STAR OF PERSIA



JILL EILEEN SMITH



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Published by Revell a division of Baker Publishing Group PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287 www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smith, Jill Eileen, 1958- author.

Title: Star of Persia: Esther's story / Jill Eileen Smith.

Other titles: Esther's story

Description: Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019. | Bibliography: p. [275]-278.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019017717 | ISBN 9780800734718 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Esther, Queen of Persia — Fiction. | Bible. Esther — History of Biblical events — Fiction. | Xerxes I, King of Persia, 519 B.C.-465 B.C. or 464 B.C. — Fiction. | Women in the Bible — Fiction. | GSAFD: Bible fiction. | Historical fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3619.M58838 S73 2018 | DDC 813/.6—dc23 LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019017717

ISBN 978-0-8007-3778-8 (casebound)

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Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370, www.booksandsuch.com.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To every man and woman who is willing to take the risk of trusting God in the middle of a crisis and do the hard things.

To those who will step up when faced with your own "such a time as this."

This book is for you.

Prologue

489 BC

Vashti moved through the palace gardens, cradling her bulging middle After three years of marriage to Xerxes and two pregnancies lost, she had feared she would never bear a child. Even now she feared. What if the child was stillborn? What if she died in childbirth?

She moved through a walkway of flowering almond trees, her maids following closely behind. What she wouldn't give to talk to another woman, but she cared nothing for Xerxes' concubines.

She crossed her arms. Surely the child would be a boy. Xerxes' heir. Perhaps that would keep her husband from wandering to the beds of other women, though she knew him too well to think him capable of being faithful to her alone.

Still, her child would be his first. Even when he married Amestris, a spoiled child of royal blood promised to Xerxes once he took his father's throne, no one would be able to take her child's place as firstborn of the king. Vashti felt her jaw tighten with every thought of Amestris and the insistence of Xerxes' mother, Atossa, that this was best for all. After all, she'd reminded Vashti often enough, "You are not fully Persian, my dear." Never mind that she was the granddaughter of Babylonian kings.

She shook her head. Thinking of Amestris did nothing but cause her worry, and she needed peace and rest lest she disturb the babe. Still she paced, restless. She walked toward the gate that separated the palace grounds from the residents of Susa. As she looked out at the city, she spotted a young girl skipping beside her mother, her thick, dark curls bouncing beneath a neatly tied beige linen headscarf. The girl turned her head and looked toward the imposing palace. Vashti drew in a breath. Such large, inquisitive eyes! The child was already beautiful and not yet grown. Vashti smiled. How many suitors this child's father would have to fend off! At least her father would have choices. Something Vashti's father never did.

The sting of loss over what she had never known faded as she placed a protective hand on her swelling belly, and reminded herself that Xerxes was at least an attentive lover when he was in need of her. That he favored her was satisfaction in itself, though she often wondered what life would have been like if she had been born in Babylon, the city of her ancestors, instead of in the conquering land of Persia.

You should be grateful that one day you will be queen. You have privileges others do not.

She knew that. Didn't she remind herself often enough? She looked again toward the gate and saw that the child stood near, peering at her through the slats.

"Hadassah, come!" the girl's mother called.

A sudden urge overcame Vashti, and she moved closer to the gate. She spoke to one of her maids. "Call the woman and the child to me."

The maid complied, and a moment later, the woman and her daughter were ushered into the gardens. The woman bowed low, but the child simply stared at her with those large, dark eyes.

"I hope I did not startle you," Vashti said, motioning for the woman to rise. "Your daughter. She is beautiful."

The woman nodded. "Thank you, Your Majesty." Clearly the woman recognized her, though Vashti was not dressed in her royal finery as the crown prince's wife.

Vashti met the woman's gaze. "You called her Hadassah. You are of Jewish blood."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The woman glanced about her as though the meeting made her uncomfortable.

"Do not fear. I hold nothing against your people. I simply wanted to see the child." And to speak to someone about birth and raising a child, though others would do the job for her. "Was it difficult to birth her?" Vashti asked, despite her better sense to keep her thoughts to herself rather than make them subject to public gossip.

The woman looked at her feet, then lifted her head and offered Vashti a slight smile. "I can tell you what it was like to birth my sons, but I did not birth Hadassah. She is my husband's cousin. She is orphaned, so we adopted her."

Vashti released a breath. She could trust a woman who would reveal such knowledge. "How did she become orphaned?" Vashti longed to kneel to the child's height, but in her condition she could only look down at the girl. She moved to a bench and sat, inviting the two to join her.

Star of Persia

"Her father died of a fever before her birth, and her mother died shortly after childbirth. Hadassah has been with us these past six years."

"And may I ask your name?" Vashti looked at the woman, then coaxed the child to sit beside her. Hadassah glanced at the woman for permission, then climbed onto the stone seat.

"Levia. My husband is Mordecai. He works as a scribe at the king's gate."

Vashti touched the child's curls, suddenly hoping her child would be a girl despite the need to bear a son. "Then he is a good man," she said without looking up. "It is unfortunate the child has lost so much."

Hadassah looked into Vashti's eyes and searched her face as though she was seeing beyond her ability to comprehend. She reached a small hand to touch Vashti's face, then placed a hand on Vashti's protruding middle. "You will have a baby soon," Hadassah said. "You are pretty and have kind eyes."

Vashti sat straighter. She took the child's hand. "And you are young to say such things."

"She has always been a bright child," Levia said.

Vashti nodded. She had no reason to detain the woman or the child, yet a part of her longed to do just that. At last common sense won out, and she cupped Hadassah's face and slowly rose. She looked at Levia. "Take good care of her. She is one who could come to great favor or great harm for her beauty."

"Thank you, Majesty. I will be extra watchful for your warning."

Vashti dismissed them, wondering what had caused her to say such a thing, yet feeling some strange sense that she

had done well. She watched Levia, with Hadassah in hand, walk toward the gate, where Hadassah looked back at her and smiled. Warmth like the break of dawn after the darkness washed over Vashti, and she wondered if she had touched the face of an angel.



PART ONE

This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa....

Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas—to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

Esther 1:1-5, 9-12 NIV





Six Years Later

Hadassah moved through the market, basket on her head, Levia one step ahead of her. "Hurry along, child," Levia scolded. "The crowds are growing too great."

The market had been quiet when they'd arrived after their visit to the well and preparing the morning meal. But now, servants of visiting nobles and governors from the king's 127 provinces descended upon the shops. Hadassah could feel Levia's tension and protectiveness.

"I'm coming," Hadassah assured her as she picked up her pace and came alongside her cousin's wife, the only woman she had known as mother. She glanced behind her and noticed the servants streaming from the palace halls. The palace stood in all its grandeur like a towering sentinel in the center of the city.

Her heart skipped a beat as she and Levia nearly ran

through the cobbled streets, and she breathed a sigh of relief as they finally entered their neighborhood. The clay brick home looked like every other in their small community, all clumped together with little space between them, owned by those subject to King Xerxes. While the Jews tended to settle together, Levia's husband, Mordecai, had kept them slightly apart—a few blocks away from other Hebrew people.

Most of the Jews had returned to Jerusalem several years before, but Mordecai had followed his father in service to the king and felt compelled to stay. Sometimes Hadassah wondered if they would have been better off to go with their people, to be free of the wild debauchery of Susa. But when the king moved to Persepolis for the winter, Susa was quiet. Peaceful even. After a cleansing rain, Hadassah could stroll with her older cousins to the hills outside the city. Life felt safer during those times.

They reached the house and hurried inside. Levia shut the door and leaned against it. "How long is this revelry to go on?" She wiped her brow and moved into the cooking area. "A person should not have to feel like a thief stealing spices from the market."

"But we aren't thieves, Ima." The endearment had come early in her life. "We purchase what we need."

"I know that, sweet girl." Levia touched Hadassah's cheek.
"I just hate to be so rushed, as though I'm sneaking away before I'm caught."

Hadassah smiled. Levia was always dramatic in her telling of tales, while Hadassah cared more for Mordecai's matterof-fact, often earnest way of sharing the day's news.

"How long does Abba say the governors will be here?" Hadassah took the basket from her head and unloaded its

contents—muskmelon, carrots, eggplant, pistachios, garlic, and a sack of beans. She looked forward to tasting all of it with the evening's meal.

"Mordecai knows nothing." Levia waved her hands as if batting at flies. "What good does it do to work at the king's gate and know nothing of what goes on in the king's house?" She pulled out the jar of flour ground earlier that morning and set about to knead bread for the evening. Levia began early in order to use the community oven first. Perhaps one day Mordecai would be able to build a grand oven for them in their own courtyard, but he'd been too busy to work on anything since the king had called together the leaders of the provinces to Susa. If their old oven had not crumbled to where they could no longer use it, Levia would not always be in such a hurry.

"Perhaps Abba will learn something new today," Hadassah said. She realized that Levia would hurry no matter what the circumstances because she was simply anxious, and to expect her to be anything than what she was would do no good. None of it mattered regardless. Hadassah loved Levia just as she was. "They've already been here five months," she added, setting the vegetables on a board to begin chopping them.

"How long can men sit around and just eat and drink?" Levia clucked her tongue. "Such a waste of time."

Hadassah nodded. She had never seen drunken men, but Mordecai had often told tales. It was said that the king drank far too much for his own good and couldn't make decisions when he was in such a state. Yet Mordecai had also told them that the purpose for this grand celebration was to gather the leaders from every province where Xerxes ruled in order to plan a great war. The war his father, Darius, had planned

to wage before his sudden death. In the uproar of Xerxes' coronation and marriage to the Persian princess Amestris, then the birth of their two sons, there had been little time to leave Persia. Apparently now, Xerxes was ready.

"Hopefully, it will all be over soon." Hadassah took some of the flour and kneaded a batch to be made into a sweet pistachio treat, while Levia prepared two round loaves of bread.

"Yes. Hopefully."

Silence fell between them, a pleasant camaraderie Hadassah enjoyed, though sometimes she wondered what life would have been like had her own mother lived.

"Do you remember the time we stopped at the palace gardens and Princess Vashti talked with us?" Levia's comment brought the memory to mind.

"I was just a child, but I remember she was kind."

"She was carrying Xerxes' heir and gave birth a few months later. I wonder if her son will have any standing at all in the kingdom, with Amestris bearing two sons in two short years of marriage."

"Vashti is the first wife. Her son should rule after his father." Hadassah recalled how bold she had been to even touch the future queen's face.

"Yes, but Amestris is the wife of royalty. She wed Xerxes after he was crowned king. My guess is that her sons will rise above Vashti's boy." Levia glanced at Hadassah. "It's a shame, really. Vashti is truly a queen. Amestris, from what the gossips say, is a cruel person."

Hadassah shivered. "I am glad to have nothing to do with any of that. I want to marry a Hebrew man and move to Jerusalem."

Levia scowled ever so slightly. "You are too young to marry,

my child. As for Jerusalem, the walls are not yet built. It is not safe."

"Perhaps by the time I am ready to marry they will be built and we will all move there together." She smiled, hoping to diffuse any doubt in Levia's mind.

But Levia shook her head. "Walls take years to build, child. As for all of us moving together—Mordecai would never do so. He could have gone before our sons were born and chose not to. Personally, I am glad of it. The rumors coming from Jerusalem say that rebuilding the temple was no easy task." She bit her lip. "No. It is safer to stay here, despite our drunken king." She lowered her voice and met Hadassah's wide eyes. "But you must not worry, dear girl. Mordecai will always keep you safe."

Hadassah merely nodded. There was no sense in disagreeing with Levia when she began worrying about Hadassah's safety. It was something she could do nothing about. She wanted peace, but she enjoyed adventure too. Sometimes she wondered if she would ever know her own mind or what she wanted in life.

Not that it mattered. Girls didn't get to choose their futures. Mordecai would pick a husband for her one day, and she would belong to him. Others would always make choices for her—at least the ones that mattered.

Hadassah sighed. She would think about her future later. For now, she simply wanted peace and time with her cousins and her friends. To be a girl, and not have to worry about the things that troubled Levia. She sensed that day would come soon enough.