

Darya does not remember how she came to be a slave or who she was before she was bought by an army captain in the ancient Persian city of Susa. When the captain dies, Darya becomes the seventh handmaiden to the mysterious Esther, who is being housed at the Royal Palace as a candidate to be King Xerxes' new Queen.

However, life is precarious for women and outsiders. When the King appoints a new Prime Minister, Darya is drawn into his murderous conflict with the Judean community and tries to protect her friends.

As she grows up she grapples with her own identity, her aspirations and desires and begins to understand the true meaning of both slavery and freedom.

This vividly imagined historical novel offers a rare glimpse into the Jewish diaspora in Ancient Persia and the Persian Empire.

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The Seventh Handmaiden

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Prologue

Persia, 485 BCE

The woman heard the children before she saw them, and the sound of their carefree laughter clawed at her heart.

Do not look at them, she warned herself, standing in the kitchen vegetable garden. It will only make things worse. Collect the eggplant and carrots you came here for, and take yourself back into the kitchen to prepare the stew for the master's dinner.

But almost as though they were acting on their own, her feet stepped toward the wooden trellis that screened the kitchen from a formal garden. She peered through the trellis and was struck as always by the breathtaking beauty on the other side. The walled garden was truly a paradise. Overhead, a mosaic of green leaves and turquoise sky gleamed like polished tiles on this perfect summer day. Underfoot, white pebbled walkways curled through a carpet of grass and flowers that looked as though it had been patterned on a magic loom.

And there were the young children she had heard—two girls and two boys. The boys captured her attention first, because they were taller and louder and never seemed to stop moving. In knee-length tunics and close-fitting trousers, they chased each other along the paths, leaped over small shrubs in the grass, and picked up pebbles to

aim at the tree trunks. The girls were smaller and stood close together, holding hands, watching the boys with wide eyes. Playful ribbons and matching patterned tunics over colorful pantaloons set off their flawless skin and dark hair and made the girls seem like part of the flowering garden. Their musical voices blended with the cooing of palm doves nesting in the trees.

The woman behind the trellis stared at the entrancing little girls, looking from one to the other and back again. Slowly, her eyes widened with the realization that the girls were so identical that one of them could have been standing next to an image of herself in a mirror.

Two the same—twins, the woman murmured, *while I will no longer have even a single child. She will be taken from me and sold to slave dealers!* Her mouth contorted in bitterness and pain as tears welled up in her eyes. She tried to turn away but could not. Her gaze was riveted on the girls while she absently twisted the coarse fabric of the large, empty vegetable sack in her hands.

As the woman watched, the boys tired of their running and shouting. They wanted to play a game of hiding and seeking with the girls. The girls shook their heads, but the boys were insistent. While the older boy faced a tree trunk and covered his eyes, the three younger children cast about for hiding places. Giggling, the two girls ran together behind a bush of flaming orange hibiscus, but the younger boy rushed after them, hissing at them to separate before he hurried off to find his own place. The girls' smiles faded

as, reluctantly, they let go of each other's hands and moved apart. Separated, they looked forlorn and vulnerable. While one stayed behind the flowering bush, the other searched for a new hiding place. She ran behind a tree, but the trunk was not thick enough to shield her, so she crouched behind a rose bush, which she realized was not high enough. Then she spied the trellis and rushed toward it, bounding into the vegetable garden just as the watching woman stepped into the shadows behind the open kitchen doorway.

The woman could hear the child's panting and see the tension in the tiny shoulders as the little girl crouched and peered through the trellis. The ribboned dark hair reminded the woman so much of her own daughter that fresh tears filled her eyes.

Why do you torment me? she pleaded silently to the gods, raising one hand to finger an amulet around her neck. *Why did you bring this child here to rub salt in my wounds?* But her own words struck her. The gods had certainly brought the child there!

Did you bring her to me for a reason? she asked them silently. *Dear Ahura Mazda and all the ahura—gods of goodness and light—are you not taunting me, but trying to help somehow?* She had prayed so hard and so tearfully for help. All of the *ahura* knew how much pain she endured. *What do you want of me?* she implored. *Why was this child brought close to me in this garden? Dear ahura, show me the way. Give me a sign.*

And then her eyes caught sight of the second little girl on the other side of the trellis. It was a sign! It had to

be! Why else would this child have a double, a twin to salve her parents' hearts if she were gone? The woman knew she could never leave another parent bereft as she was—empty and grieving. But these parents would still have someone to love, another child to shower with care, if this one were taken.

No. She could not believe that the *ahura* were telling her to do something so terrible. How could she be so cruel as to kidnap a child? But how could she not? She had to present a small girl to the slave dealers, and if there were none other, it would be her own daughter—her own beloved daughter being sold to them!

Dear ahura, she prayed silently, clutching her amulet. Help me. Please help me! I do not belong to the daeva, lords of darkness and evil. I belong to you. Help me know what to do. Help me save my child.

One

Six Years Later

Darya awoke in the pre-dawn darkness. As always, she stretched out her arms on either side of her body and looked quickly toward the dark square of window, searching for glimmers of light that promised sunrise. She needed this morning ritual, this stretching and searching for light, because she always awoke with the dread that she was locked in a small, dark space, and she needed to reassure herself that this was not so. Jaleh, the housekeeper, indulged her by not closing the shutters completely at night, so that from her straw mat on the floor Darya could glimpse the moon and stars as she fell asleep and the first rays of light as she awoke.

Dear Jaleh, Darya thought fondly, looking toward the shadowy mound that was the housekeeper's soft pallet against the wall of the small room. *And dear Parvaneh. How would I survive without them?* Darya could hear the measured breathing of the woman and her eleven-year-old daughter, still asleep together. When she was younger, Parvaneh had often shared Darya's mat on the floor, the two of them curled up together like a pair of kittens. But now Parvaneh preferred to sleep on her mother's pallet, stuffed with feathers and goose down that Jaleh had salvaged from the kitchen.

Darya missed her friend's close proximity through the dark nights, and at first found it difficult to fall asleep alone on the floor. She felt as though a part of her were missing when Parvaneh moved to the pallet, as though she needed another person within reach to feel complete. These were feelings she did not understand, just as she did not fully comprehend her morning terrors.

Jaleh was certain their cause lay somewhere in the part of her life that Darya could not remember clearly. That time was almost as dark and shrouded as the realm of the *daeva*: the time before Darya was bought by her master, the army captain, as a slave for Monir, his small daughter.

The earliest clear memory Darya could ever call forth in her mind was the day she stood trembling in the crowded slave market of Susa, one of the splendid capitals of the great Persian Empire, tied to four older children: three boys with the dark skin of Nubia and a girl from the barbarian north, with sun-yellow hair and sky-blue eyes. Of course, Darya knew nothing of Nubia or barbarians back then; after all, she was only five or six years old at the time. She remembered staring fearfully at the other children's skin and hair and eyes, wondering what sort of strange beings they were, until her attention was diverted by the people who had come to buy slaves.

"Stand straight and stop shaking!" the slave dealer had ordered, grabbing Darya's shoulders to pull her erect before his customers. "And may the *daeva* take you if you do not stop your crying!" he added, as tears began streaming down

Darya's face. "Who will want to buy a girl who always cries?" He stepped away from her to scan the marketplace, looking for customers, but kept muttering angrily.

"It is enough that you wasted a moon's worth of my time nursing you back to health after I bought you. Those cheating dealers swore you were as healthy as all the other slaves in their caravan, that they kept you in that box on the wagon to make sure you were not stolen since you were so small, but they were lying through their broken teeth. Now it is time for me to get my money's worth."

Darya bit her lip and wiped her face with her hands. She had no clear recollection of the slave caravan or of being sick. Instead, she sensed a jumble of sounds and smells and feelings, all shrouded in inky darkness. For weeks that seemed to have gone on forever, her body had sweated with unbearable heat, then shivered uncontrollably with icy chills. Her mouth had been intensely dry as she lay in the small, dark space on the slave dealer's wagon. Her head and arms had felt too heavy to lift, while her legs had seemed devoid of strength, light enough to float on air.

She had dreamed of beautiful people, a man and woman, smiling at her and speaking kindly and soothingly, and a playful little girl, holding her hand; but when she opened her eyes, all was black, and the only voices she heard were harsh and cruel. Her dream land was airy and as spacious as the heavens, but the black space surrounding her was tight and close, leaving her no room to stretch her limbs. And in her dream world she ate fruits and cakes and sweets

at tables laid with painted dishes; but in the blackness, foul-tasting food and drink were placed beside her in the box by hands she could barely see.

She vaguely recalled being lifted from the darkness by a new slave dealer and screaming when he ordered that buckets of cold water be poured over her to wash her. Then, terrified, she was handed over to a giant blacksmith who fashioned a narrow iron collar that lay loose and heavy around her neck. Later, in a dark hut, the slave dealer hammered a long chain to the back of the collar and fastened it to an iron ring set into the stone wall. And that was where Darya was tethered until the chills and sweats abated.

She was afraid of this new slave dealer from the start, with his *kulah*, his tall black felt hat, perched on his unruly hair, and his dark-green tunic smelling of garlic and soiled with drippings from his meals. He was a short, round man, who had poked the five children awake that morning, then doused all of them with his buckets of cold water to clean the sweat and grime that was caked on their skin. The yellow-haired girl and the dark-skinned boys had cried out with words Darya did not understand, but quieted when the dealer handed them clay bowls heaped with barley and beans so they would be well fed when he displayed them at the slave market. Darya had only stared at the food through her tears while the other children stuffed handfuls into their mouths.

“No crying!” he had ordered that morning as well, while he tugged a comb through her dark, wavy hair. “Not if you

want the *abura* to shine their light on you. They will make sure you are bought by a good family that will treat you well, instead of some workhouse that will use you to collect animal droppings for farmers' fields. But you must stop crying, eat, and look your best. You speak Aramaic, which makes you worth more than these foreigners you are tied to, so do not ruin your chances—or mine," he muttered.

Darya remembered his words as she stood in the market and tried her hardest to stand straight and quench her tears. She watched as men and women fingered the older girl's yellow hair and looked into her eyes, marveling at their color, while the girl hunched over to hide from their stares, and the dealer kept ordering her to stand upright.

Other customers prodded the boys' arms and legs, trying to gauge their strength. Very few buyers glanced at Darya, the smallest of the group, even when the dealer repeatedly advertised that she spoke Aramaic and proclaimed that the youngest slaves were the best since they could be trained more easily.

After four hours of baking in the heat under the dealer's linen awning, only Darya remained unsold. The yellow-haired girl was bought first, by two men who had moved from dealer to dealer, buying all the exotic-looking girls on the market to train as dancers. Then the boys were sold, one of them to a stonemason and two to labor in a copper mine.

"It is too hot to stay here any longer," the dealer grumbled, struggling up from where he had been reclining

on brightly colored cushions. He had ordered the children to carry them to the market for him in the morning and pile them in a comfortable stack on the ground. Starting to take down his awning, he muttered, "Buyers are looking for a cool place to eat lunch, not for slaves."

Darya realized this meant she would be led back to the dark, dank room where she had awakened that morning, and that she would be chained to the wall alone, without even the foreigners for company. She wanted to cry again, but instead looked desperately around the marketplace, hoping more buyers were coming her way. The dealer was right: only a handful of prospects were still there, and other dealers were also taking down their awnings.

At a stall nearby stood a man in a spotless white tunic and trousers, holding the hand of a little girl younger than Darya. They were examining a slave girl, and Darya could hear the man discussing her price with her dealer. But when his child tugged at his sleeve and shook her head, the two of them turned away and slowly came toward Darya.

The little girl was well cared for, with a colorful dress and ribboned hair. The way her father held her hand protectively made Darya feel forlorn and almost brought tears to her eyes again, reminding her as it did of the beautiful man and woman in her dreams, but she forced herself to stand straight and smile shyly. The little girl smiled back and stepped closer. "What is your name?" she asked softly in Aramaic.

Darya stood tongue-tied for a moment, searching her blank mind for a name that sounded familiar.

“She is called Darya,” the dealer put in helpfully, coming up behind Darya and placing his hands possessively on her shoulders. *Darya?* she questioned silently. The name sounded strange. But she had no time to wonder about it, because the dealer was leaning toward the well-dressed child, attempting a friendly smile. “A good Persian name—even if we do not know where she is from.” He looked up at the child’s father, the smile still plastered across his face. “And she speaks Aramaic, which will make her an excellent slave. Worth every gold *daric* you would pay for her.”

“My name is Monir,” the child said, barely audibly, looking from Darya’s face to her body clothed in rags. Slowly, she unwound a long, pink, gossamer shawl from around her shoulders and handed it to Darya, who gratefully took it and let the dealer drape it about her with a satisfied grunt.

A pleased expression spread across the army captain’s face above his combed and curled beard. It seemed he had finally found the right slave for his daughter.