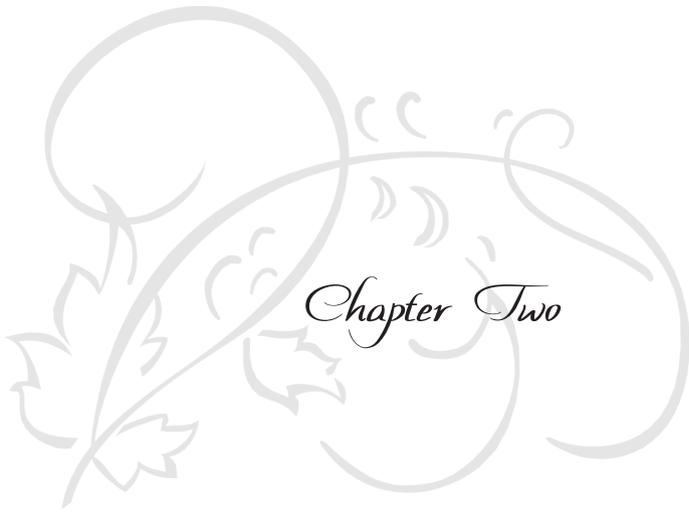
My father straightened with an abrupt motion. "What have you done?" he asked, his voice faint.

Nehemiah leaned back. The flowing sleeve of his silk robe moved like a billowing wave in the lamplight. "I have acted in Sarah's best interest."

"Acted, *how?*"

I was taken aback by my father's hostility. The realization began to sink into my consciousness that my cousin had taken some momentous step that concerned me. "My lord?"

"Sarah, you shall be the queen's senior scribe."



## Chapter Two

### The Sixteenth Year of King Artaxerxes' Reign\* Persepolis

Earlier this week the queen dismissed her senior scribe," Nehemiah said. "He had proven incompetent one too many times." My cousin leaned back against a cushion. "She has since sifted through every eunuch available from Susa to Persepolis, but none has met with her approval." He stopped speaking in order to brush an invisible fleck from his shoulder.

"Here is where you come in, Sarah. It so happens that the queen has lately been reading the account of a female scribe in ancient Mesopotamia. Last evening, while she partook of supper with the king, she bemoaned the lack of such a woman in Persia.

\* 449 BC

“I was present during this conversation, and was given the opportunity to tell Her Majesty that I knew just such a woman. I mentioned *you* to her, Sarah—your ability, your training, your passion. I said you were the very woman she sought.” Nehemiah gave a bland smile, as though his pronouncement had not just turned my life on its head.

“You told her *I* was such a woman? What did she say?”

“That she wishes you to be her scribe, for a trial period at first. And if you please her, which I have no doubt you shall, then the work is yours.”

“She would have to live at the palace for such a post!” My father’s protest sounded loud in the quiet room.

“That she would, Simeon.”

“You want to take my daughter out of my home?”

“What would you prefer? That she should remain in this house and spend her days in isolation? Without a single friendship, without companionship?”

“And who in the palace is going to offer her all that—the queen? Have you given a thought to her future? Who would ever want to marry her: a royal eunuch?”

I would have laughed at my father’s biting humor if the tension between the two men hadn’t reduced me to a jumble of nerves. I sank into my cushion and bit my nails.

“Royal servants are not in lifelong bondage. She’s more likely to meet a prospective husband at the palace than she would here. There are plenty of Jews in the service of the royal family. She could marry whomever she chooses,” Nehemiah countered.

All this talk of marriage and husbands seemed to drive the conversation away from the topic that was of most interest to me. “I thought you said something about my being a scribe, my lord.”

“A *senior* scribe. You would never have to cook again, or wash your own laundry, or dust and sweep. The queen’s servants take care of her staff’s general needs. And you could still see your father frequently since he works at the palace too.”

I could not digest the immensity of Nehemiah’s words. I felt like I had swallowed one of the king’s dancers and she was busy turning summersaults in my belly. The thought of moving away from the only home I knew was overwhelming; the thought of reporting to the queen of Persia even more so. “I cannot do it,” I said. “It is too much.”

My father heaved a sigh that seemed to come up from his toes.

“Sarah, you can.” Nehemiah slashed his silk-clad arm through the air for emphasis. “I have worked with eunuchs and scribes over half my life and have seen none more gifted than you. The Lord has prepared you for this day.”

Nehemiah’s words of praise settled over my heart like a pleasant balm. Did he really think me that talented? Then I remembered the plethora of other deficiencies I’d have to contend with. “I haven’t the faintest glimmer of palace protocol. No doubt I shall offend the queen before I even open my mouth, and after *that*, my doom is sure.”

“Members of the queen’s retinue will give you whatever training you need. You will not be the first outsider to move into the palace who needs a bit of polish.”

Among Nehemiah’s talents was an extraordinary ability for persuasion. Half of me thought the whole idea ludicrous. I could not imagine myself adjusting to such an inconceivable change. The other half began to catch the spark of my cousin’s enthusiasm. To live in the palace—to be surrounded by beauty and culture and new wonders. To occupy such a high position—one rarely enjoyed by a woman, no less. To have my abilities

acknowledged in such a public fashion. These realities presented an irresistible pull, while fear pushed back with equal force. I sat frozen, caught between the two forces within myself.

As if sensing my weakness, Nehemiah pressed his advantage. “Think of it Sarah: you shall have more tablets and scrolls than even you can count. Your own scribes will report to you and do your bidding. The queen will rely on you to administer her vast holdings. Many will depend on you; your life shall serve a purpose you could not have conceived.”

“I . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“This is a unique opportunity, Sarah—a once in a lifetime moment. Ponder this: what are the chances that the queen should read an obscure account about a female scribe? What are the chances that she should want such a scribe and express her desire in my presence? What are the chances that I should happen to know such a woman—to have intimate knowledge of her fidelity, her ability, and her wisdom—qualities most esteemed at the court? What are the chances of such a configuration of far-fetched circumstances?

“None! There is no *chance* at work here, my dear. This is a door that the Lord holds open for you. Walk through it. He who has called shall also equip. Everything you lack shall be provided.”

I hesitated. I could not proceed blindly for the sake of faith; I was not like Nehemiah. I needed human assurance. Human reasoning.

“Tell me what holds you back,” he said.

He already knew the answer, I reckoned. He merely wanted to hear me say it. “Fear,” I admitted, and then decided to open my heart to him. “Fear that I’ll fail. Fear that I will not fit into the palace and make myself and my father and you into a laughingstock.”

“You may fail; I cannot deny it. But if you go through life making every decision based on what is safest, you will look back one day and discover that you have missed out on the best. Do you think you can reject the offer of the queen and return to your quiet existence without regrets? No, Sarah. Allowing fear to run your life will only rob you of your future.”

I drew my knees up against my chest. “How long do I have to decide?”

“Until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Queen Damaspia is sending a servant to fetch you and your things in the afternoon.”

I turned to my father. “What do you think, Father?”

He shook his head. “You must choose. I know not.”



In the end, in spite of Nehemiah’s advice, it was fear that determined my decision, not the Lord’s will. I was more afraid of turning down the queen’s offer and regretting it the rest of my life than I was of my own deficiencies. One fear beat the other in its urgings.

A eunuch from the household of the queen showed up the afternoon of the following day to transport me and my meager belongings to the queen’s apartments in Persepolis.

“Good-bye, Father,” I said, while the eunuch waited outside. If I had expected an emotional display, I would have been disappointed. But as my father had not held me in a tender embrace even once since the death of my mother, I was prepared for his awkward distance.

He pulled on his beard. “Well, I’ll see you at the palace, no doubt.”

“How shall I contact you?”

“You can send me a message through one of the servants.”

And that was the end of my life at home. I would have wept as I walked out, except that I was too occupied with thoughts of Persepolis to dwell on what I was leaving behind.

The eunuch had strapped my wooden chest to the back of a cart. I climbed up next to him and covered my hair with a long scarf, hoping not to arrive at the palace looking dusty as well as provincial.

Persepolis was famed as the most exquisite structure built by human hands that the world had ever seen. The palace, surrounded by walls as thick as the height of an ancient oak, was nestled on a terraced landscape so that it was visible from a great distance. Like everyone else living in the area, I had seen glimpses of it most of my life. I had even peeked within the entrance through the massive gates, which gaped open during the day. But to drive past the guards and *into* the wide avenue that led to the grounds of the palace itself was a heady experience.

My father traveled this path every day and had grown accustomed to the stunning sculptures and reliefs carved on every surface, the tall columns that seemed to hold up the heavens.

For me, however, each sight was new and awe inspiring. We had entered through the Gate of Xerxes, an imposing portico made of carved limestone. On either side stood two giant statues of winged bulls. I almost fell backwards into the cart trying to see to the top of them. The marble that covered the winding driveway was more luxurious than the floor *inside* my childhood home. On either side of us majestic cypress trees lined the road. The heady scent of thousands of white and purple hyacinth blossoms made my head spin.

The Gate of Xerxes was the entrance closest to the main royal stables. The eunuch left the cart and donkey in one of the larger stalls housing royal carriages and carts, and we continued our journey on foot.

As we left the marble courtyards and wide limestone staircases rising to stupefying heights, wall friezes gave way to silver, ivory, and ebony carvings; gold, lapis lazuli, and carnelian details covered many surfaces, as if to blind visitors by the overwhelming display of riches at every step. It seemed impossible that human hands could have wrought such luxury—such immensity.

Another wonder that struck me that first day was the lack of foul odors. The whole atmosphere of the palace seemed saturated with perfumes. I learned later that palace engineers had installed covered drainpipes underground to carry sewage away from its grounds.

To any observer that may have caught a glimpse of me, I would have seemed a callow outsider. I doubt I closed my mouth for the length of time it took us to walk from the stables to the women's quarters.

My guide delivered me to a cramped, windowless room and informed me that I would be sharing my quarters with three other women, also servants of Queen Damaspia, who were currently occupied with their work.

I sank on the carpeted floor and looked about me. Even this small place, out of the way and created for servants, held more luxury than my childhood home. The walls were painted a faint blue and two plain columns stood at each side of the door. Shiny green tiles covered the floor where the carpet ended. Rolled against a wall rested four sets of mattresses and bedding; someone had clearly prepared for my coming.

I was wondering what I was supposed to do next when a

woman with curled hair, dressed in crisp linen garments, appeared at my door.

“I am the queen’s senior handmaiden. She has assigned me to welcome you.”

Was I supposed to bow to her? Should I introduce myself? Was she considered my social equal or was I expected to address her as a superior? I felt the weight of my own ignorance crushing me.

My visitor frowned as she examined me from head to foot. Flustered, I scratched the side of my face nervously, hot under such an unflinching evaluation.

“That won’t do.” She knocked my fingers away from my face. “When you come before the queen, there will be no scratching, no fidgeting, no picking, no coughing, no speaking unless you are spoken to. And don’t even think about blowing your nose. Do I make myself clear, scribe?”

That was only the beginning of my training. For eight days I was deluged with more information than my father had poured into me in eight years. And this merely prepared me for my first interview with the queen.

Damaspia, the only lawful wife of King Artaxerxes, was not what I expected. When later I grew more familiar with royal practices, I’d learn to appreciate how understated her court was. She expected few honors, though she was due every form of them.

Not many people were present in her chamber when I was ushered in for my first meeting. I had been bathed so thoroughly I doubt even the angels could smell cleaner. But no amount of soap could hide the coarse fabric of my garment or the rough edges of my manners. If she noticed, she made no mention.

Damaspia was the most beautiful creature I had ever set

eyes on. Even clad in a simple long linen garment with no jewelry, she took one's breath away. Although she was past the first flush of youth, her skin remained taut and her fashionably tall figure retained its willowy charm. Everything about her was narrow; her waist; her nose; her fingers—everything except her lips and eyes, which were both wider than most people's. Her hair, unlike mine, curled naturally and had been rolled and tucked under with gold combs so that it looked far shorter than it was. The cerulean blue gaze rested on me and she gestured for me to approach.

"So you are my new scribe," she said, when I straightened from my imperfectly executed bow.

"If Your Majesty pleases."

"I will tell you what I please. Be honest. Be loyal. Be competent. Do the work I give and do it well, and we shall have no problems, you and I."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

She flicked a hand. "Well, go and do it, then."

That was the end of my introduction to the queen, though my full training in royal formalities went on for months.

The only time in the palace when I did not feel like I was blundering were the hours I spent in my cramped office, which I shared with two eunuchs, scribes who reported to me. The first day or two they had little to say to me and spent entirely too much time staring at me, the way they would have an exotic animal in a cage. I suppose they had never had to work with a woman before. In time, as they saw that I knew my craft and they could rely on me to provide adequate guidance, they forgot that I was a woman, and treated me as an equal. With them, I need not worry about palace etiquette or social niceties. Our work was our code of conduct. I would squirrel myself in that closet of a chamber as long as I dared, until the queen's

sharp-tongued senior handmaiden found me and dragged me out for more lessons on royal propriety.

There were other things I needed to learn. The king's household traveled with predictable regularity to different nerve centers of the empire: Susa, Ecbatana, Passargadae, even Babylonia. I came to see more of the world's wonders than I had ever thought possible. Suddenly I wasn't a sheltered daughter, hardly leaving home from month to month. I had to learn to be mobile. I had to adjust to traveling and learn to become ambulatory without losing any of my efficiency.

Late at night I would crawl into my chamber, often finding my roommates already asleep. The few times I saw them long enough to converse, I was so impressed by their sense of superiority and their disapproval of my simple appearance that my late hours began to offer more of a relief than an inconvenience.

In spite of its aggravations, I grew accustomed to palace life. Nehemiah's opinion of me was borne out; I had been made for this work. It came easily to me.

The Persians used few slaves; the majority of their labor force came in the form of paid servants. Each servant's wages was paid in rations—grain, wine, livestock. Among the vast array of my responsibilities was the need to keep track of every single payment made to each of the queen's hundreds of workers. I ensured that everyone received fair and timely payment, and that none of the queen's possessions found its way into someone else's pockets. As a linguist, an accountant, an administrator, a librarian, and a keeper of records in triplicate, my job had many facets. And I proved adept at every aspect of them. Before one month was done, the queen offered me the position on a permanent basis.

I was twenty. And I was the Queen of Persia's Senior Scribe.

Once a week, I would meet with the queen herself. Shrewd and well educated, she knew every detail of her far-flung enterprise. The night before every meeting I suffered from stomach pains and nausea. I would not sleep the whole night through no matter how well prepared I was. This anxiety only grew worse with the years, although she was not stingy with her praise.

Once, after a long and complicated meeting, she gave me an exquisite fan in appreciation. "You have been doing well, scribe," she said. "You have sharp eyes and a keen understanding."

That night, I sat up filled with fear. I worried that I would lose her good opinion. I thought that eventually she would come to realize that I was not as satisfactory as she had thought. It was as if the more praise she lavished on me, the less confident I grew.

Every accolade became a new high standard I had to maintain. I knew that I could not retain such a standard no matter how hard I strove.

On the one hand, my success was my lifeline. After a childhood of disappointing my father, I had grown into an adulthood that at long last reaped approval. I swallowed that approval with greed; but I found I never grew quite full enough. So on the other hand, my achievements drove me to anxiety. I always feared that I would fail in the end.

Beneath my apparent success, my father's daughter brooded with fear. She knew better than anyone that if I failed at my work, I had nothing else to offer.



The months melted into years while I remained occupied with my vocation. After three years of service to the queen, the

court became my whole life. I was certain—that like my father—I was meant to be a scribe until I grew old. I was certain that I would serve the queen for years to come. I was certain. But I was wrong.