

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of Shaddai.
Psalm 91:1*

Chapter 1

Pi-Ramses, Egypt

Late 13th Century BC

First month of Ahket, Season of Inundation

The crash of the drum echoed in Bezalel's ears as he slipped out from behind his pedestal on the portico and hastened to the throne room. He dared not risk the penalty for being late—again. His tunic still stuck to his wounds from the last beating and ripped them open whenever he moved the wrong way.

He dropped to the cold limestone floor on one knee and lowered his head, raising it just enough to watch pair after pair of bare feet shuffle west toward the dais. The heavy scent of perfumed oil stung his nose.

The old king ascended his throne as the bare-chested attendants silently lined the walls on either side of the spacious hall then turned toward their sovereign and bowed low.

This daily routine was absurd, pretending that Ramses was a god. He was no more a god than Bezalel was, although Bezalel couldn't say that El Shaddai was doing him much good at the moment either. In fact, he seemed utterly incompetent. Or callous.

Bezalel rose. From the tiled hall that led beyond the throne room to the private quarters beyond the dais, he heard the jingling of bracelets and anklets. He looked toward the entryway and saw a young girl emerge behind a number of women who had no doubt dressed her, perfumed her, painted her face, and adorned her with the excessive jewelry of a concubine.

She was perhaps twenty strides away. As she neared he saw she was Egyptian and quite young, several years younger than he—perhaps no more than fourteen. A vague scent of jasmine hung in the air.

She glanced at Bezalel as she passed and his mouth went as dry as the desert surrounding him. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Even behind the heavy kohl he grasped the misery in her eyes. His chest constricted in a way he had never felt before and an inexplicable urge to grab her and pull her away from the group overwhelmed him. The king used to take consorts often. Why was she different?

Guards led her to the center of the room. The other girls retreated to the rear. She knelt and bowed low to the king, her head nearly touching the floor.

Bezalel's face grew hot and his breathing became shallow.

The girl—for though she was to be a consort, he could hardly call her a woman—stood.

Ramses stepped off the dais and walked stiffly toward her. He circled her like a vulture, looking her up and down. He lifted her chin with his wrinkled hand and studied her face. Her shoulders tightened when he touched her.

Bezalel's hands curled into fists. The others had seemed more than willing to become part of his harem. Why take one by force?

“She is acceptable. Take her to my chambers.”

A guard grasped the girl's arm and started toward the hallway. She stumbled along behind him.

“N—!” Bezalel rushed toward her, but a harsh yank on the neck of his tunic cut off the word as well as his progress. He spun around, putting his hands to his neck and choking.

An older man came toward him, scowling. “Bezalel!”

Forcing his breathing to slow, Bezalel glanced sideways at him then looked at the floor. He put his hand to his throat again and winced.

“Bezalel, you are under my protection here, but I cannot save you from your own foolishness.”

“But Ammon, did you see her? She is but a child!”

“And he is Pharaoh! Her age is irrelevant. He can marry an infant if he wishes.” The man's voice softened. “You are lucky I was here to stop you.”

Bezalel sighed and turned back toward the private hallway. His stomach revolted as the guards led the girl into the elderly king's private rooms. He closed his eyes and tried to shut out his own imagination.

Ammon put a hand on Bezalel's shoulder and led him away. The man looked older than the last time Bezalel had seen him. His paunch had grown, and almost all of his hair had disappeared. Sunlight bounced off the large jeweled ankh hanging around his neck. “Why don't you show me what you've been working on while I've been gone?”

They strolled toward the long, narrow portico that ran along the back of the throne room.

Pillars separated the two areas, and the east side of the portico opened onto a large, airy courtyard that let in the sunlight for most of the day, making the portico an excellent place for the artisans to work. Beyond the courtyard, the Nile rushed toward the sea.

They neared a pedestal that stood on the north end of the long workspace.

“Used to people watching you work yet?” Ammon chuckled as he removed a cover from a sculpture nestled in a sandbag.

“That is why I am here, isn’t it?” Bezalel turned up one side of his mouth.

“Ah, finally a smile! Or at least the start of one.”

“Do you like it?” Bezalel searched his teacher’s face for approval as the man scrutinized the work. He craved the old man’s blessing, even after all these years.

Ammon nodded. “It’s a lovely beginning. What a stunning piece of alabaster!” He drew his hand over the stone. “You’ve only roughed out the face, I see.”

“I started the eyes yesterday. I love that part—they bring the life out.” Bezalel rubbed his thumb over the beginnings of an eye.

“You always did. Come, Bezalel, let us go to your workroom.”

Bezalel followed his teacher back across the portico toward a whitewashed hall. Opposite it, on the other side of the throne room, the corridor to the private areas extended west. This hallway ran east and contained workrooms and storerooms. Ammon opened a door and entered Bezalel’s room. He pulled a high stool away from a large table and sat down with a sigh. A large, south-facing window set high up on the wall showered sunlight on the table. A bed hugged the wall under the window. Bezalel grabbed two cups from a shelf and filled them with pomegranate juice.

“I didn’t know you were back from Memphis already.” He handed Ammon a cup.

“I returned last night. I intended to see you this morning, after my visit with the king.”

“You already saw him?”

“Yes. Bezalel, I am afraid I have some news you will not like.” He looked down at his cup and traced the rim with his finger. “I am leaving here. I will no longer be a craftsman for the king. Ramses has awarded me a plot of land . . . and I am going to live on it.”

Bezalel furrowed his brow. Surely he didn’t mean right now. “What about the Colossi?”

Ammon drained his cup. “They are far enough along to be finished without me. And the trips to Memphis are too hard on me anymore.”

Bezalel sank to a stool. Air left him as if he’d been punched in the gut. “But why?”

“I am old, Bezalel. You can’t see it because you love me. But I am old and tired.” He stretched the fingers of one hand wide. “My hands ache all night after I carve for even a short time. My back hurts constantly.” He smiled. “But I have accomplished more than I ever dreamed I would. The Colossi are my greatest work, my legacy. There is nothing left for me to do.”

Bezalel set his cup on the table, stood, and walked toward the door. He whirled around to face Ammon. “But there is always more to do! Ramses needs you. I need you! You can’t leave.” He spread his arms out.

“You don’t need me.”

Bezalel’s head spun. How could Ammon do this to him? “I do! You are all I have . . . almost. I have lived in this palace since my eighth summer. You have always been here for me. I have been with you more than my own parents!”

Ammon put down his cup and twisted in his seat. “Yes, I know. And I have loved you like a son, even though you are a slave and a Hebrew. I have trained many artisans, but I have not loved any of them as I have loved you. None of them lived with me here as you have. But it has been twelve years and now you are grown. You are a man. I haven’t even been around much for the last three years, and you have done very well. I heard about you even in Memphis.”

“And Ramses is willing to let you go?”

“He has you. He knows of you and your work, which is the only reason you were not severely punished just now.”

“But I cannot compare to you!”

Ammon stood and crossed the room. He put his hands on Bezalel’s shoulders. “My boy, I have taught you—and you have mastered—everything I know. And before me, you exhausted the knowledge of three other teachers. You have surpassed us all.”

Bezalel closed his eyes and sighed deeply. This could not happen. There must be a way to change Ammon’s mind.

“I have always felt you had a special ability. There have only been a few who can work with so many materials. None had your creativity. Your work decorates many rooms in this very palace, even the king’s own rooms. I believe Ptah has blessed you.”

Ptah. Bezalel shifted his weight at the mention of the Egyptian god. Why did Ammon always have to bring him up? Bezalel might be angry with Shaddai, but that didn’t mean he worshipped Egypt’s false deities.

Ammon sighed. “I know you do not worship our gods. You have your own gods—”

Bezalel frowned.

“No matter.” Ammon took a deep breath. “I have to leave you now. I doubt I will see you again. My new home is too far away to come here often.”

Bezalel wrapped his arms around his teacher. He closed his eyes tightly against the tears.

After several moments Ammon pulled away gently, his eyes moist as well, and laid his hands on Bezalel’s face. “Know that you will always be in my heart. And I look forward to hearing many good things about you.” His voice was soft.

He opened the door and left.

Bezalel stared at the empty doorway. An emptiness filled his heart. Just knowing Ammon was there—even if “there” was far away in Memphis—had always been a comfort. Now he was on his own. Alone.

His ability had given him an easier life in the palace, but it had taken him away from home. He knew precious few people in the village other than his family, whom he saw only once a week at most. Almost all of the Israelites thought of him as a traitor—as if he had a choice of where to work. Now his closest, perhaps only, ally was gone. How would the new chief craftsman treat him?

He walked to the table and reached for his cup. He held it for a few moments then sent it sailing. Red juice exploded onto the wall and trickled down in rivulets as it made its way to the shattered cup. Then he did the only thing he knew to do, the only thing that gave him pleasure. He left his room to return to his art.

He caressed the pale alabaster, his fingers hesitating on the spots where the ears, the nose, the mouth would be. To him, the face hid in the stone, waiting for him to find it. It was a game, a

challenge to get to the final form concealed within, one that often surprised him as much as it did those who had commissioned it.

He picked up a bronze claw. The soft stone gave way easily to the short curved teeth of the long-handled tool. He drew it along in short, brusque strokes, tugging away at the unwanted parts. Bits of alabaster clinked on the floor as he continued to carve, each chunk bringing him closer to the revelation inside.

Bezalel paid little attention to what happened on the other side of the columns, trying to shut out everything but his craft. He looked up only occasionally, to assure himself he did not miss another summons.

After a while the noise of a particularly large delegation caught Bezalel's attention as its members stomped in from the entrance hall to the southeast of the courtyard. Their very dark skin and closely braided hair identified them as Nubians. That meant gold. Lots of gold.

Ten men, in pairs, carried enormous, open black-and-red pots filled with gold flakes and nuggets, tribute for the season. Bezalel's thoughts ran wild as he envisioned the jewelry he could fashion from it. In its present form it wasn't much good to anyone else.

A parade of women in multi-colored garments followed, carrying trays full of copper and gemstones from the Sinai mines, shut down before summer's fury took hold. Light green turquoise, deep blue lapis lazuli, pale purple amethyst, red carnelian, textured green malachite, and clear green emeralds. To most they looked like worthless rocks at this stage, but to him, even unpolished they held unbelievable beauty and possibility.

Before Bezalel could dream about what he could do with the gems, two young girls bolted in from the hall, screaming. He grimaced as an inhuman growl filled the air. Sailors strutted in, one with a golden cat that stood as high as a man's waist, with a long rope tied around its neck.

The animal looked from side to side constantly, as if searching for its next meal. The handler walked the cat up to the throne and stopped, then knelt. The cat, covered with what appeared to be black paw prints, lay down next to him, swishing its tail.

Ramses leaned forward and pointed at the animal with his scepter. "What is this? Is this the leopard I heard about as a child?"

The sailor stood and gestured grandly toward the cat. "Yes, my king. This is the famous leopard. There has not been one at court since Queen Hatshepsut, almost two hundred years ago. But I, Menes"—he put his hand on his chest—"have brought Ramses II, the greatest king of all, the finest leopard in all the land of Punt." He bowed deeply.

Ramses raised his eyebrows. "Really? In all the land? You searched it all?"

The sailor stood. "Well, it-it is the finest that I found ..."

"If I had wanted one, I would have sent for one." Ramses sat back in his throne. "Did you bring anything ... useful?"

"Well, yes, there is a myrrh tree, frankincense, ebony, ivory—"

"Very good. You are dismissed." Ramses struck the floor with the heel of his scepter.

The sailor's shoulders fell, and he shuffled off, pulling the leopard behind him.

Bezalel shook his head. Ramses didn't care about the effort the man must have gone to as he captured, trained, and brought such a magnificent creature to him. If it didn't fill his treasury or his harem, he troubled himself little about it, no matter how much sweat or blood it cost.

Crewmen followed, carrying baskets of the promised white elephant tusks and black wood. This afternoon the rare ivory and ebony would be in the storeroom. Bezalel could hardly wait.

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The water clock said the day's work was finished, although the sun would not set for some time. Finally, Bezalel's week was over. He needed his family tonight. He packed up his tools and shut the door of his workroom behind him.

He left the palace and headed northwest along the river, and in less than half an hour reached his village. A day or so was hardly enough time. Thankfully, he lived close enough to come home midweek sometimes, if his workload permitted. Ammon had given him leave to choose his own time off as long as he accomplished his work. Would his new master do the same?

The evening sun cast long, misshapen shadows east over the river, and the cooler air beckoned people outside. River birds darted above the heads of the small children who hid among the papyrus reeds. Older children began arriving from the brickfields along with the adults. Several younger boys shouted as they played a game of chase near the river. Bezalel stopped and watched. Their innocent joy refreshed him after days with the selfish king.

"Hey, palace rat, leave them alone! Stay away from them!"

Bezalel flinched, and looked around for the voice that yelled at him.

A group of mud-stained young men his age stood a short distance away, staring at him. The leader stood in front of the rest, arms crossed. His bushy beard made him look older than the others. "I said, leave! We don't need your kind here."

Not tonight. His feelings were raw already. No matter how often he explained, some still couldn't believe he did not have a choice of whether or not to work in the palace. The lack of mud on his tunic and blisters on his hands provided the only provocation some needed to hate him. He had no energy to argue tonight. Still, if they wanted it ... He headed toward them.

"Bezalel!"

A familiar voice caught his attention. He turned to see his grandfather ambling towards him. Bezalel stared a moment at the group then walked away.

"*Sabba.*" Bezalel smiled and hugged his grandfather.

"Welcome home, *habibi.*" His grandfather clapped him on the shoulder. "Problem?"

"Not anymore." They fell in step as they strolled through the narrow streets of houses made with adjoining walls. They passed a couple nuzzling near the door of a mud-brick home. A gaggle of boys kicked a ball. Girls huddled, pointed, and giggled as boys walked by. Everyone had someone. Everyone except him. Sometimes—often—he wished he made bricks like everyone else. It would be so much easier. Why did he have to be different?

They reached their small home. They removed their sandals and walked through the large room into the open-air kitchen in the back.

"Bezalel, you're home!" His mother dropped the large spoon she was using into a pot, grabbed Bezalel, and held him close.

"Yes, *Imma*, I'm home." He smiled broadly and hugged her back then pulled away and kissed her on the cheek.

"Oh, a week is too long, *habibi.* Hungry, I hope? I roasted a duck since you are home for

dinner tonight. Now, wash your hands.”

The two men washed and dried their hands, stepped into the main room, and sat on the floor in front of the low table already set with plates and cups and a pitcher of juice.

Imma set out fresh dates and bread then disappeared again. She emerged with a platter of duck meat, which she placed on the table.

“Thank you, Rebekah.” Sabba grabbed a date while she wasn’t looking.

“So, what happened at the palace this week?” Imma sat beside Bezalel.

He watched her as she filled his plate with meat and fruit. She looked so tired lately. Gray now streaked her beautiful brown hair, and her bright eyes always had dark circles under them. She looked far older than her years. “The Nubians brought gold again, and the Sinai miners sent basket loads of gems. I can’t wait to work with them. The water master came with the first report of the rise in the Nile. Sailors from Punt brought a leopard—”

“A leopard! I thought that was only a legend.” Imma’s eyes grew as wide as the dates she had served.

Bezalel swallowed his bread. “I guess not. An enormous cat. Gold with black spots. He was stunning, but he scared the servant girls.” He took another bite and thought of the girl in the throne room. Her face filled his mind, and once more he wanted to go find her and take her away. What was her name? What was she doing right now? How frightened was she? He shoved the thoughts aside.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Her question pulled him back to the present. “What?”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Ramses took a new wife again. Well, a concubine, anyway.”

Imma’s mouth dropped open. “Again? But it’s been years.”

Bezalel nodded. “She’s so young this time ... the youngest one yet. And very pretty.”

Imma studied his face. “Is that all? You’re still leaving something out, I think.” She touched the darkening bruise on his neck.

He pulled away. “Don’t worry about it.” He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I guess if he is a god he can do anything, even marry a child.”

“God? He is no god,” Sabba huffed.

“The people think so. He is as good a god as El Shaddai.” Bezalel shoved his food away. “Maybe better. Shaddai cannot stop Ramses from keeping us as slaves. He is not ‘the Almighty,’ and this proves it. No god would bring his people to a strange land and then leave them there to become slaves under these unbearable Egyptians.”

“Oh, habibi.” Imma reached over and stroked his cheek. “Such anger in one so young.”

After dinner, Bezalel wandered outside. He soon found himself at the river and sat on the wide bank. A gray heron stood on one leg, soundlessly hunting its dinner. The setting sun felt warm on his back.

He lay on the ground, arms under his head, and listened to the flow of the water. The flooding would reach this part of the river in several weeks and cover the very spot on which he lay. His thoughts went yet again to the girl and this time he did not avoid them. He remembered her eyes, the sorrow and hopelessness in them. Or was it fear?

He put one arm over his eyes. He knew what would happen tonight. And then Ramses would discard her, as he did all the others, like so much trash, and return to his beloved, to Nefertari.

And then, like him, the girl would be alone.
Somehow, he had to find her.

Chapter 2

Bezalel crept along the side wall of the throne room, wishing he had kicked off his sandals. He slid forward until he could see the faces of both the visitors and the king. Dust hung in the light streaming through the windows placed high in the walls. Silence settled on the room like a blanket, making even the early morning air feel heavy. A drop of sweat dribbled down his neck.

Ramses descended from his throne and now stood a breath away from two Israelites.

It was unusual enough that Hebrews would be allowed a meeting with the pharaoh, but that the king would come down to see them face-to-face? It was unheard of.

Bezalel held his breath, put his hand on his empty stomach to muffle the grumbling.

Aaron's bare feet were still wet from the ceremonial washing required before a royal audience. His full, white beard and gray hair touched the patched brown cloak he wore over a mud-stained tunic.

Bezalel didn't know the other man. He was shorter than Aaron, and stockier. Like Aaron's, his hair touched his shoulders, but his weathered face was clean shaven, like the Egyptians. Tension crept down Bezalel's body.

Ramses stared silently at the man. Light reflected off the old king's thin hair. At eighty years of age, his hair color had faded but it still identified him with the god Seth, the god that gave his family the power to rule.

"Moses." An odd smile of recognition crossed Ramses's face. "It has been a long time since we studied together at Thebes."

So was this "Moses" an Israelite or Egyptian? He studied in Thebes, he was barefaced, but he dressed like a slave. It didn't make sense.

"Y-yes. It has been many, many years."

"Indeed. Too many years for you to think our common ground has earned you anything other than an audience. You are now but a slave." Ramses chuckled. "Although I hear you rejected even that identity and ran off to hide in the desert." The king looked Moses over head to toe, gave a snort of contempt, then spun around and returned to his throne.

Bezalel let out his breath and his muscles relaxed. He gazed at the ceiling, gold stars painted on a field of blue. At least Ramses wasn't going to hurt anyone. For now.

Moses took a deep breath as his cheeks colored. "I am here now. Th-that is all that matters."

"So you are. Speak to your king."

"My b-brother will speak for me." Moses stepped back.

“Someone *always* spoke for you.” Ramses glanced away.

Moses nodded to Aaron.

Aaron puffed out his chest. “This is what Yahweh, the God of Israel says to you: ‘Let My people go, that they may meet with Me in the desert.’” His voice echoed off the tiled walls.

Bezalel watched Moses, although Aaron tried to capture everyone’s attention.

Ramses snickered. “Who is this Yahweh? I know many gods. I know Ra, and Amun, and Osiris, and Isis, and many others, but I do not recognize any ‘Yahweh.’ Why should I obey him? I do not know him, and I will not let Israel go.” He lifted his hand in a wave of dismissal, but Aaron either did not see it or ignored it.

Bezalel cringed as Aaron defied the king, raising his staff—and his voice. “Yahweh is the God of Israel, the only true God. He met with us last night, and we must make a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to Him.” He hesitated before continuing. “Or He may strike with plagues or with the sword.”

Bezalel leaned his head against the wall. *Oh, no, don’t threaten him. That never works.*

Moses glanced at Aaron with widened eyes, giving the distinct impression that Aaron went further than he should have.

Ramses stood.

A shiver crawled down Bezalel’s back, even in the delta heat, and he slowly sidestepped away from the dais. Ramses was unpredictable, but even Bezalel could tell when he would explode.

Aaron retreated several steps, but Moses stood firm.

“Moses, why do you wish to keep my people from their labor?” Ramses’s voice began calm but grew louder with every syllable. The heavy kohl rings around his eyes made him appear angry even when he wasn’t. Right now, he looked positively menacing.

The king stepped to the edge of the dais. “My city is not yet finished, and until it is, no one will leave this delta. Not even for three days! Your worship is not my concern. They all must remain here and keep working, and you are interfering. Leave them alone, and leave me alone. I have indulged you; now *get out!*” He lunged at the men but stopped short of jumping off the dais.

Moses turned to go. Aaron started to raise his rod again, but Moses touched his arm. Aaron closed his mouth and followed his brother out, head bowed.

Bezalel ran a hand over his face and breathed a heavy sigh as he walked to his room. He had just returned to the palace after spending two nights at home. He kicked off his sandals and plopped on his bed for a moment. *What happened out there? Aaron has a brother? One who knew Ramses in Thebes, and meets with Shaddai, and is brave—or stupid—enough to say there is only one true God to Pharaoh’s face.*

Bezalel gathered his tools and walked across the portico. He tried to focus his thoughts somewhere else—anywhere else—as he picked up his chisel. He pulled it gently in semicircles, each one deeper than the last, to form an ear. As he worked, the heavy scent of lotus blossom filled the air around him, and he felt eyes boring into his neck. He shrugged off the feeling, but it persisted. His hands continued to carve the alabaster, but he couldn’t hold his tool steady. When he could stand it no longer, he stepped back, as if to study his subject, drawing the back of his arm across his forehead to wipe away the sweat.

The king himself stood only a few strides away.

Ramses sauntered toward Bezalel. He reached out and touched the sculpture. He walked around the white stone bust, arms crossed over his chest, and studied it from all sides. His double crown reflected the sun's rays.

Although Bezalel stood taller than the king, he felt small in his presence. His heart pounded, and he feared Ramses could see it under his tunic.

"I like it. You have done well. You capture the power of Ramses." The pharaoh left without waiting for the customary response. Golden threads in the pleated linen *shenti* wrapped around his waist glistened, and jeweled bracelets on his wrists clinked together as he strode back to his private rooms beyond the dais. Several servants followed.

Bezalel staggered and realized he had barely taken a breath since his ruler approached. He gasped, then stumbled backwards and sank onto a couch along the wall behind him. His heart had slowed to near its normal pace and he had caught his breath by the time a tiny Egyptian offered him a cup of water. Bezalel smiled and took it.

"He can be scary, can't he?"

Drops of cool water ran down Bezalel's chin and he wiped them away. "Maybe." He studied the child's face. His eyes were dark brown and his lashes were long and black. He had a tiny scar on his right cheek, and he had lost a tooth. "What's your name?"

"Ahmose." The boy was almost entirely without clothing except for his flaxen shenti. He wore his thick, black hair tied at the base of his neck.

"I've seen you here before. How old are you?"

"Seven." Ahmose put his hands on his hips. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen." Bezalel laughed at the boy's directness. "Why aren't you in school with the other children?"

Ahmose stared at his bare feet, wiggling his toes. "I am only a servant."

"Oh." Bezalel returned the cup. A servant at seven? That was terribly young for an Egyptian. What could the boy possibly have done to deserve that? Bezalel scrambled for words. "Thank you for the water. I needed it. My mouth was so dry I couldn't speak."

"Is this the first time our master has spoken to you?"

"Yes. I am in his presence almost every day, but he has never addressed me directly. I wasn't sure what to expect."

"So why are you in here instead of out there with all the other Hebrews?"

A twinge of pain pricked at Bezalel's heart. *Good question.* One Shaddai had never answered for him. "I am an artist. I make things for the king. So he keeps me here."

"You can't go home?"

Bezalel clenched his jaw a moment before he answered. "No. I must stay here now."

Ahmose nodded. "I have no home, either." The little slave left with the cup and wandered down the hall.

Bezalel crossed the courtyard and headed toward the river. He didn't like that word "either." Maybe the boy didn't have a home, but he did. He had a home; he just wasn't allowed to live there. He had family; he just couldn't be with them. He even had a people; they just considered him an Egyptian, a traitor. How could El Shaddai let this happen? Was he God Almighty or not?

Bezalel picked up some rocks and tossed them into the river. He saw a turtle and aimed for

it. The small stone hit the reptile's shell and it dove under the water and swam away. Even it had a home that couldn't be taken away. It wasn't fair.

###

When the drum rang the noon meal, Bezalel crossed the portico, grabbing a plum and a loaf of bread from a basket set on a pedestal along the way. He pushed open the door to his workroom then sat down and bit into the deep purple fruit.

He was pouring a glass of goat's milk when a man appeared at his door. He wore the fine linen shenti of a court official, with gold threads and a jeweled leather belt.

Bezalel rose, and the man strode toward his table. "The king has commissioned new bracelets for his son for the coronation. He wishes them to look like this." He handed Bezalel a drawing on parchment. "You may use the jewels and gold that Nubia brought the other day."

Bezalel set the plum down and studied the drawing. "Very well. Thank you."

"Shall we go now?" The man stepped toward the door and gestured down the hall.

Bezalel raised his eyebrows. "Go where now?"

"To the storeroom, to get the jewels and gold."

Bezalel sat again. "No, I'll go later. I have not yet eaten today."

"But I am not free later. So you'll have to go now."

"I have a key, so I can go later."

The official pursed his lips. "But you're a slave."

Bezalel took a deep breath. "You're new here, aren't you?"

The man stood a little taller. "Yes. I have replaced Ammon as chief artisan. I came up from Memphis with him."

Bezalel walked toward the official and offered a smile he did not feel. "Congratulations. I am sure you will do well." He folded his arms over his chest. "I have worked in this palace for over twelve years. While I cannot work anywhere in the kingdom for pay, I have earned respect and a measure of freedom in the palace. Freedom to go where I need to go as well as to create."

He held up the rolled parchment. "I am never given drawings like this. Ramses only gave me this one because he wants these bracelets to match exactly the ones I made for him a few years ago. He does not know I can remember those down to the last jewel." He shrugged. "Ammon gave me a key to the storeroom with the king's knowledge and consent. So if you don't like it, I am afraid you'll have to talk to him." Bezalel returned to his seat and picked up his plum.

The official narrowed his eyes and his face turned red. "We'll see about that." He spun on his heel and walked away.

That's what I was afraid of.

After he stuffed the last bite of bread in his mouth, Bezalel took a large oil lamp, and a little wooden key hidden under it, off the shelf. He stepped out of his room then walked down the hall away from the throne to the storeroom. There were no windows, so the only light came from the lamp.

When he reached the storeroom, he inserted the wooden key into the lock and turned it. He smiled as he listened to the tumblers fall one by one. The door popped open just a bit; he pushed it

the rest of the way and entered. He placed the oil lamp on a shelf made just for that purpose, and it lit up the sizable room. Gold and jewels glittered in the flickering glow, throwing bits of light over the walls in an ethereal display.

He found the pottery jars of gold nuggets and flakes. He thrust his hand deep inside and brought it up full of the precious metal, his fingers splayed, and let the misshapen rocks sift slowly through his hand and back into the pile. Nothing else on earth felt like gold. The nuggets were heavier than they looked, and the sound of them falling back onto themselves both soothed and stirred him. He closed his eyes and let them fall a few more times before he filled a linen bag about as long as his hand, pulling the drawstring tightly closed when it was full.

The unpolished gemstones sat on platters on a series of shelves. He scooped up a handful and took a deep breath. The scent of the earth still hugged the unrefined stones. Each one needed a vigorous polishing, but he could see the finished prize waiting beneath all the dirt and impurities.

He searched the gems one at a time, holding them to the light, turning them over in his hand. He carefully selected those that matched the bracelets he had crafted for Ramses, finding exactly the right stones for them. Each one had a purpose and meaning, at least to Ramses. Bezalel did not believe mere rocks had any power, but the king did, so he did his best to select perfect stones.

The Egyptians believed lapis lazuli, blue like the heavens and the Nile, had life-giving powers, symbolizing creation and rebirth. Green turquoise brought joy and delight. The dark red of the carnelian symbolized the blood of life and had healing properties. Malachite's green protected the wearer from epidemics and Bezalel's favorite, amethyst, represented wealth and royalty. He dropped the chosen stones into another pouch.

He was about to leave when he saw the ivory and ebony. Several elephant tusks stood in a corner. He drew his hand down one as tall as he was—far too big for him to pick up alone. From its tip to the base it was dense, without visible grain, and creamy white. Toward the bottom it cracked, almost like cedar. Constructed of rings set one inside another, its very center was hollow.

He dragged a fingernail down the side. This was far denser than the hippo ivory he had worked with. This was magnificent. He reached up to a shelf and grabbed a piece of heavy black wood and set it next to the ivory. The ebony was even harder. The black next to the white was spectacular, and his mind raced with possibilities of what he could create.

So different, and yet so similar at the same time. Both smooth, glistening, hard, solid; they would be difficult to carve. They required thought, planning, and special tools. Better to keep them safely locked up for now.

Closing the storeroom door, he heard a soft noise. Holding the lamp high, he looked all around. Seeing nothing, he reached back and locked the door. But the sound came again, a whimper, like a kitten. He looked once more, with the lamp lower.

Then he saw her.

Curled up in the corner, back to the wall, was the girl from the throne room. She sat with her legs pulled up and her arms wrapped around them, her face buried in her knees. She cried so softly it was nearly inaudible.

An almost physical pain enveloped him, as if a giant hand squeezed his chest, making it hard for his heart to beat and for him to breathe. Never before had he had so much feeling for

anyone else, especially someone he didn't even know.

He knelt next to her. What should he do? Neither servants nor Israelites could touch Egyptians without permission. Dared he risk it?

He remembered the way she looked at him in the throne room, her eyes filled with despair. Was she asking for help then? She was in pain of some kind now, and she needed ... something. He reached out and gently touched her arm.

She flinched and pulled herself even farther into the corner, crying out as she looked up.

He jumped away from her, falling back onto his seat, his weight on his hands. "Shh! I'm sorry! I just want to know if you need any help."

She stared at him with red, wet, kohl-smearing eyes. Her hair hung around her shoulders in a mess of knots and misplaced decorative pins. Yet there was still something about her that drew him ... Even at her most miserable, she made him dizzy. A few more tears fell, and she shook her head. "Thank you, though." Her voice was rough.

His breath came in shallow bursts. He didn't want to scare her, so he slowly sat up. "Can I get you anything? Food? Water? Anything?" He paused. "Someone else?"

She shook her head again and smiled weakly before hiding her face once more in her wet and wrinkled dress.

He sat on the floor for a few moments, wondering what else he could do. If she wouldn't let him help, there really was nothing to do. Her exquisite linen tunic was ripped at the neck and at the hem, but there were no obvious bruises. Her bare feet were filthy and cut, and somewhat bloody. He couldn't see her hands.

Was she still crying from two nights ago? Was she just lonely for her family? He longed to dry her tears, to comfort her, to hold her until she stopped crying, but he was sure that was exactly what she didn't need—or want—right now.

He waited a few more moments, wishing he could do something, anything. Then he stood up. He would get no answers sitting here.

The walk back down the hallway seemed much longer than the walk to the storeroom.

When he neared his workroom, he saw the king cross the throne room. He paused in the shadows so Ramses could not see him and reached down to place his bags on the limestone floor. He grimaced when their weight shifted, and they jangled and clinked.

The king marched toward his throne, stabbing the floor with his scepter in time with his long strides. His heavy necklace banged against his chest. Crown prince Amun-her-khepeshef scurried behind. "Father, your command makes no sense!" The prince spread his arms. "You are only slowing down the completion of your own city!"

Ramses whirled about, nearly knocking his son over. "They are slowing down the work, not me! The Egyptian workers will no longer gather and deliver the straw. The slaves will gather their own. I am tired of their laziness and their schemes to get out of work."

Unmistakably Ramses's son, the prince shared the same long nose and high cheekbones. He still enjoyed taut skin and straight posture, and women still wanted to be his consort. He didn't have to take wives or concubines by force or royal order, as did his father. Bezalel balled his fists and clenched his teeth and forced his mind back to the conversation.

"... and then if we do not give them the straw—"

“I no longer wish to discuss this! The matter is closed!” The pharaoh’s face immediately brightened. He smiled. “I wish to discuss happier things. How are the preparations coming for your coronation as my co-ruler? Will we be ready at the end of the summer?”

“They are coming along well, my king.” The prince bowed his head.

“My king? Are you angry with me?” The king reached for his son’s face and lifted it. “There is no one else here. Why do you address me so formally, habibi?”

“I am sorry, Father. I did not mean to offend you. It is simply habit to address you more formally in the throne room. I had not realized we were alone.”

“Good, then. Let us retire and discuss the ceremonies.” Ramses wrapped his arm around his son’s waist and the pair disappeared down the hall to their rooms. Ramses chattered away, but the prince looked at his feet.

Bezalel grabbed his bags. *This is bad. Really bad.* When he returned to his workspace, he threw the bags on the floor and kicked at the stool. He loosed the leather string at his collar and ran his hands through his hair then clasped his hands behind his neck. He paced as he fumed.

If Moses had bothered to find out exactly what the situation was before he appeared in Pharaoh’s court, he might not have forced the king to such an extreme move. And Aaron and all his posturing. Shouldn’t he have stopped Moses in the first place instead of trying to look so important?

There would be chaos in the villages tonight.

Moses should have stayed in the desert.