

TESSA AFSHAR

A NOVEL



THE
HIDDEN
PRINCE

PRAISE FOR TESSA AFSHAR



JEWEL OF THE NILE

“Afshar’s excellent latest follows a young mixed-race woman in the first century CE as she embarks on a quest to find a father she thought long dead. . . . Exquisite plotting and outstanding historical details set this apart. Afshar’s fans will be overjoyed with this tale of love lost and found.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW

“Tessa Afshar’s novels are well worth waiting for and *Jewel of the Nile* is certainly no exception! What a lovely book and what a beautiful message.”

CHRISTIAN NOVEL REVIEW



DAUGHTER OF ROME

“With meticulous research and a vividly detailed narrative style, *Daughter of Rome* . . . is both an emotive biblical love story and an inherently fascinating journey through the world of first-century Rome and the city of Corinth.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“This is a lovely slow-burning, faith-filled exploration about overcoming trials and accepting past mistakes.”

HISTORICAL NOVELS REVIEW

“Afshar brings in a thoughtful consideration of whether or not there are behaviors that cannot ever be forgiven, and her intricate biblical setting will engross readers. This is [her] strongest, most complex scripture-based story yet.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Tessa Afshar inhabits the world of early Christians with refreshing clarity. From life under the threat of persecution to domestic details and her characters’ innermost thoughts, she makes early Christianity spark.”

FOREWORD REVIEWS

“Tessa Afshar has the rare gift of seamlessly blending impeccable historical research and theological depth with lyrical prose and engaging characters.”

SHARON GARLOUGH BROWN, author of the *Sensible Shoes* series

“Tessa Afshar’s ability to transport readers into the culture and characters of the biblical novels is extraordinary. . . . *Daughter of Rome* is a feast for your imagination as well as balm for your soul.”

ROBIN JONES GUNN, bestselling author of *Becoming Us*



THIEF OF CORINTH

“Afshar again shows her amazing talent for packing action and intrigue into the biblical setting for modern readers.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“Lyrical . . . [with] superb momentum, exhilarating scenes, and moving themes of love and determination. . . . Afshar brings to life the gripping tale of one woman’s struggle to choose between rebellion and love.”

BOOKLIST

“Afshar’s well-drawn characters and lushly detailed setting vividly bring to life the ancient world of the Bible. A solid choice for fans of Francine Rivers and Bodie and Brock Thoene.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL



BREAD OF ANGELS

“Afshar continues to demonstrate an exquisite ability to bring the women of the Bible to life, this time shining a light on Lydia, the seller of purple, and skillfully balancing fact with imagination.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Afshar has created an unforgettable story of dedication, betrayal, and redemption that culminates in a rich testament to God’s mercies and miracles.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“With sublime writing and solid research, [Afshar] captures the distinctive experience of living at a time when Christianity was in its fledgling stages.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Readers who enjoy Francine Rivers’s Lineage of Grace series will love this stand-alone book.”

CHRISTIAN MARKET

“With its resourceful, resilient heroine and vibrant narrative, *Bread of Angels* offers an engrossing new look at a mysterious woman of faith.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE



LAND OF SILENCE

“Readers will be moved by Elianna’s faith, and Afshar’s elegant evocation of biblical life will keep them spellbound. An excellent choice for fans of Francine Rivers’s historical fiction and those who read for character.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Fans of biblical fiction will enjoy an absorbing and well-researched chariot ride.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“In perhaps her best novel to date, Afshar . . . grants a familiar [biblical] character not only a name, but also a poignant history to which many modern readers can relate. The wit, the romance, and the humanity make Elianna’s journey uplifting as well as soul touching.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, TOP PICK REVIEW

“Heartache and healing blend beautifully in this gem among Christian fiction.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“An impressively crafted, inherently appealing, consistently engaging, and compelling read from first page to last, *Land of Silence* is enthusiastically recommended for community library historical fiction collections.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEWS

“This captivating story of love, loss, faith, and hope gives a realistic glimpse of what life might have been like in ancient Palestine.”

WORLD MAGAZINE



THE
HIDDEN
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TESSA
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The Hidden Prince

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The Hidden Prince is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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To Laurence:

Brave. Loyal. Caring. Honest. True.

My beloved nephew.

You will always be a prince in my heart.

,

Y

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REGIONAL MAP



PROLOGUE

Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.

Daniel 2:48, ESV

The Twenty-Ninth Year of King Nebuchadnezzar's Reign

My father tightened his grip on my hand as we hurried past the ziggurat, the golden shrine of Marduk at its top gleaming in the morning sun. He always felt uneasy when we came too close to one of Babylon's many temples. But this one, the most renowned and opulent, made his Jewish heart downright agitated.

The ziggurat had occupied the center of Babylon for centuries, growing dilapidated with the passage of time. When Nebuchadnezzar ascended the throne, he spent a fortune on repairs to the famous landmark, restoring the ziggurat to a magnificent height so that fifty men could stand upon one another's shoulders and still not touch the zenith. To stamp the monument with his personal seal of grandeur, the king had added the bejeweled shrine of the Babylonian god Marduk like a crown at the top of the lofty structure.

I stumbled as I stared over the walls, past the veil of palm fronds and verdant tree branches, following the slow progress of a white-clad priest as he ascended the ornate staircase, carrying a burning brazier.

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“Pay attention, Keren. Stop staring at that abomination.”

“Yes, Father,” I said, my gaze still glued to the priest.

“You must not allow your mind to wander when you begin your service in Daniel’s household. Stay your thoughts on the tasks given you.”

“Of course.”

“And do not ask impertinent questions.”

“Who? Me?” I asked, offended. “Grandfather says my questions are the sign of a quick mind.”

“As I said. Impertinent. You must quash that tendency.”

“Yes, Father.”

By now, we had left the main thoroughfare by crossing a bridge over one of the canals that watered the city and found our way to a narrow, unpaved lane. Most of Babylon’s roads were made of packed dirt, though some were wide enough to accommodate two chariots.

Without warning, Father stopped and turned to face me. I was tall for my age. But he still had to bend his head to look me in the eyes. “Keren,” he said, his voice growing faint. “You know we love you. Your mother and I.”

“And I love you. Stop worrying about me.”

“Daniel is a good man. You will be safe in his household.”

I patted my father’s shoulder reassuringly. Years ago, the king had elevated Lord Daniel to the position of chief amongst all the wise men, and governor over the province of Babylon, the wealthy capital of the nation of Babylonia. In one fell swoop, Nebuchadnezzar had made a young Jew ruler over many of his own countrymen.

Not all of us captives from Judah were so honored.

Many of my people served as slaves. Others had been sent to live in Babylonian lands previously uninhabited. Some, like my

father, occupied more menial positions in Babylon. My father's skills had earned him the post of assistant to a scribe. Though my mother and sisters wove baskets for a merchant in the market, and my brothers worked in the docks, my father's salary was the mainstay of our home. His meager income had to stretch eight ways and was never enough. In a moment of desperation, my father had borrowed from a money lender at an exorbitant rate. And now, he could not pay it back.

He had wept when he had approached his kinsman Daniel. Wept with sorrow and, I suspect, no little shame. Though he had my blessing, offering to sell his youngest daughter to his wealthy cousin nearly broke my father's heart. Of course, we all hoped that my family would save enough to redeem me within the year. But I suspected our hope to be more of a vain dream than a realistic plan. In all the years we had lived in Babylon, my family had yet to save a single silver shekel.

To our relief, Daniel had graciously offered to buy me from my father. Only to return me to my family, immediately, as a kinsman-redeemer would.

My father had hung his head. "We cannot afford to feed her, you see. We simply do not have enough. Would you allow her to work for you? She will earn her bread, I promise. Send her home to us every Sabbath so we can see her and rejoice."

Lord Daniel had agreed. He might have been a cousin to us, but he was as many times removed from my father's bloodlines as my fraying tunic was from the sheep that had been shorn to weave its fabric. Daniel did not have to act as my redeemer by Law, nor did he have to multiply his generosity by feeding and housing me at his own expense.

I understood how important it was that I repay my master's generosity with useful labor. I patted my father's shoulder again.

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“I will work hard, Father. You need not worry. I will not shame you and Mother.”

He laid his warm hand on my cheek. “We never worry about that.”

Lord Daniel’s house was everything you might expect in a nobleman’s residence. Years ago, he had lived at the palace, but he received permission from the king to move into his own house when his sons were born. Three stories tall, the building had walls of expensive oven-baked bricks, whitewashed to battle the brutal heat of Babylonian summers.

This palatial dwelling had little in common with our tiny rectangular reed home and its reed-mat doors. The front door of Daniel’s sumptuous home, along with its frame and lintels, was made of sturdy timber, a commodity Babylonia had to import at great expense.

“Cedars from Lebanon,” my father breathed, probably remembering another door from a home long since lost.

I had few such memories. My mother had barely weaned me when the siege of Jerusalem began. I had just turned four when it ended in a tide of fire and blood. Sometimes I fancied I could still hear the echo of hideous wailing in my dreams, the kind of grim, animal howls only a war can squeeze out of human throats.

I had come along when my mother had believed herself too old to bear more children. She named me Keren-happuch, after Job’s youngest daughter. I suppose everyone in Jerusalem had felt a little like Job by then. But, rather too hopefully as it turned out, she had chosen the name of a daughter conceived after Job’s troubles had ended. Ours were only about to begin.

Our family was one of the blessed. Save for my eldest brother, the rest of us had survived the butchery of angry Babylonian

soldiers who were fed up with Judah's repeated treachery. We had survived Nebuchadnezzar's sword, the fires of war, the gnaw of famine, the waves of pestilence.

Only to be carried to Babylon as captives.

Ten years had passed since the day my family sat by the waters of the Euphrates, exhausted by their long, merciless march, and wept for the home they would never see again. Some wounds cannot be healed by the passing of time. They fade, only to gape and bleed again at some unexpected provocation. Which was why my father would stand and stare at strange times, eyes welling up abruptly as they did now, coming face-to-face with memories trapped in a door made of rare cedars.

I pressed his hand in comfort. He smiled, trying to steady his quivering chin, and raised his knuckles to rap reverently upon the amber-colored planks. A slave dressed in a neat, short tunic invited us in. "The master is expecting you," he said with a bow of his head.

Though he spent most of his time at the palace, Lord Daniel had a whole chamber set aside for his work at home. Bent over a pile of clay documents on his otherwise neat table, he was so deep in thought that our entrance did not rouse him. We stood quietly near the door, waiting to be acknowledged. Behind him, a partitioned case housing numerous clay tablets and cylinders spanned the full length of the wall. In one corner of it, he had stacked scrolls of papyrus, which were not as popular in Babylonia as clay documents.

My fingers itched to look at those tablets, to try and decipher them and see how well Grandfather's teaching had served me. In Babylonia, girls were usually not taught how to read and write. But my grandfather had other notions.

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By the time I started to toddle, Grandfather had become afflicted with the start of his shaking disease and could no longer serve as a scribe. For the first time in his life, he had the luxury of free time. And he was bored. He discovered quickly that I found his stylus and tablets fascinating and began to teach me. We bonded together over what we both liked best. The knowledge and power of words. I would miss him, living away from home.

My new master lifted his head and blinked as if awakening from a dream. "Asa! Forgive me. I did not hear you come in." He rose from his seat, the folds of his long sea-green tunic falling about him in an orderly wave.

"And this must be Keren-happuch." He studied me with a glint of surprise. I was skinny for my age and as flat as the timber roof on his house. Womanhood, if it ever intended to visit me, had proven reluctant to bless me with any obvious charms. *Yet*, as my mother was fond of reminding me.

Father bowed his head. "We call her Keren, Master Daniel." My parents had realized early that if they wanted to keep me from getting into trouble, a shorter appellation would be necessary. I would be halfway down the road, chasing whatever had taken my latest fancy, before they pronounced the full cartload that was my given name. "You can trust her to work hard," Father added. "She is stronger than she looks."

I nodded to emphasize his words. My eyes fixed on the mounds of clay cylinders behind my new master. I wondered how many of them I could carry in my arms at one time.

"I am sure we will find something to suit her. Now, please receive this as a token of my appreciation for allowing your daughter to serve my household." Daniel dropped a cloth bag jingling with silver shekels into Father's palm. "I will arrange

for her to visit you at home every Sabbath. We wouldn't want her mother to miss her too much, would we?"

The door swung open behind us and the most elegant woman I had ever seen entered on sandaled feet. Her long, royal-blue tunic danced at her ankles as she walked deeper into the room to stand next to Daniel. Two pale-blue shawls decorated with the golden fringe so admired by Babylonians draped diagonally across one shoulder, held in place by a jeweled belt. Someone had arranged her hair into a perfect, ornamented creation of loops and crimps, adorned by gold rings. But by far the most glamorous thing about her was her face, with its sharp, short nose, cool brown eyes darkened with kohl, and curved lips that dipped into a deep wedge at the center.

Those lips betrayed no expression when Lord Daniel introduced me. "Mahlah, my dear," Daniel said with a smile. "Here is your new charge, Keren. I am sure you will find some useful task for her around the house."

This, then, was my mistress. I would not be spending my time serving Lord Daniel in his study, it seemed. I hid my disappointment and bowed respectfully before the elegant woman.

My new mistress regarded me in silence. If she were a scroll, I was illiterate. I could read nothing from her expression, which remained bland as she scrutinized me. "Let us try the kitchens," she said.

My heart sank. This might not be an auspicious beginning. My mother and sisters rarely allowed me near the place.

"Excellent idea," Daniel said, immediately returning to his pile of clay tablets, and I barely had time for a hurried goodbye embrace from my father before Lady Mahliah led me out of the chamber.

"My husband tells me you are fourteen," the mistress said as

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she guided me through the corridor into the rectangular courtyard. Above us, a partial roof of palm wood planks and packed earth kept the climbing sun at bay.

“Yes, mistress. I am tall for my age, and the rest of me still has to catch up.”

The elegant face remained impassive. But I fancied I saw the tiniest sparkle in the brown eyes as she turned to study me for a moment. “The kitchen is here” was all she said, leading me to a chamber in the far corner of the courtyard.

A rotund man with dark hair stood by the open door, sharpening his knife. He bowed when he spied the mistress. I kept an eye on him, worried he might poke his flesh on the point of his blade as he bent down. He proved dexterous, however, portly fingers nimbly tucking the knife away.

“My lady, how may I be of service?”

“I have brought you additional help, Manasseh. This is Keren. See if you can train her to be useful around the kitchen.”

“Yes, lady.” He bowed again, not straightening until the mistress began to walk away. I followed his example, though it seemed excessive. If I had to bow every time someone above my station came and went, I would spend the whole day bent over my shoes.

Manasseh sized me up. “Scrawny little rat, aren’t you?” He lifted a huge iron bowl full of unshelled, dried walnuts from a shelf and shoved it into my chest. I staggered under the weight, barely managing to hold on.

“Shell,” the cook barked. He pointed a corpulent finger toward the corner of the room where a hammer awaited on a stool. “When you finish, I have a bowl of almonds.”

I sat on the floor, the bowl tucked between my legs, and started breaking shells. It was dull work, and soon my attention

began to wander. On the low, three-legged stool where I had found the hammer, I spied a small clay cylinder resting on its wobbly side. A scrap of papyrus lay open near it.

Writing instruments held a great deal more charm for me than every manner of nut under the sun. I slowed my hammering as I slid to the right and craned my neck to have a better look. Enough light streamed through the door for me to make out the words.

The clay cylinder was a royal list of provisions. I recognized it immediately as resembling the ones my father sometimes prepared for the palace scribes. My brows knotted as I sounded out the wedge-shaped Akkadian syllables for oil, barley, dates, and flour.

Lord Daniel had been amongst the first wave of deportees from Judah—one of the talented young men of noble family that Nebuchadnezzar had carried off to Babylon nineteen years before the rest of us had been taken into captivity. As a high courtier in service to the king of Babylonia, he received monthly provisions of food and oil, of which the scribes kept careful records.

Next to the neatly prepared royal tablet lay a dirty scrap of papyrus with an additional list, this one in Aramaic. No royal scribe had prepared this atrociously spelled piece of workmanship. Quickly, I scanned the contents. Plums, emmer, prunes, fish, frankincense. It took some imagination to understand the words, they had been so mangled by poor penmanship.

My feet scabbled a little closer to the three-legged stool, the pot of walnuts entirely forgotten now. This list included purchase prices as well as weights. It wasn't my intention to be nosy. But my bored brain found the sums too inviting to resist. I added them up in my head, first the weights, then the prices. The total on the paper did not tally with my additions.

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The account became a wrinkle in my mind, a challenge I couldn't resist. I added the prices again more slowly, compared them with the weights, and went back over the list. It took only a moment to find three mistakes.

Scratching my nose, I stared at the cook's back, bent over as he vigorously pounded a piece of mutton. No doubt this list was his handiwork. As chief cook, he had charge over purchases beyond royal provisions. A household this large and wealthy would need to buy more than the basic staples the palace provided. But he had spent a lot less than he claimed on his list.

I bit my lip in thought. Judging by the man's inadequate writing skills, I assumed this was an honest mistake. Any half-educated scribe would be able to pick out his errors within moments, as I had. At best, he would find himself extremely embarrassed. More likely, he would be accused of attempted theft.

I cleared my throat. "Master?"

The cook's large head pivoted on his short neck. "Aren't you finished with those walnuts yet?"

"Not quite."

"Get a move on," he barked before returning to his pounding.

"It's only that . . . I have found a mistake, you see."

This time he turned more slowly, pinning me with an unblinking gaze. "Mistake?"

I nodded toward his list. "I couldn't help noticing. You added them wrong."

The portly cheeks, glistening with steam from a boiling pot, turned the color of the plums on his list. "You *read* my list?"

I shrank back. "I didn't mean to pry."

"You read *my* list?"

"The papyrus was practically under my nose." I scooted backward cautiously. "Naturally, I added the columns up. I can

show you where the mistakes are. We can correct them in a blink. Give me a bit of ink and . . .”

The corpulent finger pointed at me again. “Up!” he bel-
lowed. “Up!”

I scrambled to my feet. “I only meant to help.”

“Out of my kitchen! *Out*, I say!” The bellows were getting louder. Now the other hand lifted, waving a bronze mallet stained by blood and mutton gore.

I gulped. My feet stumbled over themselves as I turned to obey the cook. I must not have moved fast enough for his liking. A booted heel landed squarely on my bottom and shoved hard. I tripped, lurching through the door, and, barely regaining my balance, dashed out of the kitchens as fast as my skinny legs could carry me.

Unsure where to go, I headed for the main house, looking over my shoulder every few steps to ensure Manasseh had not followed me with his bloody mallet. I had barely walked through the door when I collided with something soft, wafting with the perfume of roses.

The mistress.

She steadied me with an arm. “What is this uproar?” she asked calmly. “I heard shouting from the kitchens. Why are you not where I left you?”

“The cook requested my departure, mistress.”

She gave me a look that scared me more than Manasseh’s gruesome mallet. “And why is that?”

“I tried to help him,” I squeaked.

“You tried to cook?”

“No, mistress! That would not be advisable for anyone’s health.” My mouth turned dry. “I tried to . . . That is, I made a suggestion.”

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One perfectly shaped brow rose. “Don’t take a step until I return.”

I stood motionless, sweat staining my woolen tunic. A few moments later the mistress reappeared from the direction of the kitchens, her golden fringes flapping against her soft leather sandals.

“He refuses to have you back,” she said, her face blank of expression.

My heart sank. I wondered if she would return me to my father’s house, disgraced, after less than half a day in her service. But she merely said, “Come. We will find you a new place to serve.”

She led me into the bowels of the house, guiding me to a chamber in the south end of the property. My eyes widened as for the first time in my life I saw a bathing room—a whole chamber set aside for the purpose of personal ablution. I had heard of such places but had never had occasion to enter one. In my home, when we needed to bathe, we headed for the river.

With interest, I noted that the tiled floor sloped slightly toward the center of the room. Before I had time to examine this oddity further, a faint movement in a dark corner of the room made me hop back in alarm. I realized that the mistress and I were not alone in the chamber.

A woman walked toward us from the shadows. She had a round face, flushed and beaded with sweat, wisps of dark hair sticking to her forehead. Her arms were bare and pink. It dawned on me that she must be the household washerwoman.

She bowed to the mistress before picking up a wide bronze bowl full of water and emptying it upon the tiled floor. As the contents of her bowl flowed toward us, I took another hasty step away, worried that the foul water would seep into my only

pair of sandals. But the water merely rolled into the center of the floor and disappeared down a small hole I had not noticed until then.

“Why, it’s a marvel!” I cried.

“I am glad you approve,” the mistress said dryly.

“Is that drain attached to a pipe, mistress? It must lead away from the foundations of the house. Where does it go? My guess would be into a canal, and there . . .”

The mistress held up a hand and I managed to swallow the rest of my words. “You don’t need to figure out the architecture of it, girl. You merely have to make use of it.” She turned to address the woman with the pink arms. “Rachel, this is Keren. Our new servant. I am placing her under your tutelage. See if you can make a good laundress of her.”

“Yes, lady.” Once the mistress withdrew, Rachel said, “I’m glad you are here. “My daughter used to help me with the heavy loads. But she is big with child and cannot manage it anymore.” She fetched a load of wet garments from the corner of the chamber and, dropping them into her now empty bowl, handed them to me. “Follow me.”

I shifted the bowl and found it not as heavy as I had expected. At one end of the courtyard, someone had strung up a length of rope, and Rachel helped me quickly hang the garments from it in an orderly row. A few linen tunics and short skirts such as those women wore under their garments, a dozen men’s loincloths, and light summer shawls.

I smiled to myself. If this was the heavy work, my job as the laundress’s helper would be simple.

“Come,” she said. “Time to fetch the bedding.”

“Bedding?”

She nodded. “Once a month, we wash the sheets and blankets.

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Every blessed one. We start with the master and mistress's bed, followed by their sons' beds, and then the bedding used by guests. And there are always guests! Of course, we set aside another day for the servants' bedding."

I gulped, realizing that what we had just hung on the line was the lightest load I would likely encounter in this household. It took Rachel and me a good hour to strip the beds and gather the wool and linen fabric in two baskets. I thought she would head back to the bathing chamber. Instead, she headed for the street.

"Where are we going?"

"To the river," she said. "These are too big to wash indoors. I only launder the family's clothing there. The mistress is very particular and does not wish her intimate garments flapping in the wind by the banks of the Euphrates for everyone to ogle."

I did not answer. I could not. I had already grown winded from carrying the enormous basket, which contained more linens than I had ever seen in one place. When we arrived by the river, I collapsed on the shore and took a relieved breath. I could have taken a nap right there on those sheets, be they washed or not.

Rachel pulled out one sheet and showed me how to look for stains and to treat them with a bar made of fat boiled with ashes. After soaking the sheet in the river, she beat it with a smooth rock to remove the dirt.

"Now take this and rinse it," she instructed. "Then you can start on the next one."

I nodded as I took the sheet a little deeper into the river to allow the water to rinse over the linen. My eyes widened as I spotted a clump of reeds. I noticed amongst them several stems that would yield a perfect stylus for writing on clay.

If a reed was too thick, it yielded poor symbols; if too thin, it broke easily. If it was too old, the nib would shatter under pressure. It took experience to pick just the right reed. I loosened my hold on the sheet, reaching with one hand to the stem closest to me. My father would appreciate the gift of a sturdy reed for a new stylus. The stem proved stubborn, and I twisted further toward it to take a firmer grasp.

The unthinkable happened.

I lost hold of the sheet and it began to float, carried away by the currents of the river.

“Gah! The sheet! The sheet!” Rachel shouted from the shore, gesturing wildly with her arm.

My attention might have been a little lacking, but at least I knew how to move quickly. I ran down the shallow riverbed before the undulating sheet could go too far and lunged. A smooth stone jutting from the sands hit me squarely in the chest, and for a moment I lost all the breath in my lungs. But my fingertips twisted into the linen and I managed to grab it and pull.

I came to my knees, panting and wet. With a shaking arm, I lifted the sheet into the air. “I have it,” I called.

Rachel patted me on the head as she retrieved the runaway linen. “Good thing you run fast.”

After that, she would not let me come anywhere near the river with the laundry. She had me sit in the sun and apply her lump of boiled fat and ashes to any stains I found.

As I rubbed, I berated myself. How could I have been so inattentive? Why had I not kept my mind on the task at hand?

We ran into the mistress when we returned to Daniel’s house.

“How did she do?” the mistress asked Rachel.

The laundress shook her head. “She is a good girl and she

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works hard. But she was not meant to be a laundress. No doubt, you will find something more suitable to her talents.” To Rachel’s credit, she did not divulge my stupidity.

The mistress raised a perfectly plucked brow after the laundress left us. “What did you do? Make another suggestion?”

“No, mistress.” I dropped my head. “I let go of the sheet in the river.”

“One of my embroidered ones?”

“I fear so.”

“Then you can help embroider another to replace it.”

“You won’t need to replace it. I caught it before it swam too far.”

“In that fast current?”

I rubbed my chest. “I dove after it.”

Again, I thought I caught the palest twinkle in her cool brown eyes before she signaled me to follow. “I trust you will have no need of diving with my weaver.”

I swallowed a groan. Weaving, sewing, and embroidering were not my strong suit. But I was determined to do better. This time, I would not disappoint my mistress.

The weaver, Haggith, had the responsibility not only for weaving fabric, but also for sewing new tunics, repairing old garments, embroidery, and ornamentation for the whole family. She spoke Aramaic with the distinctive Hebrew accent that tinged my father’s and mother’s speech.

It dawned on me that most of the master’s servants were from our country. Some, like the cook, out of religious necessity; others, no doubt like me, here because of an act of kindness. Who knew how many of us they had saved from starvation or prevented from falling into the hands of cruel overseers.

“Do you have experience?” Haggith asked, lifting her head

from the vermilion tunic that lay before her on the sheet she had spread over the carpet. Expertly, her fingers gathered the loose, delicate threads fringing the hem and tied them in exactly equal segments.

I bit my cheeks. “Not so you would notice. I am willing to learn.”

“Let’s see what you can do.” She handed me a man’s tunic with a tear near the hem. “Can you mend that?”

I took the ivory needle she offered me and did my best to bring the tear together with tiny stitches. The fabric bunched as I pulled the thread. Looking over my shoulder, Haggith shook her head. “Don’t pull so tight.”

I loosened the thread with the next few stitches, and the fabric gaped. “Not so loose!” the weaver snapped and took the tunic from me.

“Let’s begin with something simpler.” She laid a handkerchief on the sheet next to the vermilion dress. “Hem that. Keep it spread on the sheet so you can see what you are doing.”

I nodded. Placing my fingers where she had shown me, I began to take tiny stitches, pretending to wield a stylus on wet clay. In truth, writing Akkadian was much more complicated than taking even stitches. It required a delicate touch, rendered in syllables rather than with an alphabet like my mother tongue. I told myself anyone who could write the complex Babylonian symbols could certainly hem a simple kerchief.

Bending low over the square of gray linen, I took tiny stitches and kept a close eye on the gauge of my thread. I left the kerchief flat on the sheet to ensure the fabric did not grow bunched and sewed with more patience than I had ever shown my mother at home.

“Finished?” Haggith asked.

THE HIDDEN PRINCE

I leaned away so she could examine my handiwork. She frowned and tried to pick up the kerchief. The sheet came up with it. I had sewn the seam all the way through to the sheet. I might have been given another chance if the red dress had not also grown trapped by my stitches, which had picked up a few of the delicate strands of the fringe.

After that, Haggith consigned me to a corner of the chamber as far away from her as possible. Giving me a hank of freshly dyed yarn, she ordered me to wind it into a neat ball.

“My mother usually assigns me the same task,” I said morosely, fingers twining the yarn round and round. The ball was finished by the time the mistress came to ask after my progress.

Once again, I followed her down the long corridor of the main house. I did not dare ask if she intended to send me home. She came to a stop before Lord Daniel’s chamber and after a brief knock entered with me in tow.

Daniel lifted his head from his work and gave her a slow smile. “Mahlah! Is it dinnertime already?”

“Not quite.” She drew me forward. “I am returning this one to you. I have tried everything under my purview and found no fit. See if you can do something with her.”

“I?” Daniel seemed lost for words.

Mistress Mahlah did not smile, exactly. But her eyes danced. “You, my lord. I will leave you to it.” And promptly, she turned on her heel and left the chamber, leaving me standing like a tent pole in the middle of the room.

Daniel stared at me for a moment. Then, waving a hand, he motioned me to sit before returning his attention to what lay before him. I realized he was writing on a small tablet of wet clay no larger than the palm of his hand. Halfway through the first line, the nib of his stylus snapped.

“Not again!” he murmured. Pulling forward an alabaster cup full of reeds, he searched for a fresh stylus. Finding them all in disrepair, he expelled a long sigh before retrieving a short knife from the cup.

Gingerly, I came to my feet. “My lord? May I sharpen that nib for you?”

He looked up as if he had forgotten my existence. “I can repair your stylus,” I said. “My grandfather taught me.”

Daniel studied me for a moment. Without a word, he extended the broken stylus to me. He hesitated a little before handing me the knife as well. “You aren’t going to cut off your finger, are you?”

In answer, I took the broken stylus and examined it in the light of the lamp. “The reed is poor quality. It keeps breaking because its walls are too thin and cannot bear the pressure of your hand.” I pointed toward the middle. “If I cut it down to here, will you still be able to wield it comfortably? The reed walls thicken here.”

Master Daniel nodded. I pulled the clay tile sitting on the corner of his table toward me and laid the reed’s broken tip on it. Taking a firm hold of the stylus, I made a clean, diagonal cut across the top. Satisfied with the result, I made a few quick slashes, until the reed had the right contours at the tip, perfect for creating the wedge-shaped symbols of Akkadian.

The wet clay of the tablet had been marred when the nib had broken. I pointed to the damaged clay. “Would you like me to repair the tablet as well, my lord?”

Daniel pushed it toward me without comment. I dipped the tip of the stylus into the cup of water resting near the master’s hand and carefully applied the wet, polished curve to the surface of the clay, smoothing it out with a few swift strokes.

THE HIDDEN PRINCE

“Will that serve?” I asked, washing the clay from the nib before passing the stylus to him.

He examined the freshly cut stylus. “Admirably. My thanks.” Without comment, he returned to his writing, dipping the tip in water and wiping off excess clay on the rag he kept for that purpose. He had not dismissed me, so I sat on the carpet and waited in silence. When he finished, he pushed the tablet aside and turned his attention to me.

“It seems you know your writing implements.” he said. “The stylus worked well.”

I scrambled to my feet. “I saw a sturdy patch of reeds by the river earlier this morning. I didn’t have a chance to examine them closely, but I suspect they would yield at least a dozen fine styli. Would you like me to fetch them in the morning? I could sharpen them, ready for your use.”

Daniel frowned. “You can’t go alone. I will send one of our men with you.”

I could have clapped. His consent meant I wasn’t being sent home. Tonight, anyway. “Thank you, master.”

He hesitated. “Can you read and write?”

“Yes, lord. Though my Aramaic is better than my Akkadian.”

“Everyone’s Aramaic is better than their Akkadian,” he said dryly, making me laugh.

Most people in Babylon spoke Aramaic, but the language of the court, and therefore of scribes, remained Akkadian, the archaic tongue belonging to ancient Babylonians and Assyrians. Aramaic was a simpler language to write, because like Hebrew, it had an alphabet, whereas Akkadian used six hundred syllabic symbols, requiring the memorization of a dizzying array of combinations.

“How do you know so much? Most women cannot read, let alone sharpen a stylus.”