



A NOVEL

OF FIRE AND LIONS

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MESU ANDREWS

AUTHOR OF ISAIAH'S DAUGHTER

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OF FIRE AND LIONS

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This book is a work of historical fiction based closely on real people and real events. Details that cannot be historically verified are purely products of the author's imagination.

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*To our twins, Rory and Asher.
You were a gift to our family during
the writing of this book.*

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CHARACTER LIST

Abednego	<i>(see also Azariah) Twin of Meshach (Mishael); one of three brothers, Daniel's friends, taken from Jerusalem in first exile to Babylon</i>
Abigail	<i>Hebrew handmaid taken from Jerusalem in first exile to Babylon; Daniel's maid</i>
Allamu	<i>Belili's son with Gadi</i>
Amyitis	<i>Nebuchadnezzar's wife; queen of Babylon; daughter of King Astyages, king of the Medes</i>
Arioeh	<i>Commander of the king's guard; King Nebuchadnezzar's personal bodyguard</i>
Ashpenaz	<i>Chief eunuch; overseer of palace</i>
Azariah	<i>(see also Abednego) Abednego's Hebrew name</i>
Belili	<i>Gadi's wife; Daniel's wife</i>
King Belshazzar	<i>Last king of Babylon; grandson of Nebuchadnezzar</i>
Belteshazzar	<i>(see also Daniel) Daniel's Babylonian name</i>
King Cyrus	<i>King of Persia; nephew of Amyitis, Nebuchadnezzar's wife; grandson of Astyages, king of the Medes</i>

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Daniel	<i>(see also Belteshazzar) Hebrew boy taken from Jerusalem in first exile to Babylon; becomes governor of the Chaldeans (chief wise man) during King Nebuchadnezzar's reign</i>
King Darius	<i>(see also General Gubaru) A Mede; sentences Daniel to lions' pit</i>
Gadi	<i>Belili's first husband; chief magus; Allamu's father</i>
General Gubaru	<i>(see also King Darius) A Mede; leads army that conquers Babylon in one night</i>
Gula	<i>chambermaid for twins Meshach and Abednego</i>
Hananiah	<i>(see also Shadrach) Shadrach's Hebrew name</i>
King Jehoiachin	<i>King of Judah; taken into captivity in Babylon during second exile; son of King Jehoiakim</i>
King Jehoiakim	<i>King of Judah 608–598 BC; king during the first exile</i>
Kezia	<i>Eldest daughter of Daniel and Belili; Sheshbazzar's wife</i>
Laqip	<i>Chief astrologer</i>
Mert	<i>Shadrach's Egyptian chambermaid; becomes Daniel's family servant</i>
Meshach	<i>(see also Mishael) Twin of Abednego (Azariah); one of three brothers, Daniel's</i>

friends, taken from Jerusalem in first exile to Babylon

Mishael	<i>(see also Meshach) Meshach's Hebrew name</i>
Nabonidus	<i>King Nebuchadnezzar's son-in-law; king of Babylon 556–553 BC and then co-reigns (from undisclosed location) with his son, King Belshazzar, until Medes invade in 539 BC</i>
King Nabopolassar	<i>Nebuchadnezzar's father; died 605 B.C</i>
King Nebuchadnezzar	<i>King of Babylon 605–562 BC (approximately)</i>
Orchamus	<i>One of the three overseers in King Darius's kingdom; responsible for satraps in Phoenicia</i>
Princess Rubati	<i>Classmate of Daniel</i>
Shadrach	<i>Eldest of the three Hebrew brothers, Daniel's friends, taken from Jerusalem in first exile to Babylon</i>
Sheshbazzar	<i>Kezia's husband; Daniel's son-in-law; chief scribe at the Esagila, temple of Marduk</i>
Zakiti	<i>Baker's daughter</i>
King Zedekiah	<i>Last king of Judah before Babylon destroyed it; taken captive during the third exile; Daniel's uncle</i>
Zerubbabel	<i>General Gubaru/King Darius's personal bodyguard; grandson of King Jehoiachin (Daniel's cousin)</i>

PART 1



Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

—2 KINGS 20:16–18

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King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles. . . . He gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar . . . had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. . . . As they drank the wine, . . . the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall.

—DANIEL 5:1–2, 4–5

Babylon
October 539 BC

I'd never seen a sesame seed grow until I came to Babylon almost seventy years ago. At harvest time my husband, Daniel, looks to the tiny seed as cause for great celebration. How inconsequential is a miniscule seed? How incomprehensible its yield? How unbearable the process of growth? A seed is buried. It dies. Then sprouts. And grows. It blossoms. Dries and dies again to be plucked up and used for the purpose of its planting. My husband's purpose in celebration was to mark the passing of years toward prophecy's fulfillment—now just futile poetry. But it caused me to remember things I'd rather forget.

It was a day I dreaded all year long.

I picked up my polished-bronze mirror and tucked a stray tendril of gray curls beneath my new linen head scarf, noting in the reflection his

fidgiting behind me. He always had trouble tying a jeweled belt, but his fingers seemed more trembly this morning. Was he nervous too?

I set aside my mirror and crossed the bedchamber, nudging his hands aside. “Let me do it.” Though both his hands and mine were spotted with age and lined with bulging blue veins, at least mine were still nimble.

He cradled my head and placed a kiss on my forehead. “Thank you, love. What would I do without you?”

I finished the knot and gazed into his rheumy eyes, as smitten as I’d been sixty-six years ago. “Let’s hope you never find out.” I laced my arm through his. “Let’s go downstairs. The children are waiting.”

He opened our chamber door, and lively family sounds floated up from the courtyard below. We descended the stairs slowly since Daniel’s feet pained him. Waiting in our lush green courtyard were three generations of our descendants seated around four long rectangular tables. Four daughters with their husbands. Twenty-one grandchildren. And thirty-two greats.

Two conscientious grandsons met their *saba* Daniel at the bottom of the steps, one supporting each elbow. I was left to follow—alone. The snubbing had begun.

“I’m fine,” he protested. “Tend to your *savta*.”

“But *Ima* said your feet have been painin’ you, Saba.” Our oldest daughter’s firstborn offered an obligatory nod at me. “*Shalom*, Savta.”

I returned the nod with a half smile but remained silent, refusing to mock the peace such a greeting offered. One glance at our oldest daughter, Kezia, assured me there would be no shalom today. She stole sullen glimpses at me while standing beside her husband, Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah’s exiles in Babylon. Our other three daughters stood arm in arm with their husbands, eyes trained on the *abba* they all adored.

“Abba and Ima!” Sheshbazzar, whom we lovingly called Shesh, shouted over the dull roar of chattering children and our fountain’s happy splashing. “Take your place at the head of the table.” He’d already ar-

ranged two brightly colored cushions at the end nearest the stairs and rushed over to support Daniel's arm while he lowered himself. I mouthed a silent thank-you and sat quietly beside my husband.

Shesh took his place at Daniel's right. Kezia sat beside her husband with several of her children and grandchildren filling spaces at the large table around us. She avoided my gaze.

"You look lovely today, Kezia." I spoke across Daniel. "Is that a new robe, dear?"

Her eyes sparked. "Are you implying I spend too much money at the market, Ima?"

"No, dear. I . . ." Nothing I said to Kezia would be safe. "You are beautiful, Daughter. That's all."

Her cheeks pinked, and she looked quickly away, beginning a conversation with one of her daughters about the toddler on her lap. A great-grandson I'd met only a few times. Kezia's eyes crinkled with a smile that lit her features. She was a good ima, at her best when her children surrounded her. Had she learned anything from me—before her hatred sprouted and grew?

The servants began a triumphant march with pitchers of juice and wine and platters laden with various meats, fruits, and vegetables. This was a day our dear Egyptian servant, Mert, anticipated all year long, a day when her best recipes from both Babylon and Jerusalem found their way to our table.

My husband hoisted his silver chalice in the air, repeating his annual vow. "If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy." Adults lifted goblets of wine and children their cups of juice. Our children had seen Jerusalem only in their minds through the stories Daniel told of his childhood in the palace. The rugged beauty of Zion. The grandeur of Yahweh's Temple.

With our first sip came the rattle of the courtyard gate, and I caught

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the glint of morning sun off a soldier's shield. Ten of King Belshazzar's guards charged into our celebration.

One, wearing a captain's gold breastplate, marched straight toward my husband. "King Belshazzar commands the presence of Daniel, exile of Judah, chief of King Nebuchadnezzar's counselors."

"I am Daniel." He stood, and the captain gripped his arm and fairly dragged him toward the gate.

"Wait!" I lunged for my husband, but the other soldiers blocked my way.

My Daniel looked over his shoulder, offering a weak smile. "I'll be back, love. Save some roast lamb for me."

Panic clawed at my throat while ten strong soldiers led away the beating of my heart. I turned to the fruit of my womb, who moments ago had shunned me. Now everyone stared at me, pleading silently for direction. Angst filled my belly. Who needed food when my Daniel had been taken to the banquet of a madman? "I'm going upstairs to pray. No one eats a bite until Daniel returns."



The captain's fingers bit into Daniel's arm, pulling him into the narrow street. Daniel tried to hurry his pace, but his feet were too tender. Perhaps conversation would slow the man down. "I haven't visited the palace since Nebuchadnezzar released me from service twenty-four years ago. Did King Belshazzar mention his reason for summoning me?"

The only sound came from rippling water in the canal alongside the street. Silence was typical of a loyal eunuch. The captain's wide gold collar proclaimed his vow to serve the king unto death and the king's reciprocal commitment to lifelong provision.

Daniel stumbled, landing hard on his right foot. He braced his hands against his knees, wincing in pain.

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“Are you well?” The captain’s concern was rather surprising.

“Yes, thank you. Could we slow our pace a bit?” Before the eunuch could answer, his stomach growled, and Daniel chuckled. “You and your men should have joined us for this morning’s meal. Mert is a fine cook.”

The captain’s features remained grim. “The king needs you now, Lord Daniel. Please.” He extended his hand in the direction of the palace, and Daniel felt the prickly flesh of urgency.

Continuing in silence, they left the walled city of Babylon’s wealth and nobility and ascended the marble stairs to the Processional Way. While crossing the wide avenue splitting Babylon’s municipality, they passed the three-storied Ishtar Gate, the military complex, and finally entered palace grounds through its southern gate.

The pounding of drums and trill of a flute floated on a chill autumn breeze, and a sudden presence pressed Daniel to his knees. With both hands over his ears, he blocked out distraction and held in the silent whisper:

“MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN.”

Mene: I have numbered the days of Belshazzar’s reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel: He has been weighed on My scales and found wanting.

Parsin: I have divided his kingdom and given it to the Medes and Persians.”

“My lord!” A huge hand lifted Daniel to his feet. “My lord, are you well?”

Shadows cleared from the prophet’s eyes, and he gazed into ten pale faces. “Yes, yes. Thank you. We must hurry to the king.”

The captain placed a giant arm around Daniel’s waist and fairly carried him toward the grand stairway. “I’ve heard you are a seer. Did you have a vision, my lord?”

Daniel sensed something genuine in this man but knew a eunuch’s

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loyalty was first and always to his king. “If you have any family in Babylon, Captain, they should leave the city tonight.”

His brows shot up, but a slight nod communicated understanding. Any Babylonian with a measure of sense knew King Cyrus of Persia had built an army that would someday overtake Babylon—the empire King Belshazzar had weakened by overspending, poor council choices, and constant revelry during the past fourteen years.

The captain hoisted Daniel up the grand stairway and into the main entrance. They hurried through what had once been pristine hallways, now covered in dust and frayed tapestries. Music grew louder as they neared the throne hall but with no accompanying sounds of laughter or merriment.

“I thought the king was hosting a banquet,” Daniel said.

“He was.” Was it fear or loyalty that kept him from saying more? Guards at the throne room opened the double doors, revealing the colossal space filled with tables, terrified noblemen, and musicians whose timid notes tested the eerie silence.

A man wearing a gold crown rushed toward Daniel. He’d seen the young king only once, on the day of his coronation, when Belshazzar entered Babylon in a chariot on the Processional Way. He was much shorter up close and much older tonight.

“Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my grandfather brought from Judah?”

Daniel barely had time for a nod before the king aimed a shaking finger at a side wall. “The inscription. See it? None of my wise men could interpret it.”

Daniel followed his gesture and stared at the exact words from his vision blazing with an unnatural fire on the plastered wall. “I’ve heard the spirit of the gods lives in you,” the king said, his panic-stricken features but a handbreadth away. “Interpret the message, and I swear by my father’s life

I'll dress you in purple, place a gold chain around your neck, and make you the third highest ruler in our kingdom."

Sickened by the king's stale sweat and fetid breath, Daniel was grateful he hadn't eaten. How many promises had this regent broken? Many believed Belshazzar had killed his father to take Babylon's throne. Shrugging off Belshazzar's hands, Daniel stepped back and bowed with forced habit.

"You may keep your gifts and reward someone else. The Most High God gives glory and splendor to whomever He pleases—as He did to your forefather King Nebuchadnezzar. But when the king became proud, he was stripped of his glory, driven away from people, and given the mind of an animal. He lived with wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone He wishes. But you, Belshazzar, though you knew all this, have not humbled yourself."

Shocked whispers rolled like a tide over the noblemen in the hall, confirming that King Nebuchadnezzar's transformation had not been widely known. Daniel scanned the crowd, noticing for the first time the glint of gold set before each guest.

Righteous indignation loosed his tongue again. "You set yourself against the Lord of heaven by allowing your nobles, wives, and concubines to drink wine from the goblets taken from Yahweh's Temple. You have not honored the God who holds your life in His hands, so His hand wrote your doom on the wall."

Daniel pointed to the blazing words and read aloud:

"MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN. The Lord has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. You have been weighed on scales and found wanting. Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

He bowed once more and turned to go.

“Wait!” Belshazzar grabbed his arm and then lowered himself to one knee, inclining his head. “Please. I believe everything you’ve said, but please have mercy.” He stood and lifted his voice to the gathering. “Daniel will wear a purple robe from my chamber, and only my commands and those of my father carry more authority than Daniel’s in the whole empire.”

Belshazzar removed the gold chain from his neck and lifted it over Daniel’s head, letting the chiseled granite seal rest on the prophet’s chest. Linger near, he spoke in a voice meant for only the prophet. “You’re now a son of Babylon. Surely your god won’t destroy an empire governed by one of his own.”

Daniel answered in an equally quiet voice. “My God will destroy many empires to bless His own.”

King Belshazzar recoiled, stiffened, and studied him. “You will remain at my side until I’m convinced you haven’t somehow conspired against me.”

“As you wish.” Daniel followed him to the elevated table, eating food prepared by palace cooks instead of the meal made by Mert’s loving hands.

Yahweh, protect my family when You bring Cyrus into Babylon.

2

One courier follows another
and messenger follows messenger
to announce to the king of Babylon
that his entire city is captured.

—JEREMIAH 51:31

When I fled to my bedchamber after Daniel was taken, my daughters glared at me, and their husbands—temple scribes, all of them—gathered in a corner, whispering. What were they plotting? Could scribes rescue my Daniel? Their whispers did nothing but add to the tension.

I fell onto the couch beside our bed and buried my face against the armrest. *Yahweh, protect my Daniel. Only You know why he's been taken.*

My chamber door opened without a knock, and Mert entered with a tray of samplings from the delicacies she'd prepared. I was furious. "I told them we weren't eating until—"

"You're being ridiculous." She plopped the tray on the couch between us. "The babies were fussy, and the adults were about to revolt. Master Daniel wouldn't want us to waste all this food, and you'll feel better after you eat."

In stubborn silence, I stared into her wintry-gray eyes. Why was she always right? "Sit down and help me eat it, then." I scooted over to make

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room for the woman who was servant, comforter, counselor, and friend. “My children hate me.”

She spread a generous portion of goat cheese on a piece of bread and handed it to me. “They can’t hate someone they don’t know.”

“They can’t know someone who abandoned them.” I threw the bread onto the tray and inhaled sharply, driving away unwelcome emotions. I’d cried enough for ten lifetimes.

Mert picked up my bread and took a bite. “You didn’t abandon them. Explain what happened. They’re adults now. They’ll understand.”

I shook my head, still not trusting my voice, and prepared another piece of bread with goat cheese. After a few bites, I was ready to proffer another plan. “I’ll go down after they’ve eaten and try to salvage the day. Perhaps Daniel will return soon and provide the balm for any additional wounds I’ve caused.”

Mert reached for my free hand and squeezed it. “Perhaps when others are stingy with forgiveness, you should direct them to your god. Master Daniel comforts them by praying with them.”

Surprised and a bit convicted by my friend’s suggestion, I set aside my bread. “I’ve tried, Mert. Anytime I’ve suggested prayer or asking for Yahweh’s help or wisdom in a matter, my children have made it clear—they see nothing in me to warrant that kind of trust.” The gaping hole inside nearly swallowed me. I bowed my head and cradled Mert’s hand in mine. “I fear their scars are too deep.”

“Nonsense.” She drew her hand away and presented my bread to me. “Your girls have their own little circle to depend on, so they’ve held their grudge tightly. But one day, Belili”—she winked—“one day, they’ll all come around. You wait and see.”

Her optimism, though likely misplaced, brightened the mood, and we chatted of lighter things while finishing our meal. She took the dirty dishes downstairs, leaving me alone to return to prayer. *Yahweh, I know You’ve forgiven me, but how could others—when I can’t forgive myself?*

My silent plea revealed a hidden truth I hadn't even acknowledged in conscious thought. Could I ever forgive myself for the mistakes I'd made as an ima? Unsettled, but feeling the draw of obligation, I straightened my robe and returned to the courtyard to play hostess to a house full of family who loved each other and barely tolerated me.

I spent the day with the youngest in my clan, babies and toddlers who cooed and laughed on my lap, as yet untainted by family stigmas. By nightfall, fussy little ones filled all our villa's beds, and the adults gathered in huddles to share horrible possibilities of my Daniel's fate.

I wandered through our courtyard alone. The splashing fountain calmed me, and the cricket song assured me that Yahweh cared for even the most insignificant in His creation. I sat on the bench in the garden between our courtyard and street, counting the winking stars.

"Are you all right, Ima?" Son-in-law Shesh stood in a shaft of moonlight beside me.

"Not really, but I'm trying to remember that Daniel's absence doesn't mean he has come to harm. He would stay at the palace for weeks if a king asked it of him."

Shesh shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other and waited as if he had more to say, so I patted the bench. "Join me, if you like."

We sat in companionable silence for a while. I closed my eyes, inhaling Babylon's night air and thanking Yahweh for our oldest daughter's husband. Shesh was a leader of men with a heart of compassion. He'd been kinder to us than seven sons and was generous to show Daniel deference in our old age, though he and Kezia were now master and mistress of our shared villa. He adored Kezia, had been a loving abba, and was now a dotting saba of their nine grandchildren. Every Jew in Babylon respected him, and as chief scribe of the Esagila—Marduk's temple—he'd cultivated a healthy connection with Babylon's religious community as well.

"Sheshbazzar!" Kezia's voice grated like a cat's claws on tile. "Why didn't you tell me you were waiting with Ima?"

“Come, my love.” Shesh offered his hand, calling her to join us.

I scooted to the bench’s edge, and she squeezed between us, bringing a wave of tension with her. “We should send one of the servants to the palace. Check on Abba. See if he’s all right.”

Shesh pulled her close. “If your abba hasn’t returned by morning, I’ll call Israel’s elders together and send a delegation to inquire of the king.”

I patted her knee and joined my support. “Sending a single servant would be dangerous, but a delegation of Jews who hold powerful positions in the city won’t be ignored. Shesh is very wise.”

The moonlight showed Kezia’s lips pursed into a thin white line, but she held her tongue. An improvement over her early days as wife of Judah’s prince. I locked my lips as well, proof that Yahweh had done a work in us both.

Sudden splashing in the canal across the street stole my attention, and before I could voice concern, soldiers emerged. Dressed in foreign armor. Swords drawn.

Kezia screamed, and I jumped to my feet. Shesh clamped his hand over her mouth, while other shrieks echoed down the street. Then wailing.

“Get inside!” My strangled whisper mingled with the invaders’ shouts, and my feet halted on the tiles. “They’re Medes.”

Startled that I still understood the language after all these years, I silently interpreted an officer’s instructions. “Kill those who resist. Displace the others and send them across the river to find housing.”

I hurried to catch up with Shesh and grabbed his arm as we reached the courtyard gate. “Listen to me. We must leave willingly when they come. They’ll send us to the unwallled part of the city across the river.”

He looked at me as if I’d grown horns. “You understand their language?”

My children and adult grandchildren gathered around us inside the courtyard. “What language?” one of the grandchildren asked. “How does Savta know—”

“You!” Four Medes rushed toward us. “All of you! Out!”

Without thinking, I bowed deeply and answered in Median, “We will obey, Master. May we retrieve the others from our household?” All four soldiers stopped in their tracks, exchanging odd glances. I bowed again before they had time to think. “I was a friend of Queen Amyitis, the great Median princess. She taught me to speak.”

Seeming satisfied, the leader nodded to the darkened villa behind us. “Get the others and get out.”

I turned and faced my terrified family. “The soldiers are Medes. They’ll be too busy killing to attack women right away—”

“What? Ima, no!” Kezia’s shriek spread hysteria to the other women.

Shesh drew her to his chest, silencing her, and turned to me. “Have they joined Cyrus’s army?”

“He didn’t say, but Daniel has feared Belshazzar’s careless reign would draw Cyrus’s army like a wolf to an unshepherded flock.”

The ashen faces of my own flock screamed silent terror in Daniel’s absence. He was the rock on which we stood. *Yahweh, please. Give me Your wisdom.* While waiting for divine help, I stalled with what I knew for certain. “Whether the Medes acted independently or under Cyrus’s command, we must get everyone—family and servants—to a safe place. Fleeing across the river won’t be safe for my daughters or the children.”

My girls whimpered, drawing their children closer. Shesh’s brows dipped in consternation. “What do we do?”

I saw Mert standing at the back of the gathering and felt the gentle wind of wisdom blow across my spirit. “Mert, gather the servants while the family collects our little ones. Shesh, go to the Esagila and speak with the high priest. Surely he’ll allow you, as chief scribe, to shelter your family there until the invasion is over.”

One of the other sons-in-law asked, “Won’t the Medes attack the temples?”

“They will raid other temples, but not the Esagila. Because of the

Medes' respect for Nebuchadnezzar, they fear his patron god, Marduk, so the Esagila remains sacred." I shoved Shesh. "Go, Son. We'll meet you there."

My decisiveness stiffened resolve and propelled parents to collect their dear ones. Within moments, we ventured out the side door into the dark, chaotic streets. It had been years since my old legs moved so quickly and even longer since I'd seen this kind of carnage. Swords clanged. Women screamed. Children cried over their parents' corpses. The canal ran red with noble blood, those who had been passed over or who snubbed their invitation to the king's banquet. The Medes would have almost certainly attacked the palace by now, but I refused to let myself believe my Daniel lost.

Invading armies showed no mercy to conquered kings and their nobles. Daniel had been led into Belshazzar's presence this morning in nobleman's clothes. But this couldn't be the end Yahweh intended for my husband's faithfulness. *Yahweh, show him Your mercy. Deliver my Daniel by Your power as You delivered our friends from the furnace years ago.*

Kezia cupped my elbow, nearly dragging me through the street. "Ima, hurry. I'm worried about Shesh. You should never have sent him alone." I bit my tongue, feeling the weight of twenty millstones around my neck. If anything happened to our dear Shesh, Kezia would never forgive me—nor would I forgive myself. It would be a relief when I could return the weight of a family patriarch to my husband.

We passed through darkened side streets, staying off the Processional Way, until we were directly opposite the temple complex. Hurrying up the stairs, across the wide avenue, and down the stairs on the other side, my cherished brood slipped past the towering ziggurat in darkness, its heavenward height blocking the moonlight, helping us to reach the sprawling Esagila in safety.

Shesh was already there, speaking with Marduk's chief priest in hushed tones, while the rest of us waited with other anxious families in the

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main hallway. Without permission, my eyes wandered to the yawning chamber at my right and found the glistening gold statue of Marduk mocking me. I hadn't stepped inside this temple since my first days in Babylon.

"Ima, come." Shesh tugged at my arm. "We have permission to hide in one of the treasury rooms where I work."

"A treasury room?" My heart jumped into my throat. "No. I can't."

Shesh's brows drew together. Kezia rushed past him and grabbed my hand. "Ima, we must go before they offer the room to someone else."

"No!" I pulled away, blinking back tears.

Soft hands cradled my shoulders from behind. "The mistress and I will follow everyone else." Mert's voice was like honey on a wound. "We won't get lost, Master Shesh. I promise."

"All right," he said, holding my gaze. "Abba Daniel will look for us here first, Ima." Righteous, pious, tenderhearted Shesh. I lowered my head, suddenly siezed by the fear and shame that paralyzed me as a child in this dark place.

Mert stepped in front of me, looking fiercely into my eyes. "You are the wife of the nobleman Belteshazzar, who was chief of Nebuchadnezzar's wise men and governor of the Chaldeans. The priests here have no power over you." She looped her arm around mine and instructed the servants to follow our family. Shesh's position as chief scribe had secured shelter for our seventy-plus-member household, but I felt anything but safe in the southeast treasury, where my skin crawled with memories. I held my breath while passing every priest's and priestess's chamber and almost fainted as we approached the room that stored some of my deepest pain. Thankfully, Shesh opened a door two chambers before we reached it.

My family's gasps ushered Mert and me into a world so different from the chaos and blood we'd left in Babylon's streets. Gold, silver, gemstones, purple robes, exquisite furs, gilded armor, and large chunks of precious metals lay in piles around the large room.

“Some of these chunks look familiar,” I said to no one in particular. While others oohed and aahed, I found Shesh and pointed to an ornately carved bronze piece. “Is that what I think it is?”

“It’s one of the bronze capitals from the two pillars of Jerusalem’s Temple. See the pomegranates in rows around it?”

I nodded, heart pounding as I pointed out other treasures. “That’s a golden lampstand, and over there is the golden altar.”

Shesh turned to face me. “How do you know what the lampstand and altar looked like?”

Excitement had overtaken my senses. I’d been careless with my words. Though my son-in-law had been born in Babylon, he’d been faithfully taught the Law and Torah and understood the Temple restrictions. A jumble of emotions tied my tongue. Fear of past secrets warred with the joy of seeing Yahweh’s sacred items again.

Kezia heard our exchange and drew close, brows lifted. I refused to offer more grain for her gossiping hens at the market. “Are all the treasures from Jerusalem housed in this single room?” A slight shift of subject might work. “Surely this isn’t everything Nebuchadnezzar brought from the palace, the Temple, and all the wealthy landowners in Judah.”

Shesh grinned, acknowledging my redirection. “No, of course not. Though it was logged before my time, the records show King Nebuchadnezzar divided most of Jerusalem’s treasure between all the temples in Babylon. Some of it was also given to his father-in-law, King Astyages of the Medes, to aid in military campaigns. King Belshazzar, however, has squandered most of the other temple treasuries with his banquets and revelry. He’d left the Esagila’s valuables largely undisturbed until two days ago, when he requisitioned all gold and silver goblets from Solomon’s Temple to serve wine at his banquet.”

Fear vied with shock, and my mind began to spin. “No wonder Yahweh brought judgment on Babylon tonight.”

Shesh’s eyes grew wary, glancing from me to the Temple items. “You

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think Yahweh sent the Medes to attack Babylon because Belshazzar used the sacred goblets?” He folded his arms across his chest and gave me a forbearing smile. “If Yahweh was so quick to protect His holy items tonight, why didn’t He strike down the Babylonians when they destroyed His Temple?” His expression said he thought he’d confounded me.

Kezia, too, waited for my answer. Fully aware that whatever I said could lead to more questions, I walked away to inspect the piles of treasure. Some mounds rose higher than two men. Some had been sorted according to composition—gold, silver, or bronze. Another pile held only more manageable chopped pieces of what had once been larger objects.

Shesh and Kezia followed close on my heels. My son-in-law took a piece of hand-sized gold from the pile and placed it in my hands. Its weight nearly toppled me. Appreciation shone in his eyes. “We don’t often realize how heavy the golden Temple items would have been. Imagine the Ark of the Covenant, for instance.”

I swallowed the instant lump in my throat. “Yes, imagine.”

He took the gold from my hands, giving me a sidelong glance. “It’s been recorded that much of Jerusalem’s wealth—including the Temple items—was cut into pieces this size.” He held it before me. “Which makes it impossible to identify the original items.”

Renewed panic gripped me. First my Daniel had been taken and now Yahweh’s Ark? “Yahweh’s presence cannot be cut into pieces, Shesh. He would not allow it.” But even as I said it, I felt the hypocrisy of my words. Hadn’t He allowed His Temple to be burned? And His cherished people to be scattered and made a mockery among nations? “There must be a way to trace the journey of the Ark from its capture in Jerusalem to wherever it sits today.”

The son of my heart gazed into the windows of my soul. “We can only trace the Ark if those who have seen it tell their stories.”

He knew. Somehow he knew I’d seen the Ark. Mert’s hand slipped into mine. “Tell him.”

“Tell us what?” Kezia’s tone was clipped, her eyes flitting from Mert to me.

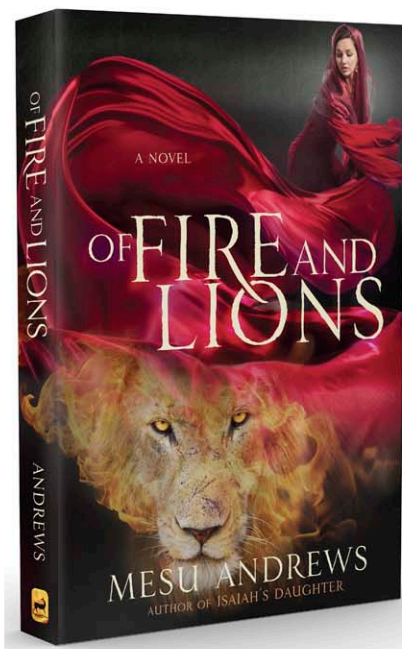
Sadly, I could more easily confide in my son-in-law than my gossiping daughter. But she feared family shame more than tonight’s invaders. Perhaps Kezia’s life as daughter of King Nebuchadnezzar’s chief wise man and wife of Lord Sheshbazzar, with the pomp and privilege those roles ensured, was more important than her standing among her gossiping friends.

Reaching out to cup her cheek, I couldn’t even imagine my eldest spending a night cold or hungry, homeless or enslaved. She could have withstood only a portion of the memories flooding my mind. “When *Crown Prince* Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem to steal the young nobility, I saw the Ark in the Temple. In his following two attacks—eight years later and eleven years after that—the priests included in both of those exiles spoke of their continuing sacrifices and annual Day of Atonement celebrations. How could they without His presence above the Ark?”

Turning to Shesh, I placed my hand on the piece of gold in his hand and held his gaze. “I’ve imagined all these years that Yahweh’s presence still rested on that Ark tucked away somewhere in a king’s treasury. I can’t bear to think it may have been chopped into . . .” I squeezed my eyes closed, and Daniel’s sweet face came to mind. I couldn’t forfeit my husband and Yahweh’s presence in the same night. I lifted my chin. “Please, Shesh. Will you try to discover in which of the exiles the Ark was captured and where it might be?”

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