

*Now the daughter of Jared being exceedingly expert, and seeing the sorrows of her father,
thought to devise a plan whereby she could redeem the kingdom unto her father.*

—Ether 8:8

Chapter 1

Tenth Century BC

“What have I done?” my sister asks me. Her arms are striped with deep claw marks from her own fingernails. Fingernails that had once been shaped, stained, and etched with delicate gold designs. They are now broken and tattered—just as my sister’s life has become.

I stare at her blood filling the cracks in the stone garden path.

“Naiva,” she whispers, her dark eyes capturing mine. “How could I allow them to send my son to the borderland prison? He is everything to me. There’s nothing—” Her voice breaks. “There’s nothing left of my heart now; it’s disappeared into my soul.”

“Hush now,” I say, although I doubt my sister still has a soul. I look away from her bloody arms as she stretches her hands out, reaching for me. I don’t need to see her wild eyes,

her unruly, long hair soiled with ashes of grief, to know her pain. Nor do I need to see her lips twist with pleas of agony. Her grief and agony are mine too.

No one returns from the borderland—especially no one sent there by the king—even if that person is the king’s own son. Rumors have already reached us. My sister’s son is being starved.

I pull her into my arms and hold on, trying to soak up her anguish in a small way, something I’ve done a hundred times over.

He will be fine. He will live, I want to promise her, but I know my words hold no power. If I could command as the Lord does, I would not be crouching next to my sister, like we’re fugitives, in the garden on the day we discovered her son is being starved to death by her own husband.

The torch lights begin to flicker out in the small courtyard near the garden we have hidden ourselves away in. The night is thick with darkness, nearly as thick as the silence in our palace of mourning.

To the people in the land of Heth, my sister is known as Queen Asherah. To me, she is simply Ash. My throat tightens as I think of my nephew and what he must feel right now, in a place we cannot reach to comfort him. He is only a child of twelve years. Fresh tears nearly break out when I envision his beautiful face.

Ash trembles inside my arms. Only then do I realize she is whispering again. “I have failed him. What mother lets her own son be tortured and starved by his father?” I wish for words of solace, yet they will not come. If I can only find a way to save her son, a way to change the king’s mind . . . But I know he will not change his mind. He is fear itself. My

sister, nor I, dare approach him since he has banished us from court. There are the other children's lives to consider. There are our own.

Her son, the prince regent, is as good as dead. And Ash has no one to blame but herself. She knew what her husband was when she married him.

The anger and grief inside me builds, and desperation rushes in. "I'll find a way to free your son. I'll take him somewhere where Akish can't find him."

"No. He'll catch you both," my sister says, her voice gaining strength. "And then he'll kill you as well." She turns her face, swollen from tears, toward mine. "Don't leave me, Naiva. I couldn't bear this life without you. I have already lost too much." Her voice falters.

We have *all* lost too much, and we are afraid to fight any more.

"Naiva," my sister's voice breaks into my thoughts. "Do you think my son suffers in his last hours? Do you think the gods are there to comfort him?"

I flinch at her plural usage of *god*. Will she ever give up her idols? Each one of them has betrayed her. I cannot answer right away, for I cannot lie to my sister. I have never lied to her, even though I've been beaten, banished, and imprisoned for treason . . . all for telling my sister, the queen, the truth.

"The Lord will comfort him," I whisper. "I have not stopped my prayers for one moment." On any other day, Ash might bristle at my mention of the God I worship, but tonight, she accepts my words.

"Do you think your God will allow my black soul into heaven?" she says.

I hesitate, and it's as if Ash knows why I cannot answer. She collapses against me, a wail building in her chest, turning into a high-pitched keening. The sound of a woman aching for her lost soul and a child whom she will not be reunited with in heaven.

I cling to her as tears finally break free onto my face, for I know the things my sister has done will be impossible for the Lord to forgive.

When we die, my sister and I will spend eternity apart. She, in hell. And when she arrives there, alone and afraid, my already fractured heart will at last break in two.