

MARY FUNK



Remember
Me

A Love Story



When deeply hurt, we never recover until we forgive. Sarah Ferguson agrees. She suffers from a mystery illness and mind-travels to ancient Persia to discover why. What emerges is nothing less than mystical as she meets Ayisha-and trails her descent from youthful innocence to love crushed so completely only vengeance remains. But Ayisha's revenge threatens to destroy the lives of everyone around her-including Sarah's, as she lay in trance on the therapist's couch...

Remember Me

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ISBN 978-1-63263-531-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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2014

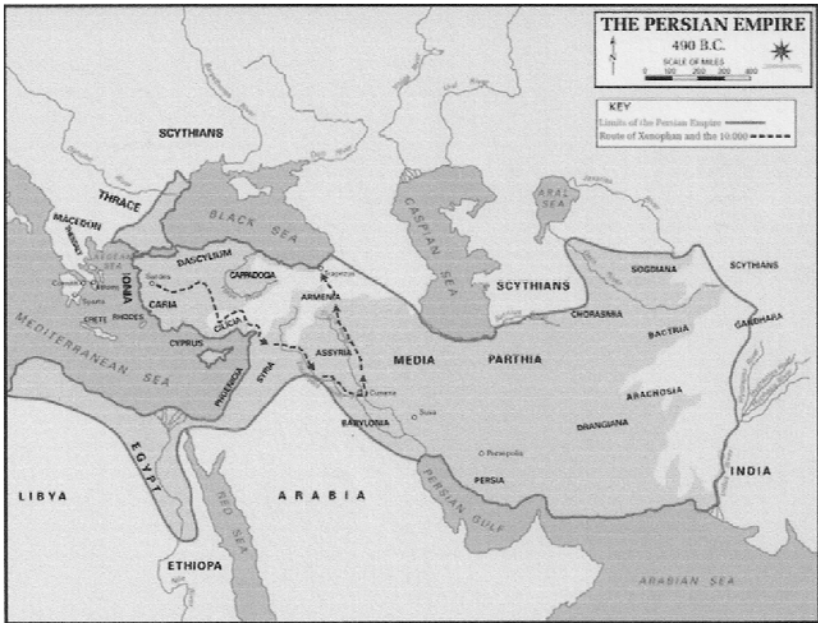
First Edition

Dedication

To Coco & Alinda, whose wisdom and direction provided the roadmap to my soul; to Steph, whose virtuoso voice and video unleashed a storyful of ideas for this book; and to the Virginia Beach Writers, whose collective eyes, ears, and feedback kept me disciplined and on the straight and narrow. Special thanks to my editor, Linda Cobb and to Richard Proescher, who helped me end the story so well. This book is yours, and I am so grateful to all of you.

“Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.”

— Mark Twain



Map of the Persian Empire in 490 B.C. Public Domain.
Courtesy of Wikipedia. Created by
West Point's History Department.

Pronunciation Key

Achaemenes - (eh-KIM-min-eez)
Achaemenid - (eh-KIM-min-id)
Adarni - (uh-DARN-ee)
Ariana - (uh-r ay-AH-nuh)
Asha - (AHH-shaa)
Athrawan - (AHH-thra-wan)
Ayisha - (ay-EE-shuh)
Bagapates - (bah-gah-PAW-tayz)
Bahadur - (BAH-hah-dor)
Bier - (beer)
Darius - (DAR-ee-us)
Hinae - (HEE-nay)
Hishawa - (hish-AHH-wah)
Huhdan - (who-DAHN)
Idan - (ee-DAHN)
Jashan-e Sade - (JAHS-nay sawh-DAY)
Kamanche - (kah-MAWN-chay)
Kaniz - (kah-NEEZ)
Khastegari - (kajs-tay-GARR-ee)
Kshatra Vairya - (kish-AH-tra VAIR-yah)
Kuh-e Rahmat - (KEWW-ay rah-MAWT)
Majless - (mazsh-LESS)
Manizheh - (mahn-EE-zay)
Maruk - (MAR-ook)
Matezzis - (meh-TAY-z-iss)
Mehriye - (meh-REE-yay)
Mihragan - (MEEH-ra-gahn)
Nadiru - (na-DEER-roo)
Namzadi - (nahm-ZAH-dee)

Nei - (NAY-ee)
Persepolis - (per-SEP-o-lus)
Pishtak - (PISH-tahk)
Rashn - (RAWSH-hon)
Rhubin - (RHU-bin)
Sarush - (SAR-oosh)
Shakila - (sha-KEY-la)
Shirin - (SHEER-in)
Srosh - (shrawsh)
Takht-e Nard - (tawk-tay NARD)
Treitops - (TRAY-ah-tops)
Vardagauna - (var-dah-GOO-na)
Vistaspa - (vis-TAH-spa)
Xerxes - (ZER-seez)
Zabi - (za-BEE)
Zoraster - (ZOR-as-ter)
Zorastrian - (zor-AS-tree-in)
Zuleika - (zul-LAY-ka)

CHAPTER I

Sarah Ferguson felt herself slipping beyond desperation into hopelessness. This was her sixth session with Dr. Tremaine—with no resolution in sight. "You've got to help me *now*," she greeted her therapist with a plea. "I can't wake up choking on my own blood again, even for one more night. I'm desperate, doctor—and if you can't help me, I don't know what I'm going to do next."

Sarah's were not your normal, run-of-the-mill kind of nightmares. They were in-your-face real—like running to the bathroom to spit out the blood in her mouth real. After that, she'd sit up the rest of the night, too upset and afraid to go back to sleep.

The best doctors and specialists could find nothing medically wrong with her. The last one referred her to Dr. Tremaine—a renowned hypnotherapist known for her impressive results with "lost causes." An added plus, she was located right here in Chicago. At least, Sarah thought, she didn't have to leave town to be told she was crazy.

Frustrated to tears, she sat down on the therapy couch and looked over at the doctor. "Why is this happening to me? What's wrong with me? Maybe I *am* crazy after all."

"The last time I checked, Sarah, bleeding from the mouth was not caused by insanity," Dr. Tremaine smiled. She was used to getting results, she told Sarah, and she was not about to write her off. Yes, they had gone all the way back to her earliest childhood memories together without unlocking the source of the nightmares. "But be patient, Sarah. The answer is

there, hidden somewhere deep inside your subconscious mind. We just haven't taken you back far enough to unlock the source of your pain. Today we'll go all the way back to the womb if we have to. Does that frighten you?"

"I don't know." Sarah hesitated, a little apprehensive. "Can we even go back that far?" She thought about it a moment longer then looked back up at the doctor. "I guess that can't be any worse than what's happening to me now. Okay ... let's do it. I'm ready for just about anything right now."

"Good," said Dr. Tremaine. "Before we begin, though, has your dream changed at all since our last session?"

"No," Sarah replied with a sigh and dabbed the tears from her eyes. "I open my eyes in the dream, and everything's pitch-black around me. I can't see a thing, and I don't know where I am, but somehow I know something is closing in on me. My mouth and throat burn like fire. I grab at my throat and start to choke. Then I taste the blood in my mouth. I wake up in a panic—and I jump out of bed to spit the blood out."

"Don't worry," Dr. Tremaine assured her, "we'll get to the bottom of this. Let's get started, shall we? Close your eyes and begin to relax."

Sarah settled into the now-familiar therapy couch and closed her eyes as she had done a half-dozen times before.

"Remember," the doctor reminded her, "I'll be recording our session, so speak up as you're describing what's going on around you. Whatever you see, you'll view it in a detached manner as if you're watching a movie. Everything is happening to the people or the places in the movie, not to you. If a situation becomes too traumatic to watch, you can always leave the movie and return to this room by raising your hand, and I will count you up from one to five. Now relax deeper into the pillows. I'm going to begin counting you down from ten, relax ... nine, relax ..."

~ ~ ~

"... two, relax ... one. Open your eyes, Sarah, and don't be afraid," said Dr. Tremaine. "Tell me what you see."

"More darkness all around me," said Sarah. She was disappointed. "No ... wait ... I'm walking—*outside* ... I'm breathing fast but the night air cools my cheeks. It's a clear night; I can see stars in the sky."

"Pull back, Sarah. See the movie, not yourself," Dr. Tremaine cautioned. She gave her a moment to refocus, then urged her on. "Now what do you see?"

"I—I see a girl. Yes, yes. She must be around thirteen or fourteen maybe. She's walking as fast as she can across hard-packed sand. She's not supposed to be out here alone in the dark. If her father or one of his men catches her, they'll turn her back for sure. She's headed for the trees up ahead. Finally, she's reached them ... she's looking all around her ... now she's slipping into their shadows ..."

"Just relax, Sarah," Dr. Tremaine said gently. "Watch the movie as it unfolds in front of you. Continue to let the girl tell you her story..."

~ ~ ~

The girl hurried silently down deeper into the orchard, away from the prying eyes of the men on the canal banks. "Zabi ... where are you?" She whispered as loudly as she dared.

"I'm right here," Zabi announced quietly into her ear. The young man was so close she jumped and nearly cried out.

"That was mean," she scolded him. "It's hard enough sneaking out here to see you without you scaring me. We'll be found out with my cries."

"Forgive me, my little Ayisha." He grinned from ear to ear and held with one outstretched arm onto the base of the palm

tree next to them. “I promise you, we won’t have to meet like this much longer.” He let go of the tree, made a seat of palm fronds on the sand and waited for her to sit down. He sat down across from her then and boasted, “Your father finally admits that my way of pollinating the orchard increased his date yield, especially of King Darius’ favorite Dayri date. And he sees how my skills as a merchant are increasing his sales in the Persepolis Marketplace.” He bowed slightly from his waist while he bragged. “Soon we’ll be the richest orchard this side of the mighty Tigris.”

“You’re such a braggart,” Ayisha said.

But she knew it was true. She overheard Abba telling Amma about their excellent good fortune, thanks in part to Zabi. She feared Abba gave much more credit to Ahura Mazda, their creator and protector against the evils that can plague the orchard. Then, of course, he gave credit to her grandfather, who invested his entire inheritance into planting the first small orchard as a tenant when the irrigation canals were built this far inland from the river.

Abba had indeed been blessed with exceptionally large yields over the past few years. Everyone knew their dates and pomegranates were the best in the satrapy. And their wine, palm weavings and perfumes were selling so well in the Persepolis Marketplace that with the profits Abba was slowly buying up the rest of their tenant property from the governor of the satrapy. Some day he would own it outright and become the largest orchard grower this side of the Tigris. And once you become a dominant landowner, the king takes notice in your favor.

Zabi grew serious and looked straight into Ayisha’s eyes. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately.”

“*Thinking?* About what, my so serious Zabi?” she teased him, laughing softly.

He cleared his throat. “We’ve known each other for so long. We grew up together as playmates, right here in these orchards. But life is changing quickly for both of us. I am now a man, and you, my little Ayisha, have become a beautiful young woman.”

She blushed and lowered her eyes at his words, but he pressed on.

“Our parents won’t let us be alone together as we once were when we were children. But you and I can change all that. If our sales go as well as we’ve planned at the marketplace after tomorrow’s harvest, I will finally have enough darius coins saved as proof to your father that I can afford to take you for my wife—if you’ll have me.”

Ayisha’s head popped up and her mouth dropped open. Zabi was just seven years old when his father died a decade ago after he fell out of the date tree he was harvesting. She was only four years old herself then, but she still remembered that awful day. Her father took Zabi and his widowed mother, Zeita, into their home, and he treated Zabi as he would his own son. Ever since that day, she and Zabi had been best friends.

She looked into his eyes with memories flooding her mind. *When I was a little girl, Zabi cheered me with his stories, sang to me when I was frightened and wiped my tears when I was sad. Ammi and Zeita try their best to separate us now—but they can never break our bond. He’s the keeper of my secrets, my dearest friend and confidant. I can’t remember a day, a single moment, when I didn’t love him.*

She took a deep breath and began as formally as she could muster, “My beloved Zabi, whose name means ‘gift’, you are indeed my gift, for how could I be so fortunate as to marry for love?” Then she couldn’t contain herself any longer and squealed, “Yes, of course, I will be your wife. We’ll have many children and Ahura Mazda will smile upon us all!”

“Ayisha,” he said, chuckling at her exuberance even as he tried to remain formal himself. “You *are* so full of life and laughter, just as your name means. I know you’ll make our home a happy one.” He took her hands in his. For an instant, they sat together as one, bursting with each other’s longings, hopes and dreams, unspoken yet already known by both—as if they had always been drawn to each other instinctively.

The sudden crackling of a footstep on dried palm fronds broke the spell. It was too late to move, so they crouched down silently as one of Abba’s orchard guards drew closer and then passed by without finding them out in the shadows. “What a great watchdog he is,” whispered Zabi.

Ayisha drew a sigh of relief under her breath. It was getting dangerously late; she had been gone too long and Amma would be noticing her absence. They agreed to keep their intentions secret until after the Persepolis Marketplace next week; then they got up and moved quickly to the edge of the orchard.

As Ayisha emerged, Zabi stayed behind in the shadows so they wouldn’t be seen alone together. She felt safe, knowing her beloved was watching her from behind. While she walked the 15 meters back to the compound’s courtyard, she quickly gathered up as many palm fronds as she could carry. If Amma was waiting for her when she got back to the courtyard, she just may believe her story about getting a jump on tomorrow’s big harvest by gathering some fronds tonight for the boiling vat’s fire.

The sun-dried, mud brick house in which Ayisha lived comfortably with her family sat on the far left end of the courtyard. It was the original and only two-story structure of what was now a six-building compound with the courtyard at its center. Ayisha shared the upstairs with her two younger sisters, ten-year-old Sima, and Talia, nine. Her baby brother,

Idan, slept downstairs with Amma and Abba. He was the most joyous addition to their family, especially to Abba, since her little brother, Cyru, died of the fever two years ago. Zabi aside, Abba said Ahura Mazda had renewed his blessings with another son and heir.

Zabi lived with his mother, Zeita, in the smaller one-story building on the far right, which shared an adjoining wall with Ayisha's house. It had been added on especially for them shortly after they moved in. The two buildings up front by the gate were added later still. They housed the winery and beer-making building on the left and the aromatic and weaving rooms on the right where Zeita made her sought-after perfumes and baskets. An iron entrance gate connected the two buildings, and when it was closed, it walled in the front of the compound. The mud brick walls and storage rooms that ran the entire nine meters of remaining distance between the front and back buildings along both sides of the compound completed the enclosure.

The gate was still open—waiting for Ayisha. She was piling up the fronds just inside the gate when Amma came walking across the courtyard. “Where have you been?” she reproached her.

“Gathering fronds, Ammi,” Ayisha replied. “We have so many to gather tomorrow to stoke the fires that I wanted to get a head start tonight.”

“With all your father's hired men camped down by the canal getting ready for the harvest? You know Abba forbids you to wander around the orchards by yourself,” her mother scolded. “Unless you weren't alone after all. Where is Zabi? He is also not accounted for.”

“Zabi?” Ayisha said with as much genuine surprise and hurt in her voice as she could muster. “Why would I be with Zabi? It's not *his* job to gather fronds. Besides, with all those

men around I should think you would want me to be accompanied by him. You know he is my dearest friend in the world, and he would gladly serve as my protector against the men's stares."

"But who will protect you against *Zabi's* stares?" she asked her. "He thinks I don't know, but I see the way he looks at you himself. And why should he not? He is a man, and you are becoming by far the most beautiful young woman in the entire satrapy."

It was all Ayisha could do to contain herself. She wanted to tell her mother not to worry because soon she would be *Zabi's* wife. Instead she asked softly, "Ammi, then wouldn't it be practical for *Zabi* to stop their stares by marrying me himself, especially if he loved me?"

Her mother grew quiet and looked deep into Ayisha's eyes for what seemed like an eternity. Finally she asked, "And would that mean Ayisha wishes to marry *Zabi*?"

Ayisha didn't want to lie to her mother about something so important. And yet, she had promised her silence to *Zabi*, so she couldn't tell her the whole truth either. She managed a breathless smile and pressed on. "And if I loved him, Ammi, would I have your blessing? Would *we* have your blessing?"

Her mother's answer wasn't quite all that Ayisha had expected. She smiled back sadly, and said, "Oh, Ayisha, yes of course you would have my blessing. But mine has never been the approval you must have."

"I know that Abba must approve, and *allow* me to marry him," Ayisha told her. "But surely he knows a marriage between *Zabi*—his smartest and most loyal right hand—and me, his oldest daughter, would be a joyous union and only increase our orchard's success in the satrapy."

"Yes," Amma replied. "But your father has eyes, too, and he knows how far such beauty as yours can take you in this

world—far beyond the hard work of this farm. It is your *blessing*, my daughter—and a smart young woman would use that to her advantage. You, a date farmer's daughter—“

“A date farmer *landowner*,” Ayisha interrupted her, “of one of the most well-known and largest orchards this side of the Tigris.”

“Which means your father could easily arrange a marriage between you and one of our local officials or some other nobleman,” she continued, “even the satrap himself. You could afford a more luxurious life than picking dates, brewing wine, making perfume and weaving baskets with Zeita, your sisters and me. And you could extend some of that more luxurious life to your family.”

Ayisha was stunned at these strange words coming for the first time out of her mother's mouth. “It's been a good enough life for you, Ammi,” she replied in disbelief.

“Yes,” her mother agreed. “I've made it work well for me, *and* for my family. But you know I had no choice in the matter. Abba and I were betrothed through a deal struck by my father and his father, who offered a very handsome dowry and family inheritance to help get us started. It was my duty to *obey* and take advantage of such a prosperous offer, not to *love*. That arrangement was the beginning of this orchard farm and look how far it has taken us.”

“So you didn't love Abba when you married him? Do you not love him now?” Ayisha asked. She had never spoken of such intimate things with her mother before.

“I barely knew your father. How could I love him? He and his family moved into this satrapy to start the date farm, and he needed a wife. I felt privileged to be chosen by him, and I have always done what was required to earn his love for me, and his respect.”

“Ammi, are you not then happy for me?” Ayisha blurted out. “Because I would marry with love already in my heart. Zabi and I would be joined together with two hearts beating as one, to grow the orchards and businesses even further. Everyone in the satrapy would feel our joy the moment they stepped onto our compound. Our family, our orchards, would be famous for it throughout the land.”

Her mother laughed out loud and shook her head. “Ayisha, Ahora Mazda guided me well in choosing your name. You certainly are so full of life and laughter.”

Ayisha continued undeterred, “Ammi, where would I be without Zabi? How could I live without him? For as long as I can remember, he’s been my best friend. I can’t imagine even breathing without Zabi in my life. *No.*” She was emphatic. “I will *never* leave this place, *or* Zabi. This is our home, and it’s where we belong, together. From the moment Zabi came into our family, it’s been our destiny. I know you understand that, Ammi. With your help, Abba will understand that, too.”

Her mother’s face darkened, and she didn’t want to discuss it anymore. “It’s late, my daughter, Idan is asleep in his basket, Zeita has gone home, and your father is bedded down by the canal with his hires.” She walked over to the gate, and closed and locked it. “The harvest begins very early tomorrow, and we all need our rest. Go upstairs now; join your sisters who are already asleep. We can speak of this again tomorrow.”

“Ammi, I beg of you,” Ayisha ventured on. “Now that you know, please don’t tell Abba about Zabi and me yet. You know that it’s his place to speak with Abba first, man-to-man. Please do not humiliate him by speaking in his place.”

“So it *has* come to that already,” Amma retorted with a mixture of anger and worry in her voice. “I had hoped I’d have more time.”

REMEMBER ME

Her mother's last words left Ayisha wondering whether she meant more time to convince Abba or to convince her. She had only wanted Amma to share in her happiness. Instead, she was confused and more than a little troubled as she walked over to the ladder leading to the second floor and climbed up it to join her sisters.

Once inside the single room that made up the entire second floor, she saw in the dim light of the still flickering oil lamp that her sisters lay peacefully sleeping on their beds against adjacent walls. She looked at their sweet faces and for the first time felt vaguely concerned for them. She tiptoed over to her own bed across the room from them and removed her leather sandals. She untied the belt from around her waist, pulled her outer kaftan over her head and hung both on the wall peg next to her box bed.

As she slipped under the rough muslin sheeting and felt the weight of her body gently pressing down into the stuffing of her mattress sack, she prayed silently to Ahura Mazda to ease her confusion. *Why do you present me with such a troubling vision of a life without Zabi? Why would you give me such joy one minute, only to cover it with a dark cloud the next? What good could possibly come of that—unless it were to help me be more determined than ever to love and honor him for the rest of my life.*

And how could I not? Unlike Abba and me—who never have a conversation, only quiet obedience on my part while I listen and try to please him—Zabi and I have spoken of so many magical things together for as long as I can remember. Perhaps these are childish things, as Ammi says, that I'll put aside as I learn the responsibilities of being a woman. But I don't think so. Zabi and I know each other like the wind knows the sky, each one separate, yet always together, two halves of a whole.

I was born of my father; he is my flesh and blood. Yet he's mostly a stranger to me. But I do know this: Abba is a practical man, and he will never send me away. I am a much-needed pair of hands that he doesn't need to pay. No, I am far more valuable to him here. How could Ammi spoil my night so completely with such thoughts of marrying a satrap and leaving my home behind? Besides, Zabi would never let that happen to me. He'll go to Abba tomorrow, as soon as I talk to him.

With those thoughts in mind, she finally drifted off to sleep and dreamed of her life to come with Zabi. She could hardly wait for that life to begin.

~ ~ ~

"One, two, three, four, five ... welcome back to the present," Dr. Tremaine said as Sarah opened her eyes. "Are you all right? You drifted away from me."

"What?" Sarah asked, a little disoriented. Then her eyes widened. "Dr. Tremaine—did you get all that? I saw so many things! The girl named Ayisha—I felt what *she* felt. And the boy named Zabi asked her to marry him. Was that real or was I just dreaming?"

"Not dreaming, exactly," said Dr Tremaine. "You were *remembering*. The source of your pain evidently goes all the way back to another life."

Sarah's eyes grew even wider. "Another *life*?" she gasped. "So *I* was Ayisha?"

"Some of my patients have stumbled upon this before, but not often."

"So you mean I was *her* before I was *me*?"

"Well, you could say that. Or it might be more appropriate to say that both of you are different parts of the same whole—if you subscribe to quantum physics' string theory of multiple dimensions."

"Quantum what?" Sarah scrunched up her nose in utter confusion.

"Never mind," Dr. Tremaine laughed. "That's more than you need to know. Let's just say that you could be seeing *her* because she's the one who holds the key to what's happening to *you* now."

"So now what do I do?" Sarah asked in a panic. "How will I ever get back to her to find out what happened? And where is back to her anyway?"

"Don't worry, now that you've made the connection, your mind will take you there again, if this memory is the source of your nightmares," said Dr. Tremaine. "And if I remember my history correctly, Persepolis was a palace city in the southern part of ancient Persia. It was partially built by Darius the Great, and when he died, the project was taken over by his son, Xerxes. That would have been ... 2,500 years ago, I think. But I can take you back there right now, if you want to continue."

"Yes, of course I do," Sarah shook her head up and down. "I want to see everything that happened to them, especially if it can help me understand my nightmares now."

"All right. Get comfortable again, and I'll count you down. Remember, you can always pull out of it by raising your hand if the memory gets too painful," she reminded Sarah. "Ten, relax ... nine, relax ...

~ ~ ~

CHAPTER II

Ayisha awoke in the pre-dawn darkness to the sounds and smells of Amma and Zeita preparing breakfast below. This was a harvest-day tradition that she had come to love. It was going to be an especially long day, Amma would say, and an unusually good meal to start it out would serve them well. She nudged awake her sisters, dressed quickly and went downstairs to take her place in the kitchen.

As she, Amma and Zeita prepared the fried wheatcakes, honeyed yogurt, datebread, lamb and apricots, her sister Sima bathed and dressed baby Idan, and Talia retrieved fresh goat's milk and prepared the tea servings. When all was nearly readied, Abba returned from the canal. "Zabi won't be joining us," he informed them. "I've left him in charge of finishing up the crews' breakfast rations and preparing the work stations." Ayisha was disappointed, but thought about how much more responsibility Abba was giving him. That bode well for his success in negotiating for her.

They enjoyed their feast; then Abba left for the orchard as Amma suckled Idan and put him, sleeping, back into his basket. With the first light, she and Ayisha left together for the orchards. Zeita, Sima and Talia stayed behind to clean up, prepare the day's meal baskets and take care of Idan.

Today the biggest part of the harvesting would be their Mubselli date palms although they would pluck some of King Darius' favorite Dayri dates, as well. They would need to string the king's dates right away because his servants would be arriving to retrieve them later this afternoon while they were

still fresh. During breakfast, Abba put Amma and Ayisha in charge of making sure only the most perfect dates would be strung. It had been an especially good growing season for both dates, so they had a lot of work to do. Abba was anxious to get as much harvesting completed as possible before the heat of June's late afternoon overtook them.

As Ayisha and her mother drew closer to the Mubselli area to be harvested first, she could see Abba was pleased that Zabi had already harnessed up, climbed to the top of the first palm and was tying off the first cut stalk of dates to be lowered to the workers waiting below. "I have the pickers' area set up over there in the shade," he called down to Abba. "And the fronds under the boiling vats are ready to be lit."

He glanced quickly at Ayisha, and they both just as quickly looked away from one another. But Ayisha caught the twinkle in his eyes that said good morning to her before she smiled at the ground. Seeing him at the top of that palm instantly brought back memories of watching him shimmy up a palm when she was a little girl until he was just out of her reach so she couldn't tag him—which meant he won, of course. After she protested enough, he would always climb back down and let her tag him anyway. He was indeed her best friend, she thought, smiling at the memory.

"There is another crew already waiting down by the Dayri dates," Zabi called down to Amma. With that, she and Ayisha headed in that direction, leaving Abba and Zabi to handle the much larger production at this end of the orchard. She was grateful to be assigned to the Dayri crew because at least those dates didn't have to be boiled, only sun-dried, and then their crew would string the very best for King Darius' table. On what already promised to be a very hot day, theirs was a much cooler task to be sure.

Ayisha knew that this was probably the only time she would be alone with Amma all day, so she seized the opportunity to speak with her again, and this time she decided to tell her the truth. “Ammi,” she began, “why would Abba not give me his blessing to be with Zabi? Your answer is important to me—because Zabi has already asked me to be his wife.”

“He did *what?*” Amma stopped short on the pathway and turned to face her daughter. “Without negotiating with your father first?”

“He wanted to be sure I would have him, *before* he negotiated the deal with Abba,” said Ayisha. “I told you, Zabi respects my opinion on everything.”

“Child, that is not the way it works,” Amma retorted, “and you are not listening to me. The matter is not up to you, or to me or even Zabi, but to your father entirely.” She grabbed the top of Ayisha’s arms with her hands and looked into her eyes. “Since the day you were born, your fate has always been in his hands. I can only hope to have some influence on his decision—and you have not given me much time.”

Time—there was that word again, and Ayisha was confused. She pulled away from her mother’s grip and took a step backward. “Ammi, what do you mean? What has Abba been planning for me? And how long have you known?”

“I don’t know any details, my daughter, I only know that rumors of your beauty have grown—”

“That is nonsense,” Ayisha interrupted her. She began pacing back and forth as she talked. “I am no more beautiful than any other young woman in the satrapy. And when the other women put on their kohl and jewelry for the marketplace and festivals, they are all far more beautiful than me. Besides, except when I go to the marketplace once a month to help sell our wares, I never leave the orchard. How could there possibly be rumors about me—”

“Stop talking for once and look at me.” Her mother’s angry voice silenced Ayisha and got her full attention. “Your father was told that noble blood is interested in you. A handsome dowry will be offered for you very soon.”

The lifeblood drained from Ayisha’s face, and her body broke into a cold sweat. “What? This can’t be possible.” She looked dazed and muddled. “I don’t understand. How could he not want to give me to Zabi? How could he not see what’s right in front of him?” Then she came back to life and lunged forward toward Amma. “Let me go to Zabi,” she begged, her voice rising along with her panic. “I’ve got to go tell him *now*. He’ll go to Abba right away and ask for my hand. Please—”

Amma grabbed Ayisha’s arms and shook her. “Calm down. The harvest has begun and there will be no running to Zabi and no negotiations about *anything* until it’s finished. She placed her hand firmly around Ayisha’s elbow and began moving her down the pathway again while she talked low into her ear. “We must hurry now to the crew that’s waiting for us to oversee King Darius’ special harvest. You know his servants are coming this afternoon for his dates. There will be disaster if those dates aren’t ready when they get here. If the king’s men don’t punish us, your father will.”

They came upon the pickers who were sitting in the shade, waiting for them. Amma assigned tasks and directed everyone to their places, all the while keeping her daughter close to her and monitoring her out of the corners of her eyes. As soon as she was finished with the others, she set Ayisha to work personally with the busiest job of all: keeping the dates moving.

The rest of the morning was like a troubled dream to Ayisha. She was so worried she couldn’t concentrate on anything. She thanked Ahora Mazda that Abba had been able to re-hire their best and most experienced pickers for the king’s

dates. They knew their jobs well and went right to work as soon as the cutting crew delivered the stalks fresh cut from the palms.

They picked and separated the dates into three baskets: one for the scrap-feed dates—these dates were inferior; the second basket for the quality Dayri that would fetch a good price at the bid market; and the third basket for the Dayri of such superior quality they were destined for King Darius' table.

The women chattered and gossiped as they sat on the ground skillfully picking and sorting under the shade of the palm trees. Ayisha's role was to keep it all moving, rotating empty baskets for the full ones and spreading the dates onto the leaf mats waiting in the sun, which was getting hotter by the minute. The king's dates dried for a brief half-day only because that was the way King Darius liked them. So she had to concentrate on keeping track of where each mat stood in that hour-by-hour drying process and rake the dates so they would dry evenly. The market dates would dry all day on different mats away from the king's.

She tried hard to concentrate on what she was doing, but her thoughts kept careening into panic at the notion of no longer walking these orchards with Zabi. She kept peering down the path to catch a glimpse of her beloved crossing between the palms as the Mubselli harvesters got closer to the Dayri harvesters. If she spotted him, she planned to drop her basket and run to him immediately, such was the panic she was feeling. Once, she nearly emptied a basket of the market dates onto one of the king's mats; she fell to her knees catching the near-spill just in time. Amma frowned at her when she saw it happening. But Ayisha never spotted Zabi.

Abba came to check their progress twice during the morning. He spoke quietly to Amma as they broke for the midday meal, which Zeita and Ayisha's sisters had delivered

earlier when they brought Idan to suckle. Amma never spoke in return but simply nodded her head with eyes lowered. Only yesterday Ayisha would not have thought twice about their brief meeting. Today she couldn't help but wonder what they had discussed.

As soon as the meal was finished, half of the women, their best stringers, stopped picking to begin stringing the king's dates. These sundried, hand-strung dates would last longer in storage in the palace kitchens in Persepolis. The bid-market dates would be loaded later in the day into the orchard's hand-stamped, palm-wood boxes. They would be re-opened and negotiated over by buyers who came from near and far to load up their wagons with the food staple. Ayisha's family lived all year on the generous proceeds from these important harvest sales. They were all grateful to Ahora Mazda for their most bountiful harvest.

But none more so than Zabi, Ayisha thought. He told her proudly last night that he would approach her father in just a few more days to negotiate for her with the coins he'd earn from this harvest. *No, he must do it now, this very day. Where is he? Why are they taking so long to reach us?*

In harvests past, she and Zabi would always have an opportunity to see each other at least once or twice during the day. But with all the new palms that had finally reached maturity this season, his crew had 50 Mubselli palms to harvest.

In the case of the Dayri palms, Abba spread out the pollination in order to have multiple harvests and fresh dates as long as possible for King Darius during the growing season. Today they were harvesting only 20 Dayri palms, so before the midday meal, the cutters had finished trimming and lowering down by rope the Dayri stalks. They had already gone to join Zabi and the other cutters at the opposite end of the orchard to

speed up the process there. After the Mubselli dates were boiled in the vats, they had to dry in the sun for two days before they were ready for market. So the entire process was much larger at the other end of the orchard.

The hot summer sun and heat were intense by the time the Dayri pickers finished with the last of their cut stalks by early afternoon. The stringers had worked so quickly that they had nearly completed stringing those dates that had already dried the required half day, and it would not be long before they would overtake the drying process for the rest of the king's dates. So it was a good time to stop for the early-afternoon tea break.

Amma had set the tea to steep in the hot sun just after their midday meal break. When she saw Zeita, Sima and Talia arriving with their baskets of flatbreads and honey cakes, she directed the lead stringer to dispense the tea to the rest of the crew, who were seated in the shade together. Zeita had little Idan strapped to her back, and Amma retrieved him to relieve her aching breasts. She took Idan aside to suckle him while Sima and Talia walked through the crew to dispense the breads.

Glancing over her shoulder, Ayisha began to walk slowly, tentatively away from the others and toward the path she and Amma had taken this morning. It was then that she finally saw Zabi. He and his crew had just arrived at the first row of Mubselli date palms at this end of the orchard, about 90 meters away, and he was getting ready to climb the first palm. She clenched her fists nervously and darted her eyes around, looking for Amma. But she was determined to reach him. *If I run as quickly as Zabi taught me, I can get to him and back before Ammi would ever notice I'm missing.*

She took off like a desert cat, running swiftly and silently toward the Mubselli palms and Zabi. Staying close to the edge

of the path for brush cover, she was halfway there when she spotted Abba and two large, colorfully dressed eunuchs coming toward her. But it was too late to avoid them. They rounded the corner at the break in the palms and walked directly into her path. In horror, she stopped dead in her tracks, almost running into them. The three of them positioned themselves to block her while she glanced first at Abba, then quickly at the two eunuchs, and back at Abba again.

One of the eunuchs spread his arms out to catch her while he said to Abba, “Ahh, she is a beauty indeed. I see them all, and I predict she will be the pick of King Darius’ litter.”

Eyes wide, Ayisha jumped back in disbelief. *King Darius?! I am being sold to the king’s harem?* Shaking her head furiously back and forth, she pleaded desperately with her father. Words flew from her mouth as quickly as she could form them, “No, Abbi, you don’t understand, Zabi wants to marry me, and I want to marry him. He’ll ask you for my hand this very minute. You can’t do this to us.” She screamed for her beloved, “Zabi—Zabi!”

Abba was humiliated and raised his voice to her. “You will marry whom I tell you to marry. How dare you speak to me with such disrespect.” He raised his arm to strike her, but one of the eunuchs deflected the blow and said, “Sire, you must not damage the king’s property. We have paid you handsomely for her, and she is ours now. We will take it from here.”

Ayisha screamed as the man grabbed her by the waist. He was so strong that he quickly twirled her around, dropped her to the ground face down and held her with one knee on her back. Then he clinched both her arms behind her and deftly tied them with a strip of muslin. The other eunuch had already grabbed her legs so she could not kick, and he tied them at the ankles.

By now Ayisha's screams had brought Zabi and his crew running. "What are you doing?" he yelled at Ayisha's father, "Don't just stand there—get her away from those animals. Help her! He quickly sized up the situation then and screamed, "What have you done, old man? Have you sold her? Is this orchard worth more to you than your own daughter?" He jumped in front of Abba, and yelled louder at him. "Than *us*? Did you not *know* I wished to marry her? Surely you knew." He turned around and started toward the two eunuchs and Ayisha, but Abba grabbed him from behind and whirled him back around.

"I have two other daughters—you can have either one of them," he shouted in Zabi's face. "This one is too expensive for you. She just bought me the rest of the orchards free and clear—"

Zabi lunged at Abba, seized him by the throat and screamed, "I don't want either one of your other daughters; I love *Ayisha*. That's a word you'll never understand, you stupid, greedy old man," he spat the words into Abba's face.

It took several of Zabi's crew members to pull him off Abba and hold him down while the two powerful eunuchs lowered Ayisha, squirming and screaming, into the giant reed basket they pulled out from under a palm. They hoisted the basket onto the back of the ox-drawn cart hidden behind a nearby clump of lilac bushes, tied the basket in place and climbed onto the front seat of the cart.

Ayisha screamed for Zabi and squirmed in vain to free herself from inside the basket. But no one came running to rescue her as the eunuchs slowly steered the oxcart onto the path leading out of the orchard. No one tried to stop them as they passed the compound with all its buildings; and no one blocked their way as they turned away from the only home Ayisha had ever known. In horror and disbelief, she continued

screaming for Zabi and pleading with her father until the orchard complex disappeared altogether from her view between the basket reeds. Then she crumpled sobbing into a tightly contained heap on the basket floor.

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The sound of her own voice calling out for Zabi pulled Sarah back to the safety of Dr. Tremaine's office. "Why did you bring me out?" she asked. Then she realized she was sobbing and reached for the box of tissues on the table beside her.

"You brought yourself out this time," Dr. Tremaine said. "You got too involved in the movie. Take a deep breath now," she told her quietly and handed her a glass of water.

"Ayisha's father sold her to the king's family." Sarah's voice heaved with emotion. "How could any father do that? Even 2,500 years ago."

"That was another time, Sarah, and it happened to Ayisha. Not to you. Take a few deep breaths now and relax."

Sarah closed her eyes and breathed deeply for a minute. Then she opened her eyes and asked, "Is that it, then? Is that the reason for my recurring nightmares? Because it doesn't feel like it to me."

"No," Dr. Tremaine agreed. "I don't think so. Do you want to continue today and find out?"

Sarah took another deep breath and let it out slowly. "I can't stop now. We're just getting to the good parts of the movie, right?"

Dr. Tremaine looked at her and smiled. "You might say that. Remember, pull back whenever it gets too intense. Distance yourself. Or detach completely whenever it overwhelms you like you did just now. You can handle this, or you wouldn't be here with me now, and this memory wouldn't

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be awakening itself within you. Are you ready? I'm going to count you back down. You can go to the exact space and time where you left off if you like...

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CHAPTER III

Ayisha knew the route to Persepolis well. She had made the trip by oxcart many times before with Zabi and her family when they transported their goods to the Marketplace. Now, she thought with horror, *she* was the goods being transported. Her father had sold her so easily—like a prime boxload of dates to the king. *And Ammi—where was she when these evil men shoved me into this basket? She’s always warned me: ‘Stay out of sight of Abba’s hired men;’ and ‘Don’t walk alone in the orchard.’ But she didn’t help me when Abba handed me over to them.*

“Where was my Ammi?” she wailed. But she already knew the answer. Amma’s own words rang in her ears while she rocked back and forth. She told Ayisha her fate had always been in Abba’s hands—just as hers had been in *her* father’s hands.

In an instant, Ayisha's safe and loving world in the orchard had collapsed by her own father’s decree. A sickening shockwave of dread came over her, and she sobbed harder. *Was Ammi really that powerless?* Her thoughts raced back and forth, stumbling all over each other. *It would never be this way with Zabi. He wants me to think for myself. He loves me for who I am. He’s the only one who even tried to save me.* And for that, she began to realize, his own life could be in jeopardy right now.

And still the oxcart rolled on, taking her farther and farther away from the compound. She had been sobbing and rocking back and forth inside the stifling hot basket for at least two hours with her hands tied behind her back and her legs tied at

the ankles. Now her head was pounding and she could hardly breathe. She tried to shift her body back into a sitting position when a wave of nausea began to overtake her in the oppressive heat. It continued to build until her skin felt clammy and her body trembled, then shook. As her stomach spasmed, it felt as if the basket was spinning out of control. The last thing she remembered before she fainted was the side of her face pushing against the warm, acrid vomit running down the basket's wall—which was the only thing preventing her from collapsing completely.

The sounds, or the smell, of Ayisha's distress must have alarmed the two eunuchs because the next thing she knew she was opening her eyes in terror while she dangled in mid-air. One of the eunuchs had yanked her up from behind and out of the basket by the bunched-up wad of her kaftan on her back. "Oh, now look at the mess you've made," he said to her, irritated. He tried to stand her up on her feet, but her wobbly legs would not cooperate. Finally, in disgust, he sat her down on the ground and commanded her to stay there as he grabbed the basket and headed for the waystation building where they had stopped. King Darius had so generously provided these stations for travelers all along the roadway.

The smaller of the two eunuchs stayed behind with Ayisha to make sure she stayed put. He needn't have bothered. She was too weak and too much in shock to move. Minutes later, the bigger eunuch, who was obviously the one in charge, returned with the now dripping wet basket in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. He set the basket down in the cart, then came around in front of Ayisha and poured the bucketful of water over her head and face.

She yelled as she rose up on her knees and shook her head like a jackal while the water quickly drenched through her clothing.

“I thought that would get you up,” he laughed. He cut the muslin rope from Ayisha’s wrists and ankles with his knife, grabbed her wrists and pulled her up to her feet. “Here,” he said, and held out a cup of water he had saved from the bucket. “Get the taste out of your mouth. Don’t swallow, just rinse and spit it out.”

Her hands were shaking as she took the cup from him, drew some water into her mouth, swished it obediently—and spat it as far and as hard as she could in his direction.

“Oh-ho!” he yelped. He jumped back just in time to avoid the assault, save for a couple of drops. “A feisty one. You are lucky you missed, Chosen One, or else I would be boxing your ears right now.” His flash of a smile turned quickly into a frown. “This will be your only warning, so you would do well to remember that.”

“You wouldn’t dare hurt me,” Ayisha said to him defiantly with as much strength as she could muster. “I’m the king’s property now, remember?” She echoed back to him the words he had spoken in the orchard.

“You don’t seem to understand that yet, but you will,” he boomed back at her. You *are* the king’s property now. And it is my job to not only bring *his property* to his harem but to make sure *his property* behaves itself there, becomes obedient and learns its lessons well—before it is ever presented to the king himself. And if that doesn’t happen, *his property* will be sold elsewhere. One way or the other, the king will recover his investment.”

His response took what little strength she had in reserve back out of Ayisha as the reality of where and to whom she was headed began to fully take hold. She felt faint again, and with nothing to lean on, she slowly sank back down to her knees. But the second eunuch would have none of that. “Oh, no

you don't," he said and yanked her back up from behind a second time.

Since both the basket and Ayisha were still soaking wet, they decided to let her continue the trip outside of the basket. The bigger eunuch tied her hands behind her back again with fresh muslin strips and then looped the makeshift rope tightly around an iron tie-down embedded in the cart floor. The other eunuch tied her legs again at the ankles. They worked together so quickly and precisely that even in her shock Ayisha could not help but realize their odd kind of teamwork only came from practice and familiarity. They must have performed these tasks together many times before.

The eunuchs hopped back onto the seat of the cart, and they were off again. The late afternoon sun quickly dried Ayisha's clothing. In spite of her ordeal—or maybe because of it—the combination of the sun's warm rays and the constant rocking of the cart slowly lulled her to sleep.

She must have slept for hours; when she opened her eyes again, she was surrounded by darkness. She raised her head and looked up at the stars. It was a clear night and they sparkled like jewels in the sky. She remembered the countless times as a little girl she and Zabi lay together with their backs on the ground while he pointed out the different constellations. He would take her finger in his hand and trace them in the sky until she saw them herself. Instinctively, she tried to raise her fingers now to trace them again—only to realize they were tied behind her back. The overwhelming memory of her last moments in the orchard came rushing back, and she wondered if she'd ever see her beloved again. *He could be tied up himself right now. He could be beaten, or worse.*

Brokenhearted, she moaned her disbelief. *This is not real, this is a very, very bad dream. Ahura Mazda, I beg of you, let*

me close my eyes again and wake up in my bed, in my home with my Abba and my Ammi, who would never do this to me.

Her prayers were shattered when the bigger eunuch called back to her. “Glad to hear you’re awake. We’re almost to Persepolis. Welcome to your new life, Chosen One.

His words brought Ayisha’s thoughts crashing back to the oxcart. Her hands were trembling and her mouth dry. She looked up furtively. She could see by the moon’s position in the sky that it was close to midnight. *Everyone is asleep right now in the orchard.*

The eunuch continued talking. “Your life will be better now—or worse—it’s all up to you. But I assure you, your old life is dead to you. You would be wise to start getting used to your new life, beginning right now.”

His words reverberated in her ears as the oxcart rolled under the main gate to the city surrounding the palace. Zabi once told her that the city was designed and created by King Darius himself, to surround and protect his magnificent palace and the immense terrace on which it was built. The terrace was built 450 meters x 300 meters and towered 20 meters above the city. Its east side jutted out from the foot of Kuh-e Rahmat, the Mountain of Mercy. It was a fortress, well protected from enemies.

Even in the darkness, Ayisha recognized the main street of the royal city’s Marketplace Square. During market time, all its streets became crowded with tents and tables loaded down with wares for sale and trade. Now only the clomping of the oxen hoofs echoed in the eerie midnight stillness as they passed through these same streets on the way to the palace. But in her mind she could hear the sounds of women chatting, children laughing and hawkers calling out their wares as she recalled the days she spent here with Amma, Abba and Zabi—twice this

year so far. *Next week would have been my third and most special time.* The thought made her even more miserable.

They passed the sacred Fire Temple, and she could see the smoke curling upward into the sky from its roof, wafting up from the sacrificial fire pit inside. It was constantly maintained by the magi, or high priests and priestesses, to never grow cold. Whenever she and her family arrived to the Marketplace, it was always to this temple that they came first, even before setting up their wares. Zabi would give the magi the goat they brought for sacrifice while Abba presented them with boxes of their best dates. Then they prayed together to Ahura Mazda for continued bountiful harvests. As the oxcart rolled past the temple, she realized now that she and Zabi should have been praying for their own protection.

Once, the both of them had sneaked out of the temple instead of sitting prayerfully while Abba and Amma joined the inner circle discussions with the temple magi. They ran all the way to the end of the city's main street and out into the courtyard to get a better look at the grandness of the palace terrace and the great hall that towered from above. They stood there gazing in awe for so long at its magnificent columns with their gleaming gold rings reflecting the pre-dawn moonlight that they were nearly caught by Abba when they sneaked back into the temple. The whole experience with Zabi had been so daring and exciting it made her heart pound. It was pounding that same way now, but the excitement was replaced by dread. Never in her wildest nightmares had Ayisha ever imagined she would one day be a special delivery to that palace.

She shook harder when she saw in the moonlight the outline of the terrace itself, jutting out of the mountainside, now only a short distance away. The street had emptied into the courtyard area that surrounded the front and sides of the terrace, the back side being the mountain itself. The courtyard

created a 15-meter buffer zone between the closest buildings and the terrace walls.

The oxcart circled around to the right until it drew up in front of the long and low-rise stair-step entrance to the terrace. Zabi had told her there were plans to build a matching set of steps on the left side of the terrace. But for now these steps were the only way up to the top. The rest of the terrace was made impenetrable by steep retaining walls and heavily fortified guard towers.

Slowly, the oxen began to pull the cart up so many low-rise steps that Ayisha lost count. When they finally reached the top, the eunuchs pulled forward into a small receiving courtyard until they finally came to a stop in front of a massive wood gate with guard towers. The guards let them through, and they slowly continued down a dark passageway. It was surrounded on both sides by tall buildings, making it seem that much darker to Ayisha. The passageway finally opened up into yet another courtyard. The oxcart circled around and came to a stop beside an oversized timber-block door in what appeared to be a very long building. Lit torches stood on either side of the door as if awaiting their arrival. The door slowly creaked open, and two colorfully dressed eunuchs quickly clamored out. They came directly over to the oxen, unharnessed them and led them away.

At the same time, the two eunuchs on the oxcart hopped down from the front of it, and the bigger one wasted no time in coming around to unharness *her*. “Ugh,” he said to Ayisha in disgust. “You smell like the evilness of Angra Mainyu himself.” He bunched up his nose and turned his head away while he cut the muslin rope that bound her to the cart.

A third, dark-skinned eunuch lurched out of the building’s doorway. He stood very tall, looked powerful, and he was

angry. Ayisha's face stiffened in sheer terror at the sight of this one.

"It's about time you got here," he said. "Hurry and get your cargo in. It's late and you have interrupted my sleep. Let's get this over with—and take those wretched clothes off her. I can smell them from here." Then he turned and stomped back into the building.

Ayisha stood up slowly, in pain from the same sitting position she had been in for hours. But the bigger eunuch yanked her down off the cart quickly and practically dragged her through the open door. He led her straight over to the powerful dark-skinned one, who had seated himself on a three-legged stool next to a small table. The only light in the room came from a dimly lit lantern that sat upon it. The rest of the room behind the eunuch was wrapped in murky darkness, making him look all the more menacing.

Before Ayisha could even cry out, her two eunuch captors who had so skillfully subdued her in the orchard now ripped off her clothing and left her standing naked and exposed in front of the dark-skinned one. Almost simultaneously, each of them grabbed one of her arms and held it out from her side, then hooked a foot around each of her ankles and dragged it toward themselves to spread her legs apart.

"*What are you doing?*" she shrieked and tried to twist her arms free.

The powerful, dark-skinned eunuch quickly jumped up from his stool and slapped both her ears hard, yelling "Silence."

Ayisha sucked in her breath and dropped her head to one side in stunned agony. Only the strong grip of her captors held her upright and kept her from collapsing while the dark-skinned eunuch calmly picked up his lantern and walked full-circle around her. He slowly and closely examined her body

head-to-toe. “Perfect,” he said as he finally sat back down on the stool in front of her. Through blurred eyes, she could see he wore a huge grin on his face, apparently very pleased.

“You have done well, Maruk,” he said to the bigger of her captors. “There’s just one more thing.” He leaned forward now, grabbed Ayisha’s thigh and like lightening thrust his cupped fingers between her legs and up inside her body cavity. She writhed in pain so deep and stabbing that she could barely scream as he just as quickly yanked his hand back out, then put his fingers to his nose and sniffed. “She’s a virgin,” he said with a satisfied smile. Ayisha groaned while her body, still held in place by her captors, went completely limp from shame and humiliation, and throbbing pain that took her breath away. Her eunuch captors moved in closer to her now, each placing an arm around her. They half walked, half dragged her past the dark-skinned one and into the darkness beyond.

The murkiness was actually steam rising up from a huge pool of water that filled the entire room in front of her. The eunuchs led her right to the edge of the pool, then using their macabre teamwork once more, they lifted her under her arms and lowered her into the warm water below. By now Ayisha’s whole body was shaking violently. Her legs gave way, and the bigger eunuch had to grab her arms to keep her from sinking under the water in the darkness. “Find the marble bench jutting out from the edge,” he quickly instructed her, “and sit down.”

She did as he told her, but the water covered her to her midriff only. She hunched over and wrapped her arms around her trembling body, in a futile attempt to cover herself, and began to rock back and forth uncontrollably.

The bigger eunuch clapped his hands together and a young servant girl carrying a basket full of scrubbing salts, aromas, scented oils and towels came out from the shadows in the far corner of the room. She knelt down beside Ayisha at the edge

of the steaming pool, now dimly illuminated by the oil lamp the second eunuch had retrieved from the outer room. The girl reached for Ayisha's matted hair hanging down around her bare shoulders, but Ayisha instantly jerked her head away. The bigger eunuch said almost kindly now, "Let her wash your hair and bathe you."

The girl took a large sea sponge from the basket beside her, dipped it in the warm water and gently squeezed it out onto the top and back of Ayisha's head several times. Next she dipped her fingers into a small pottery bowl and retrieved a white, pasty substance that she massaged into Ayisha's hair. It smelled of lilacs, an aroma that instantly transported her back to the orchard and the lilac bushes grown there for Zeita's perfumes. She closed her eyes and saw herself walking with Zeita and Zabi as they laughed together in the sunlight, each loaded down with armfuls of the overwhelmingly fragrant flowers on their way to the perfumery workroom. Tears welled up in her eyes. Just one evening earlier, she was asleep in her own bed in the orchard, dreaming of the lifetime she and Zabi would spend together.

Now one sun and moon later, she sat naked, violated, shamed and humiliated in a room-size steambath somewhere inside the king's palace. She belonged to King Darius—a beautiful new jewel in his harem. A slave girl obediently rubbed her hair and body with bath salts while two shiny-headed, half-man eunuchs watched her every move. They had dragged her away from her home after her own father had sold her and her mother betrayed her. They stripped her naked in front of a third eunuch who brutally assaulted her ... her mind began to implode from the shock of it all.

The steamy waters beckoned. She silently asked for Ahura Mazda's forgiveness, willed herself to go limp, slid down off the bench and let her body fall to the bottom of the pool. She

let the breath out of her lungs and breathed in the water that would free her from this nightmare.

For an instant she was at peace, back in the orchard, laughing in the sunshine with Zabi. But then they dragged her back, two soaking wet eunuchs kneeling beside her and forcing her to cough up the very water that was helping her to escape. The little slave girl stood two meters away, helpless and in tears. The bigger eunuch commanded the girl to leave and speak to no one about this incident, or he would cut out her tongue. He quickly wrapped Ayisha in a towel and sat her upright.

“Why would you do that?” he demanded to know, a mixture of anger and puzzlement in his voice.

“To get away from *you*,” she whimpered, eyes closed and head hung low. Her ears were ringing, her head exploding, and all the life had drained from her voice. But she was still alive.

“Well, I won’t let you,” he yelled at Ayisha. He grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. “This is your destiny, just as my life here has been my destiny. And you cannot escape it. You are the *Chosen One*. Don’t try to resist your new life. You will adjust much more quickly that way.”

“I have no life. My life is over,” she moaned.

“Your life as you *knew* it is over,” he hissed back at her, “but your life here has only just begun.”

They sat together in eerie silence for what could have been several seconds or several hours; time had somehow lost all meaning for Ayisha. Then he finally spoke again. “I am Maruk, remember my name. I will be overseeing your training. I will view your naked body regularly, so do not feel ashamed. It is part of my role here. And your role right now is to listen to me carefully and do exactly as I tell you.” His tone was commanding but almost fatherly now, and Ayisha could not

help but raise her eyes to him and at least try to absorb his words.

“Do we understand each other?” he asked her, locking his eyes on hers. She returned his gaze for a few short seconds and then turned her head away in silence.

“Good, then we understand each other,” he said.

Maruk pulled Ayisha to her feet and helped her put on the white muslin pants, kaftan, belt and black silk slippers the little slave girl had left behind. He picked up the lantern and led her around to the opposite side of the pool and down the wall lined with benches until they arrived at the wooden door at the end. He opened it and motioned her through with the lantern. In the dim light, Ayisha could make out a large open courtyard of sorts, lined on either side with numerous doorways.

In a hushed voice, Maruk informed her that behind each door was a small single-room living quarter that housed four girls each. “Except for this one,” he said and motioned her into the first darkened doorway on the right.

“This is where you will sleep at least for tonight—maybe longer,” he said. The room was barren and cramped. He pointed to an empty wooden box bed built into the wall and quietly told her that it was where she should rest now. It was a hard wooden platform with nothing more than a small woolen blanket for cover. The bed and blanket were the only hint of comfort to be found. In the back corner was a large clay pot for relieving herself, he instructed her.

Maruk turned to leave. Before he did, he warned Ayisha against trying to harm herself again. “I will be standing guard right outside this door tonight, and I will be watching you.” Then he was gone, taking the lantern with him.

Ayisha stood frozen in the darkness and silently beseeched Ahura Mazda to strike her dead. But nothing came to her, except for the silence. Finally, weariness and despair overcame

her, and she crawled onto the bed in utter hopelessness. At least for tonight, sleep was her only escape. She circled her arms around her knees and cried herself to sleep.

~ ~ ~

Dr. Tremaine counted up to five, and Sarah struggled to open her eyes even as she lowered her hand that signaled the therapist to bring her back up. "Are you there?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm here," the doctor quietly responded from her chair nearby.

"That was ... *cruel*." Sarah was too overwhelmed to say anything more.

"Do you want to stop now?"

"No," She shuddered and slowly pulled herself up. "Not yet." She looked over at Dr. Tremaine. "You know, when Ayisha tried to drown herself, I thought, *that must be the reason for my nightmares*. But drowning didn't hurt; it was peaceful. So that's not it. No, I get the feeling this is only just the beginning.

"And, well ... this is so strange, but now I'm worried about *Zabi*. It's like something deep inside me needs to know what happened to him after Ayisha was carted away, and needs to know it *now*. Is there any way for me to find out? Or can I only learn what happened if Ayisha finds out about it?"

"It seems you have a strong connection to this man even now," said Dr. Tremaine, "He could be an integral part of your nightmares. You might possibly connect with *Zabi*'s memory outside of Ayisha's experiences by using your own subconscious or deep imagination. It's called scrying. Funny, its roots also go all the way back to ancient Persia. Back then they believed that the visions it produced came from gods or demons and not one's own mind. It's hardly mainstream science, but Nostradamus used scrying to come up with some

of his recorded visions of the future. I'll warn you; it's difficult to achieve, but not impossible. I've had only one patient able to accomplish it so far. Would you like to try it?"

"What do I have to do?"

"Lie back down and close your eyes again, get comfortable, and I'll try my best to guide you through it."

Sarah relaxed into the pillows, took a couple deep breaths and let them out slowly.

"This technique will be a little different than the one your mind is using to get images of your past life as Ayisha," Dr. Tremaine explained. "With scrying, you focus on another person or events outside yourself—or Ayisha's self—that you wish to see; in this case, Zabi and in the past. The thoughts or visions your mind produces will come through your *own* subconscious imagination, not Ayisha's.

"Picture yourself standing at the edge of a small but very deep and perfectly still pool of water. Relax. Breathe deeply now and fix your gaze solely upon the water until a fine mist appears on its surface ... do you see it yet? ... good. Now stare into that mist and use your imagination to take your mind back to the very last moment you saw Zabi in the orchard the day Ayisha was taken away. Just say out loud all the random images you see as you see them, no matter how trivial or irrelevant they may seem to you ... that's right, keep talking. Now let the images float freely in the mist while you think about only what you wish to know. Keep your thoughts relaxed and detached. Watch the movie as it plays out in front of your mind's eye..."

~ ~ ~



When deeply hurt, we never recover until we forgive. Sarah Ferguson agrees. She suffers from a mystery illness and mind-travels to ancient Persia to discover why. What emerges is nothing less than mystical as she meets Ayisha-and trails her descent from youthful innocence to love crushed so completely only vengeance remains. But Ayisha's revenge threatens to destroy the lives of everyone around her-including Sarah's, as she lay in trance on the therapist's couch...

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