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POTIPHAR'S WIFE

A Novel

MESU ANDREWS

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WATERBROOK

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First Edition

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To Gene and Daphne Woodall: Your generous hospitality provided the bank of Jabbok where the Lord and I wrestled over this book—He won. Thank you, precious friends.

NOTE TO READER

Have you read the Bible story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife? Let curiosity compel you—as it did me—to discover her name. *Zuleika*.

In both the Koran and *The Legends of the Jews*, Joseph's notorious seductress is named. The research has been both fascinating and overwhelming. Placing Joseph's life on ancient Egypt's time line is no small feat; in fact, many scholars deem it impossible.

Why would Egyptologists confess such uncertainty? Think about it. If they can't ever be certain, their work becomes faith-based. Or perhaps their search is like mine—a combination of facts, faith, and informed fiction.

Though I researched intensely and made every effort to be biblically accurate, I am neither an Egyptologist nor a scholar. The story you're about to read is faith-based and informed fiction. As with all my books, you'll find more information about the research and creative decisions in the author's note at the end of the book. But beware! It contains spoilers. For now, I hope you'll simply turn the page and meet Zuleika, Potiphar's wife, as you've never known her before.



TEMEHU
(TEHENU)





CHARACTERS

Abasi	Potiphar's old steward
Ahira	Hebrew slave; daughter of Jacob's chief shepherd
Apophis	Tani's brother; general of Pharaoh's army (separate from bodyguard)
Gaios	King Rehor's street rat; Zully's childhood friend
Hami	Medjay commander; Potiphar's keeper of halls
Joseph	Potiphar's Hebrew slave
Khyan	third Hyksos ruler of Lower Egypt
Kostas	Minas's younger brother
Medjays	hired warriors from Cush
Minas	crown prince of Knossos District
Minos	king of Knossos District
Mitera (Queen Daria)	Zuleika's mother
Pateras (King Rehor)	Zuleika's father

[xii] CHARACTERS

Potiphar	captain of Pharaoh Khyan's elite bodyguard
Pushpa	Potiphar's surrogate mother; his villa cook
Sanura	Wereni's wife
Tani	Khyan's first wife (Egyptian)
Ubaid	prison warden
Wereni	second-in-command to Pharaoh
Ziwat	Khyan's second wife; daughter of a Medjay chieftain
Zuleika	Zakros's princess; Potiphar's wife

GLOSSARY

ABBA (Hebrew)	father
ABI (Egyptian)	father
AMU	an Egyptian term for Canaanites or those from Canaanite ancestry
BARQUE	a large, flat-bottomed ship made for navigating the Nile
EYE OF HORUS	a symbol derived from a mythical conflict between the gods Horus and Seth and used in art and cosmetics to signify well-being, healing, and protection
FAIENCE	earthenware embellished with opaque colored glazes
GREAT-SABA (Hebrew)	great-grandfather
HATHOR	Egypt's goddess of love, beauty, dancing, music, and fertility
HYKSOS	a Semite dynasty that ruled Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, circa 1800–1550 BC

INUNDATION	the Nile floods, marking Egypt's first of three seasons; the other two: Sowing and Harvest
KA	a principal aspect of the soul, in a human being or a god, with the ba and the akh
MA'AT	Egypt's goddess of truth, justice, harmony, and balance and/or those qualities imbued through Pharaoh
MINOAN	a native or inhabitant of ancient Crete
MISTRESS	a married noblewoman
MITERA (Greek)	mother
NEHESU	the inhabitants of the region on Egypt's southern border
OMMI (Egyptian)	mother
PATERAS (Greek)	father
SABA (Hebrew)	grandfather
SCARAB	a piece of art fashioned after a dung beetle, Egypt's sacred sign of renewal
SCHENTI	a single strip of linen wrapped round the hips
SETH	the Hyksos's patron god of chaos
SHOREEK	Egyptian sweet bread
TEHENU	a tribe that belongs to the nation of Temehu and shares the delta's western border
VIZIER	Egypt's second-highest-ranking official

A slave doesn't always wear chains, nor does a master
possess all power.

PART I

Joseph had been taken down to Egypt.

GENESIS 39:1

ONE

*He shakes the earth from its place
and makes its pillars tremble.*

JOB 9:6

ZAKROS DISTRICT, CRETE

CIRCA 1700 BC

Zuleika

The sea was choppy, angry, spitting its salty mist on my lips. My stomach grumbled, anxious to sample whatever delicacies our Minoan sailors brought home from their eight-month trading season.

A group of ships passed at a safe distance from Zakros's sturdy quay. I could barely make out their flags, but the wind eased, revealing the leaping bull. Knossos flags—the largest of Crete's districts. My husband's fleet. The oarsmen's progress was painfully slow, the wind too strong to hoist a sail. The steersman leaned into the wind, guiding the vessel with one arm on the large oar while holding the raised stern with the other.

Hundreds gathered on the sandy shore beside the quay, but crashing waves drowned conversation. Children clung to their miteras' skirts as their sand creations succumbed to the frothy sea.

I reached for the ivory figurine tucked inside my belt and rolled the

Mother Goddess over and over in my hand, remembering how the earth had trembled the day before. Had we somehow angered our island creator, the giver of all life? Had the sailors given insufficient offerings during their journey? *Sacred Mother, my husband is so close to home now. Protect him from the wrath of other gods. Keep him safe until my duties in Zakros are complete and I can go to him.*

Mitera pulled me into a sideways hug. “Don’t worry, my girl. Always remember that Minoan sailors are the best in the world. You’ll see Minas as soon as you finish the ledger work for this year’s cargo. Duty before pleasure, my girl.”

I’d heard the same mantra since I was a child. *Your sums before painting, Zully. Mopping before pottery. Reading before sculpting.* I loved Minas more than my art, but I no longer needed coaxing to protect Zakros District. “Duty *is* my pleasure, Mitera.”

“Longing for a husband is different than a princess missing her pateras.” She squeezed me tighter. “I know it will be hard to complete your record keeping before leaving for Knossos to see Minas, but your crown prince will have duties to attend to as well. Your pateras will sail with you to Knossos when you finish your tasks. You need not travel overland through the villages.”

I nodded absently, calculating the cargo on each passing ship to estimate the time my record keeping might require. If our Zakros ships returned with the same bounty, it could be a week before I saw Minas. I’d been responsible for our district’s ledgers since I was thirteen. Numbers for necessary supplies and census figures ran through my mind like the blood in my veins, but I’d never before tried to concentrate on them while yearning for a husband. “I don’t know how you’ve endured so many years of Pateras’s seafaring.”

She released me. “There’s no other choice, Zully. How would Zakros survive if Queen Daria or King Rehor decided to skip a year of trading?” She spoke of herself as Queen Daria and Pateras as King Rehor only when teaching me the hard lessons of royalty. “When Rehor steps aside and Minas becomes king, you’ll become the first queen to rule over *two* Minoan districts. If Minas never went trading,

our people would be deprived of their queen's gracious and efficient rule. And think of what a mess our well-meaning husbands would make of our island."

We shared a wry grin. My mentor and confidante was right, of course. Though I missed my husband, Crete was as unique as the octopuses in our waters largely because of the vibrant women who ruled most of the year. We lived differently from other lands. Men and women sacrificed and celebrated together in four separate kingdoms on a single island, living in relative peace.

Another boat passed with the Knossos flag. Searching frantically, wind and ocean mist blinding me, I didn't recognize the oarsmen. "When I finally see my husband," I shouted over the waves, "he'll not leave my sight for a week."

"Why do you think your pateras and I spend so little time at welcome feasts?" Mitera winked.

We giggled like young girls as the last Knossos ship sailed past. It was close enough to make out the steersman.

"Kostas!" I waved at my brother-in-law, the second of King Minos's sons. "Minas is usually steersman. I wonder why—" Dawning fear stole my breath.

Mitera braced my shoulders. "You can't imagine the worst first. Rehor would have sent a messenger if anything happened to Minas."

Unless it happened in these rough seas.

"King Rehor's standard!" someone shouted.

Everyone turned as the next fleet approached from the east. Pateras flew a flag bearing an octopus—our district's eight-legged symbol, a fascination that initiated trade conversations in every port.

Anticipation of our reunion, heightened by angst for my husband's welfare, sent me into the angry sea to wait. I fought to stay upright as the salty force of it battered me toward shore.

Pateras stood like a god at the stern, pushing and pulling the heavy steersman's oar while riding the bucking ship like a galloping horse. No statue sculpted from the rock-crystal cliffs of Crete could fairly represent King Rehor.

“Pateras!” I shouted over the rough water and wind. “Pateras!” Letting the water buoy me, I leapt and waved both arms.

He raised his hand in reply and steered the ship toward the quay. Six others followed. Thirty oarsmen—fifteen on each side—moved in perfect rhythm to pull the sleek and sturdy cargo ships through the fiercest waves. I was proud to be Princess Zuleika of Zakros, but I’d also married the Knossos crown prince. When I glanced toward the horizon beyond our ships, no more sails approached.

Where is Minas?

I swam toward shore, my strokes cutting through the waves, my legs churning, and arrived before the lead ship docked. I hurried to the quay and noticed a scuffle near Mitera. A palace servant had slapped my childhood friend. “Leave me alone, Gaios!”

“Pffft.” He dismissed her with a flip of his hand. “Don’t be so sensitive, Aronia,” he called as she ran from him.

“Lovers’ spat?” I teased when I reached him.

“Something like that.” Though he was slender and barely taller than me, women seemed to flock to him. His impish grin was likely part of the reason. “Other women on this island are much friendlier.” My street urchin friend had an arrogance born of resolve.

When we reached Mitera, a sea breeze made me shiver. Gaios removed his cloak and placed it around my shoulders. “The dove I sent yesterday returned, Princess. The message read, *Zakros hooked giant fish. Knossos eats tuna.*”

“It said ‘giant fish,’” I clarified, “not ‘whale?’”

“Yes, Princess.”

I applauded the triumphant report.

Mitera was always frustrated by our code. “Speak plainly, Gaios.”

“Forgive me, my queen.” He bowed. “King Rehor must have signed a trade agreement with Egypt’s *giant* king!”

“That is good news!” she shouted.

Commotion at the quay stole our attention. Families rushed toward our sailors, and Mitera suddenly lifted her hem and darted in the same direction.

My blood ran cold. I’d never seen Queen Daria run. “Come, Gaios.”

I followed Mitera, pulling him with me, too afraid to face my fear about Minas alone.

Gaios steadied me as I stumbled across the sand toward the quay. Stealth and quickness had made him the best street rat in Crete. I hated the term, but my friend bore it with pride. Pateras had given him the moniker when Gaios was only seven yet clever enough to recognize the danger of unrest in Malia District. He'd eluded Zakros Palace guards and gained entrance to Pateras's private chamber, then informed him of the planned coup and asked only for a sweet cake as payment. That day, Pateras made him my playmate and, later, part of my guard detail.

Thirty oars retracted as the ship nestled against Zakros's sturdy quay. Sailors leapt from Pateras's vessel and tied its thick hemp ropes to trees by the shore. A trumpeter blew the announcement: *King Rehor has returned to Zakros.*

I should have been shouting with joy at the return of our ships and at Gaios's skilled sleuthing. Instead, I could barely breathe for fear Minas was lost.

Pateras stowed the steersman's oar and descended from his perch into Mitera's waiting arms. I plowed into them both without slowing and wrapped them in all the fear, joy, relief, and trepidation a soggy hug could express.

"What were you doing in the middle of the sea, girl?" Pateras laughed. "I thought you were a dolphin and almost speared you."

"Is he safe?" I stepped back, ignoring the jest. "Minas. I didn't see him steering a Knossos ship."

"Because I couldn't wait to see my dark-eyed little goddess."

"Minas?" I shaded my eyes from the sun's glare and looked more closely at a sailor who had followed Pateras. "You're here!" It wasn't the eloquent welcome I'd practiced, but my husband swept me into his arms, and his kiss was exactly as I'd dreamed.

A cheer rose as he twirled me around. Bare-chested, dressed in a rough-spun kilt, and smelling of sea air and sweat, he looked like every other sailor. Yet the leaping bull tattooed over his heart made him mine—and the next king of Knossos.

“You must put me down at once!”

He obeyed, but I felt as if my world spun, though it was he who should have complained of sea legs.

He pulled me into his arms again and stared at me. How I had longed for this moment. “Quickly finish your record keeping, Wife. We’ll not attend tonight’s feast until we’ve made every effort to produce an heir.”

“While you still smell like a sailor, Son-in-law, you can help with heavy lifting in the banquet hall.” Mitera tugged at his arm and then winked at me. “Leave Princess Zuleika to her duty.”

He groaned as he released me. “Why must a crown prince do the heavy lifting?”

He kissed my cheek and offered his arm to escort Mitera to the palace, sneering as he passed Gaios. “Are all the servants at Zakros Palace as scrawny as you, street rat?”

“Minas!” But my husband had already walked away with Mitera, her servants, and the villagers to finish preparations for tonight’s feast. Should I apologize for my husband’s rudeness? Minas would one day be king and—if like his pateras—might never apologize. When I turned to face Gaios, he’d already followed Pateras back to his ship, his stylus poised over a wax pad to record the cargo as the sailors unloaded.

I ran to catch up, determined to at least explain. “Minas is simply angry. The information you gather makes Zakros a viable competitor with Knossos for trade agreements with larger nations. Knossos kings aren’t used to that. They secured every treaty along Canaan’s coast until you came to Zakros.”

He gave a dismissive snort. “You and King Rehor are the reason Zakros succeeds, Zully. I provide information, but you use it to improve the lives of our villagers. King Minos never needed to compete to secure trade agreements until—”

“Until Pateras made you and me his secret trade counselors.” I linked my arm with Gaios’s. “And my husband will realize that growing Zakros is the same as growing Knossos. Our children will benefit from two equally strong—”

A strange rumble shook the ground beneath my feet. The sailors stopped unloading the ships, and everyone stood as still as one of my sculptures. Pateras glanced at me and then searched the path between the shore and Zakros Palace. Mitera and Minas must have already gone inside. A few villagers had stopped on the path and looked out across the sea, but most of those already ashore were inside Zakros's sturdy walls.

The waves' steady sound promised that the rhythm of our lives would return. I exchanged a relieved look with Pateras. "Let's get the cargo logged so we can both enjoy a reunion before tonight's feast."

He pulled me into a ferocious hug. "I expect a grandchild by the time I return next year."

"Uhh!" I playfully shoved him away. "Am I only capable of making babies now that I'm a wife?"

His smile faded as the earth beneath us rumbled and an otherworldly roar turned violent. Shrieks and screams filled the air, and I glanced, terrified, at my king. Staring at the sea, our lifeline and guide, I watched the tide recede and the shore extend into the waters as far as a stone's throw.

Pateras turned and grabbed my arm. "Get everyone out of the palace!"

"No! We must take shelter!" We stumbled in shifting sand, frustrated in our race toward the most stable structure in Zakros. Gaios kept pace. He'd grabbed my other arm, both men pulling me toward home. Thighs burning, feet churning uphill, we made it to the crest. Thrown against a waist-high palace wall, I caught myself, but Pateras and Gaios slid down the sandy mound.

A woman screamed. I held on to the shaking rock wall as she raced from the southeast palace gate. The earth before her opened in a terrifying yawn. The deafening roar drowned out all other sound.

"Zully!" Pateras shouted.

I reached for him and Gaios as the ground beneath us heaved, casting us on our faces like beggars before an angry god.

"Are you all right?" Gaios scrambled toward me.

When I rolled onto my side, I saw them. Mitera and Minas stood on the palace balcony overlooking the courtyard. She extended her hand, beckoning me, as a deep, ugly crack crawled up the wall.

“Nooo!” I lunged toward the massive stone building as it began to crumble. Fighting to keep my footing as the ground shook, I tried to run, but an olive tree fell across my path. I crumpled and covered my head.

Once the shaking ceased, I lifted my head. Dust billowed upward from a large pile of stones where Zakros Palace once stood. The earth was silent for one lonely heartbeat. Then the wailing began. I leaned forward, unable to speak, and pressed my fists against my eyes. Groaning. Growling. Gasping. I retched.

“Zully!”

Shuddering violently, I peered toward the voice calling my name. *Gaios*. I couldn’t answer. Unwilling to think. My mind throbbed with disbelief. Voices rose around me. Shrill and piercing. Bass and rumbling.

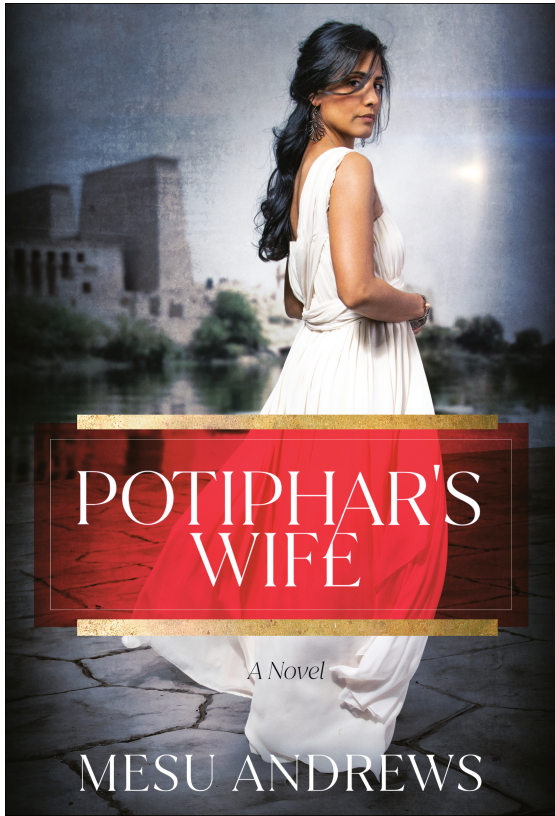
“Zully girl.” This voice strong and commanding.

“Pateras?” I flung myself into his arms. Sobs racked me.

He trembled and cried out, rocking as he held me. I was lost in the nightmare.

As my tears ebbed, Pateras released me. When I opened my eyes, I saw *Gaios* standing alone, his head bowed. I remembered the day his mitera left Crete, and *Gaios* watched silently on the quay, weeping. “How did you ever live without your mitera, *Gaios*?” I pulled him into a hug, but he stiffened and nudged me away.

“You and King Rehor are my only concern.” He swiped at his cheeks, smearing the dust into mud. “I’ll never leave your sides.”



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