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The Gilded Chamber

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It came to pass in the second year of the reign of Xerxes – who ruled from Hindush to Kusha – that I was orphaned. My father was trampled in the street during the first revolt of Babylon. My mother followed him an hour later, reaching the end of her days in childbirth. I heard her cries grow weak and shallow, after the midwife sent me from the room. When she died, I was not allowed to see her or the stillborn baby. But I saw them in my dreams. The creature had the head of a man and the body of a lion. Its claws tore through my mother's womb and her blood ran like a river.

I was in my tenth year.

My only surviving kin was Mordechai son of Yair, my father's brother. Mordechai lived in the capital city of Susa, on the east bank of the River Sha'ur, a journey of five days from Babylon. He had served as a minor treasury official during the years Xerxes spent as the viceroy of Babylon. When King Darius died and Xerxes inherited the turban of the kingdom, my cousin was among those who followed the new king out of Babylon to Susa. He left his home, seeking to do good for his king and his kin.

Mordechai soon rose to a position of honor in the court of King Xerxes, holding the second place under the minister of the treasury. From dawn to dusk, he sat at the king's gatehouse, receiving men from throughout the empire, dignitaries and common people who came to the palace bearing gifts of gold and silver coin for the royal treasury. He also held responsibility for checking the revenues of the tax collectors, to ensure that none stole what belonged to the king.

Mordechai's absence from Babylon saddened his family, but we spoke with pride of his loyalty to the king and his success. The Jews of Babylon knew him to be a good son who honored his parents. He

enriched them with gifts of coin and cloth, and after the death of his father provided for his mother's needs.

We held Mordechai in great esteem for his accomplishments and his generosity, but we knew little of his life in Susa. We did not know that he went by the name of Marduka the Babylonian. Or that his fine house in the fortress stood apart from the homes of all the other Jews, who lived in the town below the acropolis. We never imagined that he employed a Babylonian housekeeper who was not a Jew and did not keep the dietary laws.

I am glad that my father never knew how Mordechai hid himself among the Zoroastrians, who worship Ahura Mazda, and the Babylonians, who worship Marduk. He would have grieved as if for a lost son.

Yet Mordechai's efforts to gain advancement were not un-common. Many Jews of Babylon had chosen to turn away from their heritage, forgetting that King Nebuchadnezzar had exiled their grandparents from Jerusalem. They dwelt in Babylon as if it were their ancestral home and concerned themselves only with building lives of wealth and prosperity. Some of these men even took Babylonian wives, who taught their children to pray to Marduk and Ishtar.

A smaller group, my father among them, lived for the hour they might return to Jerusalem. These Jews prayed three times each day for the rebuilding of the Temple. They observed the laws of Moses with utmost strictness and set themselves apart from their Babylonian neighbors in worship, speech, and dietary habits. They scorned Jews who adopted Babylonian ways and kept watch on each other like spies. When someone committed a violation, it was reported in the prayer tent. Three judges determined the punishments. A minor infraction, such as missing a prayer service without cause, might require a fine to be paid as charity to the poor. But some infractions were so grievous that the sinner would be banished from the tent forever. These included murder, adultery, one man lying with another, and violation of the laws of Sabbath rest.

My father was revered as a pious scholar among these devout men.

His brother Yair was neither as learned nor as observant. But he followed the dietary laws and prayed each morning in the tent of the Jews by the market square. And my father considered Yair's household suitable for his daughter.

I was still an infant when Mordechai came into his full beard. But our parents wanted to preserve and strengthen the family by uniting their children in marriage. Mordechai agreed to the match and so we were betrothed. I, Hadassah daughter of Avihail son of Shemei, was two years old. Mordechai son of Yair son of Shemei, was twenty.

Mordechai left for Susa six years later, promising to return when I came of age. But the subject of our marriage was never far from the lips of my mother and aunt. They sat together in the afternoon, weaving plain towels on their hand looms and imagining the fine linen robe I would wear to my wedding, embroidered with azure rosettes and silver beads. They argued over whose bridal veil I should use – my mother's, crimson wool fringed with gold coins, or my aunt's, saffron wool with silver coins – until at last they agreed I should have my own. They spoke of the delicacies that would be served at the celebration – almond honey cakes and rosewater syrup – and the music that would herald my arrival to my new home. Sometimes they spent an hour or two imagining all the gifts guests would bring – the hens and the cooking pots, a heavy wool blanket for the cold nights, a fine wooden loom.

And so my young heart learned to look forward to the day of my marriage with joyous anticipation.

Sometimes I wondered why Mordechai, who did not hesitate to put aside the traditions of his upbringing and the heritage of his people, did not take a Persian or Median bride in Susa. I was a child when he left Babylon, with a child's shape and a child's ways. He was already a man, with a man's desires. He could not have known if I would grow up to be beautiful in form or pleasing in disposition. He could not have known if I would be skilled with the loom or capable of managing a house.

After I was taken away from him, I formed in myself a harsh expla-

nation of our betrothal. He had agreed to wait for a girl who was eighteen years his junior because he did not wish to be married. And when at last I came of age, and my tender young breasts ached to suckle his children, he continued to wait because he did not wish to marry. I told myself that the years would have passed and his manhood shriveled, and still I would have remained a virgin in his household.

Later I exchanged this bitter story with one that was truer to my cousin's kind heart: I was promised to him as his wife but became a daughter to him instead.

When I was orphaned, my father's friends wrote to my cousin in Susa. They did not tell him how I wept all day, or that I woke at night screaming. They said only that my parents had left this world and I was in need of protection. It was his duty to take me, they reminded him, for I was his betrothed and he my only living kin.

Mordechai did not come for me himself. Instead, he sent a purse of gold coins and instructions for my guardians to hire a guide to escort me to Susa. They chose an old Jew and his wife who had made the trip once before across the River Tigris, the vast marshland, and the high hills. They owned two donkeys that we could ride upon.

I remember almost nothing of the journey, except that the donkeys stank and the couple was not kind to me. My heart was consumed with grief and my vision was blurred by the horrors I had witnessed. I ate little and could not sleep. The guide ignored me and spent each evening counting the gold remaining in Mordechai's purse. His wife forced me to obey all the customs of mourning, though I was only ten years old. I was forbidden to wash, wear shoes, or sit on anything but the bare floor. We stayed at homes along the way, but I was not permitted to play with the other children. Had Susa been closer, they would have made me walk.

We arrived on a bright day in early spring and dismounted from the donkeys just outside the settled area. The king's white palace rose above us high on the acropolis, and the town of Susa spread before us

on the plain. Birds flitted among the reeds on the riverbank, where wildflowers bloomed. I stooped to pick a beautiful yellow tulip, its full bud ready to burst. The guide's wife slapped my hand and tried to take the flower from me. But for the first time I stood defiant. "I am giving it to my cousin Mordechai," I said, pressing the stem close to my heart.

We made our way to the Jewish quarter. The huts appeared much like those in Babylon, made of mud and reeds. But the people here supplied many fine crafts and services to the court of King Xerxes, and so they were more prosperous than the Jews of Babylon. They wore dyed wool robes and leather shoes. Their cheeks were full and their mouths curved up in cheerful smiles. The children were bold in their curiosity and several girls my own age waved to me as I walked by one donkey's side. The heavy cloud of sorrow began to lift from me and for the first time in many weeks I tasted hope.

The guide stopped several people to ask for directions to the house of Mordechai the treasury official. But no one had heard of such a person. I grew alarmed and feared that my cousin, too, had been taken from me. I imagined him dead, his flesh devoured by vultures and his remains deposited in the Valley of the Bones. I could no longer believe, as my father had, that the vision of the prophet Ezekiel would soon come to pass. I had seen death and I knew it did not rise into life.

Someone suggested that we inquire at the market square on the acropolis. As I climbed the steep road to the fortress – a ragged orphan with swollen bare feet and dirty hands clutching a yellow tulip – no one who saw me could have imagined the heights I would reach before I traveled down that road again.

When we came to the fortress gate, a guard asked my escorts to state their business.

"I am come to deliver this child to Mordechai the treasury official," the guide replied in clear Aramaic.

The guard looked puzzled for a moment before the light of recognition passed across his face. "Do you mean Marduka, the treasury official?"

The old Jew and his wife looked at each other with confusion.

"Marduka the treasury official has told us to expect his cousin, a girl of ten years old," the guard continued.

"I am his cousin!" I burst out with excitement. The guide's wife pinched me, but I did not care. The journey was over and I would soon see my cousin. As the guard gave directions, my feet grew light with joy.

I approached Mordechai's house, resolving to forget my parents and all I had lost. I would begin this new life by pleasing my cousin with a cheerful disposition. I would make myself useful to him with my busy hands. He would start each day by catching me in his arms and thanking God for such a blessing, as my father had done with my mother. We would be married and I would bear him strong sons. I would be safe in his household and never know danger again.

Such were the foolish hopes of a childish heart. For no one is safe in this world forever.