

# PLAGUES

## IN THE PALACE

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# CHAPTER 1

Meshach stared at the colorful images painted on the walls of the long corridor. Rows of people, animals, and chariots in shades of yellow, red, and topaz splashed their way from one end of the hallway to the other. He just stood with mouth agape at the strangeness of it all.

The stone floor felt cool beneath his feet, and all about him stood statues and stone carvings of all kinds. Meshach had never been in this part of the palace before. In fact, at the moment, he wasn't really sure where he was. He was supposed to be delivering refreshments to the royal queen and her guests in the palace, but he must have taken a wrong turn somewhere.

Meshach listened carefully to muted voices echoing down the stony corridor. The voices sounded as if they were coming from a large vaulted chamber nearby.

Meshach felt excited that he should be asked to do such an important task. He was tall for his age and strong. He had average looks, with bronze skin, almond brown eyes, and a head of dark hair. But his pleasant smile made people stop and greet him when he walked down the hallways of the palace or when he came into a room.

Just recently Meshach had begun working with his father, Eli, a Hebrew slave in the bakery of the royal kitchens. Eli was a skilled baker, so his services were in great demand. Meshach knew his father was fortunate. Even for a slave, working in a bakery was much better than working on a construction crew building pyramids or temples. It could be hot in the bakery, but it was nothing like working in the broiling desert sun.

Meshach loved being with his father. His father was a big man with strong hands. Like Meshach, he had dark hair, and, like Meshach, he had

a smile that lit up his face when he laughed. Eli was fun-loving and knew how to make work become a game. The two of them always laughed and joked when they were together, and sometimes his father even sang with his rich deep voice while they worked.

And Eli knew how to make the best bread around. The freshly baked bread always smelled so good when Meshach helped his father take the crusty round loaves from the ovens. Meshach loved to tear off pieces of the hot bread and pop them into his mouth.

But although Meshach liked working with his father in the palace kitchens, he didn't get to do it as often as he wanted. Now that Meshach was thirteen and no longer considered a boy, his father wanted him to learn how to read and write well. Then he could become a scribe.

His mother, Jerusha, was his tutor. Fortunately, she knew how to read and write and even do some calculations in math. Her father had been a scribe and had taught her well. Meshach knew it was unusual for a woman to have been given the chance to learn.

Meshach was a good student. Already he was getting pretty good with the letters he practiced using a wet clay tablet with a writing stick called a stylus. The letters formed words of an ancient language called Hebrew, the name used for Meshach's people. This form of writing had been used by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but since the Hebrews had been in slavery for many generations, very few people could read and write the language anymore.

"I don't want my children growing up ignorant," Meshach's father had said more times than Meshach could remember. "You never know what God may call you to do with these skills someday. We're lucky that your mother can read and write. Many families are not so blessed." He would always smile and ruffle Meshach's hair when he said this, and although Meshach didn't like to study so much, he knew his father was right.

Meshach's father could read and write too. He should have been working full time as a scribe himself, but because he was such an excellent baker, Pharaoh's chief steward, Hatsuret, had insisted that he work in the bakery for the time being. Eli's skills as a scribe also came in handy when Hatsuret began having him keep the records up to date for all that was bought or sold in the kitchen.

Meshach hoped to be a good scribe one day, too—but today he didn't have to study. His mother couldn't teach him and his cousin, Asher, because her sister was having her third baby. Besides caring for her own family, Jerusha also served as a midwife for the Hebrew women in the neighborhood where Meshach lived.

It felt good to be free from classes for the day. Meshach was tired of sitting cross-legged on the floor for hours at a time copying the dark marks his mother wrote on a whitewashed clay-brick wall in their house. On days he didn't have to study, he would work with his father in the palace bakery, helping to make breads, cakes, and wafers for the palace meals.

Meshach continued wandering through the hallways of the palace looking for the chamber where Queen Tiye would be entertaining her guests. He had never been this far inside the royal palace. As he started down another long hallway, those muffled voices he had heard before sounded louder. Meshach walked along carefully as he carried the fresh bread, beer, and platter of melons and pomegranates. Meshach's father had told him to look for Saatet, chief of the palace servants, who had ordered the afternoon refreshments for the queen and some of her friends.

Meshach wrinkled his nose in disgust. Fresh bread tasted good, but he never had liked the warm beer that the royal kitchens brewed in large clay jars. After a while it would get frothy, and if it wasn't used up soon enough, it always developed a musty smell.

Everybody drank beer—men, women, and even children. It was the most common drink in Egypt, but that didn't change the way Meshach felt about it.

Suddenly Meshach caught sight of a small room tucked away at one end of the corridor. In the room was a window opening, and the voices he had been hearing were coming through it. Maybe the queen and her guests were in a chamber on the other side of the window. "You'll know you have arrived at Queen Tiye's chambers when you see filmy purple curtains hanging in the doorway," Eli had told him. "Her favorite color is purple."

Meshach didn't see the purple curtains he had been told to look for. Had he missed some passageway somewhere? His father had been quite specific. "You can't miss it. It's three corridors down from the large banquet hall with the pictures of sphinxes on the wall. Her chamber doors are the ones with the purple curtains."

Meshach had trembled with excitement at the responsibility of serving Queen Tiye. It wasn't every day that a Hebrew boy got to bring refreshments to the wife of the most powerful man in the world. Meshach stepped to the small window and peered through it. *Is this the chamber where I am supposed to deliver the bread and fruit?*

He nearly swallowed his tongue in surprise. In a large room below him Meshach could see golden furniture and green plants of every sort. Rich silk curtains of blues and reds gave the chamber a grandeur and elegance beyond anything Meshach had ever seen.

"Whew!" Meshach whistled to himself. Bronze-chested warriors were everywhere! They were tall and silent, and their spearheads and swords glimmered in the light of the sun streaming through small windows high in the white stone walls of the palace.

A narrow turquoise carpet with yellow fringes stretched down the center of the chamber. Meshach's eyes followed the length of it until it ended before a glistening white throne.

"Whoa, now! That's got to be ivory!" Meshach had to stop himself from shouting. "This is incredible! A throne overlaid with pure ivory! Wow! I've heard about stuff like this in stories father has told me, but I never thought I'd get to see it!"

Meshach's eyes wandered to the high vaulted ceiling supported by massive stone columns. He marveled at the tremendous size of the columns. And everywhere were chiseled and carved the likenesses of strange creatures, half-animal and half-man. He could clearly see carvings of Ra the sun god, with a human body but the head of a falcon. Then there was Apis, the black bull, and Bastet, the cat-headed god.

"What is this place?" Meshach gasped. "I must be at one of the royal audience chambers for the Pharaoh himself!" The fact that he had wandered so near an important room scared Meshach. *What if someone catches me watching from the small window? Will I be in trouble? Will I be dragged off and beaten? Perhaps put in prison?*

Meshach's common sense told him he should just find Queen Tiye's chambers and deliver the refreshments—but he didn't.