

A.D. 30

A Novel

TED
DEKKER



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CHAPTER ONE



THE DESERT knows no years. Here time is marked by three things alone. By the rising and the falling of the sun each day, to both bless and curse with its fire. By the coming of rain perhaps twice in the winter, if the gods are kind. And by the dying of both young and old at the whim of those same gods.

I stood alone on the stone porch atop the palace Marid, high above the Dumah oasis, as the sun slowly settled behind blood-red sands. My one-year-old son suckled noisily at my breast beneath the white shawl that protected him from the world.

That world was controlled by two kinds: the nomadic peoples known as Bedouin, or Bedu, who roamed the deserts in vast scattered tribes such as the Kalb and the Thamud, and the stationary peoples who lived in large cities and were ruled by kings and emperors. Among these were the Nabataeans, the Jews, the Romans, and the Egyptians.

Two kinds of people, but all lived and died by the same sword.

There was more war than peace throughout the lands, because peace could be had only through oppression or tenuous alliances between tribes and kings, who might become enemies with the shifting of a single wind.

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One of those winds was now in the air.

I'd named my son after my father, Rami bin Malik—this before I'd returned to Dumah and become fully aware of the great gulf that separated me from my father. Indeed, the sheikh tolerated my presence only because his wife, Nashquya, had persuaded him. I might be illegitimate, she'd cleverly argued, but my son was still his grandson. She insisted he take us in.

Nasha was not an ordinary wife easily dismissed, for she was the niece of King Aretas of the Nabataeans, who controlled all desert trade routes. Truly, Father owed his great wealth to his alliance with King Aretas, which was sealed through his marriage to Nasha.

Still, I remained a symbol of terrible shame to him. If not for Nasha's continued affection for me, he would surely have sent me off into the wasteland to die alone and raised my son as his own.

Nasha alone was our savior. She alone loved me.

And now Nasha lay near death in her chambers two levels below the high porch where I stood.

I had been prohibited from seeing her since she'd taken ill, but I could no longer practice restraint. As soon as my son fed and fell asleep, I would lay him in our room and make my way unseen to Nasha's chambers.

Before me lay the springs and pools of Dumah, which gave life to thousands of date palms stretching along the wadi, a full hour's walk in length and half as far in breadth. Olive trees too, though far fewer in number. The oasis contained groves of pomegranate shrubs and apple, almond, and lemon trees, many of which had been introduced to the desert by the Nabataeans.

What Dumah did not grow, the caravans provided. Frankincense and myrrh, as valuable as gold to the Egyptians and Romans, who used the sacred incenses to accompany their dead into the afterlife. From India and the Gulf of Persia: rich spices, brilliantly colored

cloths and wares. From Mesopotamia: wheat and millet and barley and horses.

All these treasures were carried through the Arabian sands along three trade routes, one of which passed through Dumah at the center of the vast northern desert. Some said that without the waters found in Dumah, Arabia would be half of what it was.

The oasis was indeed the ornament of the deep desert. Dumah was heavy with wealth from a sizable tax levied by my father's tribe, the Banu Kalb. The caravans came often, sometimes more than a thousand camels long, bearing more riches than the people of any other Bedu tribe might lay eyes on during the full length of their lives.

So much affluence, so much glory, so much honor. And I, the only dark blot in my father's empire. I was bound by disgrace, and a part of me hated him for it.

Little Rami fussed, hungry for more milk, and I lifted my white shawl to reveal his tender face and eyes, wide with innocence and wonder. His appetite had grown as quickly as his tangled black hair, uncut since birth.

I shifted him to my left, pulled aside my robe, and let him suckle as I lifted my eyes.

As a slave groomed for high service in a Roman house I had been educated, mostly in the ways of language, because the Romans had an appetite for distant lands. By the time I had my first blood, I could speak Arabic, the language of the deep desert; Aramaic, the trade language of Nabataeans and the common language in Palestine; Latin, the language of the Romans; and Greek, commonly spoken in Egypt.

And yet these languages were bitter herbs on my tongue, for even my education displeased my father.

I scanned the horizon. Only three days ago the barren dunes just

beyond the oasis had been covered in black tents. The Dumah fair had drawn many thousands of Kalb and Tayy and Asad—all tribes in confederation with my father. A week of great celebration and trading had filled their bellies and laden their camels with enough wares to satisfy them for months to come. They were all gone now, and Dumah was nearly deserted, a town of stray camels that grazed lazily or slept in the sun.

To the south lay the forbidding Nafud desert, reserved for those Bedu who wished to tempt fate.

A day's ride to the east lay Sakakah, the stronghold of the Thamud tribe, which had long been our bitter enemy. The Thamud vultures refrained from descending on Dumah only for fear of King Aretas, Nasha's uncle, who was allied with my father and whose army was vast. Though both the Thamud and Kalb tribes were powerful, neither could hold this oasis without Aretas's support.

But my father's alliance with Aretas was sealed by Nasha's life.

In turn, Nasha alone offered me mercy and life.

And Nasha was now close to death.

These thoughts so distracted me that I failed to notice that little Rami's suckling had ceased. He breathed in sleep, oblivious to the concern whispering through me.

It was time. If I was discovered with Nasha, my father might become enraged and claim I had visited dishonor on his wife by entering her chamber. And yet I could not stay away from her any longer. I must go while Rami was still offering prayers at the shrine of the moon god, Wadd.

Holding my son close, I quickly descended three flights of steps and made my way, barefooted, to my room at the back of the palace, careful that none of the servants noticed my passing. The fortress was entombed in silence.

Leaving my son to sleep on the mat, I eased the door shut, grabbed

my flowing gown with one hand so that I could move uninhibited, and ran through the lower passage. Up one flight of steps and down the hall leading to the palace's southern side.

"Maviah?"

Catching my breath, I spun back to see Falak, Nasha's well-fed servant, standing at the door that led into the cooking chamber.

"Where do you rush off to?" she asked with scorn, for even the servants were superior to me.

I recovered quickly. "Have you seen my father?"

She regarded me with suspicion. "Where he's gone is none of your concern."

"Do you know when he returns?"

"What do you care?" Her eyes glanced over my gown, a simple white cotton dress fitting of commoners, not the richly colored silk worn by those of high standing in the Marid. "Where is the child?"

"He sleeps." I released my gown and settled, as if at a loss.

"Alone?" she demanded.

"I wish to ask my father if I might offer prayers for Nasha," I said.

"And what good are your prayers in these matters? Do not insult him with this request."

"I only thought—"

"The gods do not listen to whores!"

Her tone was cruel, which was not her normal way. She was only fearful of her own future should her mistress, Nasha, not recover.

"Even a whore may love Nashquya," I said with care. "And even Nashquya may love a whore. But I am not a whore, Falak. I am the mother of my father's grandson."

"Then go to your son's side where you belong."

I could have said more, but I wanted no suspicion.

I dipped my head in respect. "When you next see Nashquya, will you tell her that the one whom she loves offers prayers for her?"

Falak hesitated, then spoke with more kindness. "She's with the priest now. I will tell her. See to your child."

Then she vanished back into the cooking chamber.

I immediately turned and hurried down the hall, around the corner, past the chamber of audience where my father accepted visitors from the clans, then down another flight of steps to the master chamber in which Nasha kept herself.

She was with a priest, Falak had said. So I slipped into the adjoining bathing room and parted the heavy curtain just wide enough to see into Nasha's chamber.

I was unprepared for what greeted my eyes. Her bed was on a raised stone slab unlike those of the Bedu, who prefer rugs and skins on the floor. A mattress of woven date palms wrapped in fine purple linens covered the stone. This bedding was lined at the head and the far side with red and golden pillows fringed in black, for she was Nabataean and accustomed to luxury. Nasha was lying back against the pillows, face pale as though washed in ash, eyelids barely parted. She wore only a thin linen gown, which clung to her skin, wet with sweat.

One of the seers of the moon god Wadd, draped in a long white robe hemmed in blue fringe, faced her at the foot of the bed. He waved a large hand with long fingernails over a small iron bowl of burning incense as he muttered prayers in a bid to beg mercy from Dumah's god. His eyes were not diverted from his task, so lost was he in his incantations.

Nasha's eyes opened wide and I knew that she'd seen me. My breath caught in my throat, for if the priest also saw me, he would report to my father.

Nasha was within her wits enough to shift her eyes to the priest and feebly lift her arm.

"Leave me," she said thinly.

His song faltered and he stared at her as though she had stripped him of his robe.

Nasha pointed at the door. "Leave me."

"I don't understand." He looked at the door, confounded. "I... the sheikh called for me to resurrect his wife."

"And does she appear resurrected to you?"

"But of course not. The god of Dumah is only just hearing my prayers and awakening from his sleep. I cannot possibly leave while in his audience."

"How long have you been praying?"

"Since the sun was high."

"If it takes you so long to awaken your god, I would require a different priest and a new god."

Such as Al-Uzza, the Nabataean goddess to whom Nasha prayed, I thought. Al-Uzza might not sleep so deeply as Wadd, but I had never known any god to pay much attention to mortals, no matter how well plied.

"The sheikh commanded me!" the priest said.

"And now Nashquya, niece of the Nabataean king, Aretas, commands you," she rasped. "You are alone with another man's wife who has requested that you leave. Return to your shrine and retain your honor."

His face paled at the insinuation. Setting his jaw, he offered Nasha a dark scowl, spit in disgust, and left the chamber in long, indignant strides.

The moment the door closed, I rushed in, aware that the priest's report might hasten Rami's return.

"Nasha!" I hurried to her bed and dropped to my knees. Taking her hand I kissed it, surprised by the heat in her flesh. "Nasha... I'm so sorry. I was forbidden to come but I could not stay away."

“Maviah.” She smiled. “The gods have answered my dying request.”

She was speaking out of her fever.

I hurried to a bowl along the wall, dipped a cloth into the cool water, quickly wrung it out, and settled to my knees beside Nasha’s bed once again.

She offered an appreciative look as I wiped the sweat from her brow. She was burning up from the inside. They called it the black fever.

“You are strong, Nasha,” I said. “The fever will pass.”

“It has been two days...”

“I could have taken care of you!” I said. “Why must I be kept from you?”

“Maviah. Sweet Maviah. Always so passionate. So eager to serve. If you had not been a slave, you would have been a true queen.”

“Save your strength,” I scolded. She was the only one with whom I could speak so easily. “You must sleep. When did you last take the powder of the ghadā fruit? Have they given you the Persian herbs?”

“Yes...yes, yes. But it hardly matters now, Maviah. It’s taking me.”

“Don’t speak such things!”

“It’s taking me and I’ve made my peace with the gods. I’m an old woman...”

“How can you say that? You’re still young.”

“I’m twenty years past you and now ready to meet my end.”

She was smiling but I wondered if her mind was already going.

“Rami has gone to the shrine of Wadd to offer the blood of a goat,” she said. “Then all the gods will be appeased and I will enter the next life in peace. You mustn’t fear for me.”

“No. I won’t allow the gods to take you so soon. I couldn’t bear to live without you!”

Her face softened at my words, her eyes searching my own. “You’re my only sister, Maviah.” I wasn’t her sister by blood, but we shared a bond as if it were so.

Worry began to overtake her face. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye. “I’m hardly a woman, Maviah,” she said, voice now strained.

“Don’t be absurd . . .”

“I cannot bear a son.”

“But you have Maliku.”

“Maliku is a tyrant!”

Rami’s son by his first wife had been only a small boy when Nasha came to Dumah to seal Rami’s alliance with the Nabataean kingdom through marriage. My elder by two years, Maliku expected to inherit our father’s full authority among the Kalb, though I was sure Rami did not trust him.

“Hush,” I whispered, glancing at the door. “You’re speaking out of fever!” And yet I too despised Maliku. Perhaps as much as he despised me, for he had no love to give except that which earned him position, power, or possession.

“I’m dying, Maviah.”

“You won’t die, Nasha.” I clung to her hand. “I will pray to Al-Uzza. I will pray to Isis.”

In Egypt I had learned to pray to the goddess Isis, who is called Al-Uzza among the Nabataeans, for they believe she is the protector of children, friend of slaves and the downtrodden—the highest goddess. And yet I was already convinced that even she, who had once favored me in Egypt, had either turned her back on me or grown deaf. Or perhaps she was only a fanciful creation of men to intoxicate shamed women.

“The gods have already heard my final request by bringing my sister to my side,” she said.

“Stop!” I said. “Your fever is speaking. You are queen of this desert, wife of the sheikh, who commands a hundred thousand camels and rules all the Kalb who look toward Dumah!”

“I am weak and eaten with worms.”

“You are in the line of Aretas, whose wealth is coveted by all of Rome and Palestine and Egypt and Arabia. You are Nashquya, forever my queen!”

At this, Nasha’s face went flat and she stared at me with grave resolve. When she finally spoke, her voice was contained.

“No, Maviah. It is you who will one day rule this vast kingdom at the behest of the heavens. It is written already.”

She was mad with illness, and her shift in disposition frightened me.

“I saw it when you first came to us,” she said. “There isn’t a woman in all of Arabia save the queens of old who carries herself like you. None so beautiful as you. None so commanding of life.”

What could I say to her rambling? She couldn’t know that her words mocked me, a woman drowning in the blood of dishonor.

“You must rest,” I managed.

But she only tightened her grasp on my arm.

“Take your son away, Maviah! Flee with him before the Nabataeans dash his head on the rocks. Flee Dumah and save your son.”

“My son is Rami’s son!” I jerked my arm away, horrified by her words. “My son is safe with my father!”

“Your father’s alliance with the Nabataeans is bound by my life,” she said. “I am under Rami’s care. Do you think King Aretas will only shrug if I die? Rami has defiled the gods.”

“He’s offended which god?”

“Am I a god to know? But I would not be ill if he had not.” So it was said—the gods made their displeasure known. “Aretas will

show his outrage for all to see, so that his image remains unshakable before all people.”

“A hundred thousand Kalb serve Rami,” I said, desperate to denounce her fear, for it was also my own.

“Only because of his alliance with Aretas,” she said plainly. “If I die and Aretas withdraws his support, I fear for Rami.”

Any honor that I might wrestle from this life came only from my father, the greatest of all sheikhs, who could never fail. My only purpose was to win his approval by honoring him—this was the way of all Bedu daughters. If his power in the desert was compromised, I would become worthless.

“He has deserted the old ways,” Nasha whispered. “He’s not as strong as he once was.”

The Bedu are a nomadic people, masters of the desert, free to couch camel and tent in any quarter or grazing land. They are subject to none but other Bedu who might desire the same lands. It has always been so, since before the time of Abraham and his son Ishmael, the ancient father of the Bedu in northern Arabia.

In the true Bedu mind, a stationary life marks the end of the Bedu way. Mobility is essential to survival in such a vast wasteland. Indeed, among many tribes, the mere building of any permanent structure is punishable by death.

In taking control of Dumah, a city built of squared stone walls and edifices such as the palace Marid, a fortress unto itself, Rami and his subjects had undermined the sacred Bedu way, though the wealth brought by this indiscretion blinded most men.

I knew as much, but hearing Nasha’s conviction, fear welled up within me. I wiped her forehead with the cool cloth again.

“Rest now. You must sleep.”

Nasha sagged into the pillows and closed her eyes. “Pray to

T E D D E K K E R

Al-Uzza,” she whispered after a moment. “Pray to Dushares. Pray to Al-Lat. Pray to yourself to save us all.”

And then she stilled, breathing deeply.

“Nasha?”

She made no response. I drew loose strands of hair from her face.

“Nasha, dear Nasha, I will pray,” I whispered.

She lay unmoving, perhaps asleep.

“I swear I will pray.”

“Maviah,” she whispered.

I stared at her face, ashen but at peace.

“Nasha?”

And then she whispered again.

“Maviah . . .”

They were the last words I would hear Nashquya of the Nabataeans, wife to my father and sister to me, speak in this life.