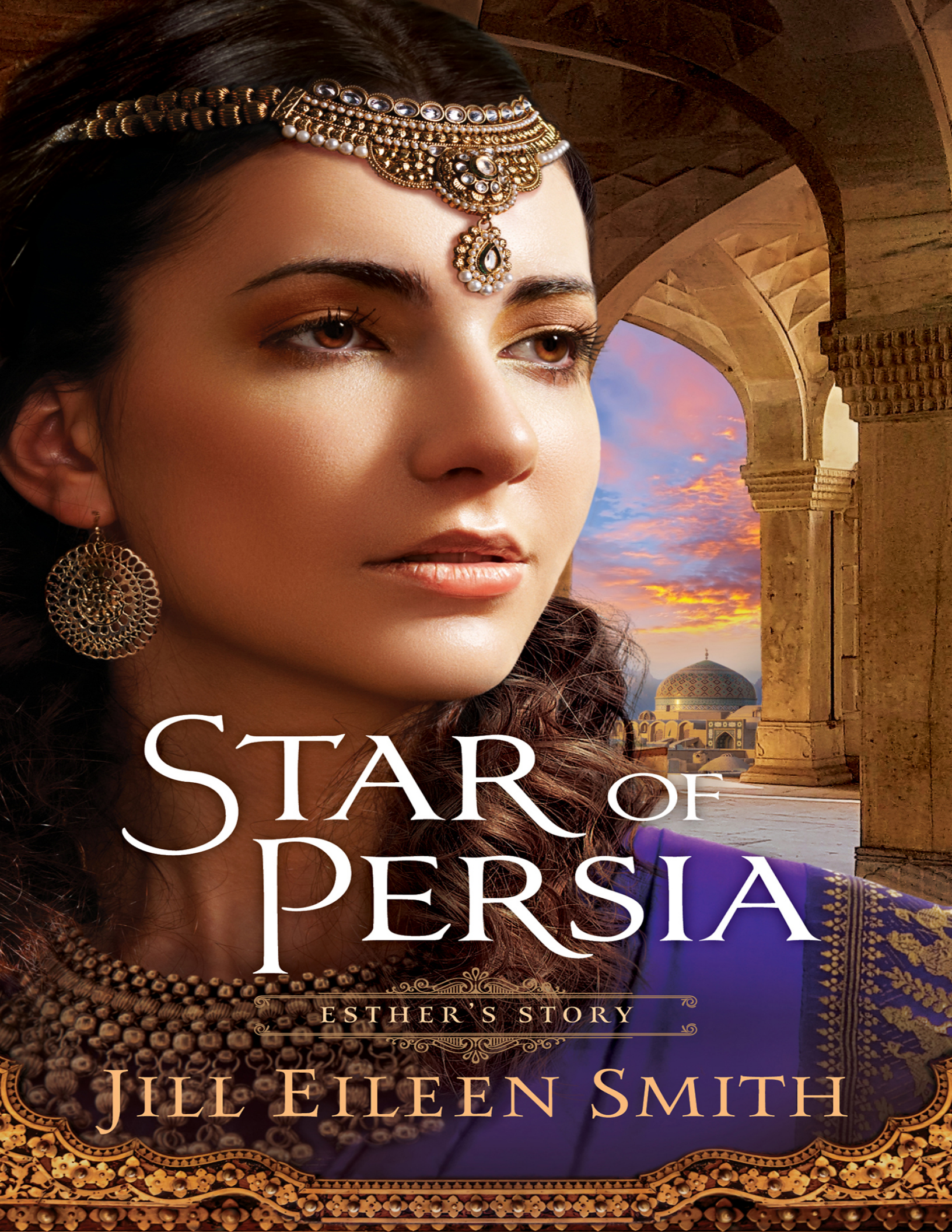


A woman with dark hair, wearing a gold headband with a central jewel and a large circular earring, looks through a stone archway. In the background, a domed building is visible under a sunset sky. The woman is wearing a blue garment with gold patterns.

STAR OF PERSIA

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Sarai

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DAUGHTERS OF THE PROMISED LAND

The Crimson Cord

The Prophetess

Redeeming Grace

A Passionate Hope

The Heart of a King

When Life Doesn't Match Your Dreams

STAR OF PERSIA



JILL EILEEN SMITH



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearance of certain historical figures is therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To every man and woman
who is willing to take the risk of trusting God
in the middle of a crisis and do the hard
things.

To those who will step up when faced
with your own “such a time as this.”

This book is for you.

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Prologue

489 BC

Vashti moved through the palace gardens, cradling her bulging middle. After three years of marriage to Xerxes and two pregnancies lost, she had feared she would never bear a child. Even now she feared. What if the child was stillborn? What if she died in childbirth?

She moved through a walkway of flowering almond trees, her maids following closely behind. What she wouldn't give to talk to another woman, but she cared nothing for Xerxes' concubines.

She crossed her arms. Surely the child would be a boy. Xerxes' heir. Perhaps that would keep her husband from wandering to the beds of other women, though she knew him too well to think him capable of being faithful to her alone.

Still, her child would be his first. Even when he married Amestris, a spoiled child of royal blood promised to Xerxes once he took his father's throne, no one would be able to take her child's place as firstborn of the king. Vashti felt her jaw tighten with every thought of Amestris and the insistence of Xerxes' mother, Atossa, that this was best for all. After all, she'd reminded Vashti often enough, "You are not fully Persian, my dear." Never mind that she was the granddaughter of Babylonian kings.

She shook her head. Thinking of Amestris did nothing but cause her worry, and she needed peace and rest lest she disturb the babe. Still she paced, restless. She walked toward the gate that separated the palace grounds from the residents of Susa. As she looked out at the city, she spotted a young girl skipping beside her mother, her thick, dark curls bouncing beneath a neatly tied beige linen headscarf. The girl turned her head and

looked toward the imposing palace. Vashti drew in a breath. Such large, inquisitive eyes! The child was already beautiful and not yet grown. Vashti smiled. How many suitors this child's father would have to fend off! At least her father would have choices. Something Vashti's father never did.

The sting of loss over what she had never known faded as she placed a protective hand on her swelling belly, and reminded herself that Xerxes was at least an attentive lover when he was in need of her. That he favored her was satisfaction in itself, though she often wondered what life would have been like if she had been born in Babylon, the city of her ancestors, instead of in the conquering land of Persia.

You should be grateful that one day you will be queen. You have privileges others do not.

She knew that. Didn't she remind herself often enough?

She looked again toward the gate and saw that the child stood near, peering at her through the slats.

"Hadassah, come!" the girl's mother called.

A sudden urge overcame Vashti, and she moved closer to the gate. She spoke to one of her maids. "Call the woman and the child to me."

The maid complied, and a moment later, the woman and her daughter were ushered into the gardens. The woman bowed low, but the child simply stared at her with those large, dark eyes.

"I hope I did not startle you," Vashti said, motioning for the woman to rise. "Your daughter. She is beautiful."

The woman nodded. "Thank you, Your Majesty." Clearly the woman recognized her, though Vashti was not dressed in her royal finery as the crown prince's wife.

Vashti met the woman's gaze. "You called her Hadassah. You are of Jewish blood."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The woman glanced about her as though the meeting made her uncomfortable.

"Do not fear. I hold nothing against your people. I simply wanted to see the child." And to speak to someone about birth and raising a child, though

others would do the job for her. “Was it difficult to birth her?” Vashti asked, despite her better sense to keep her thoughts to herself rather than make them subject to public gossip.

The woman looked at her feet, then lifted her head and offered Vashti a slight smile. “I can tell you what it was like to birth my sons, but I did not birth Hadassah. She is my husband’s cousin. She is orphaned, so we adopted her.”

Vashti released a breath. She could trust a woman who would reveal such knowledge. “How did she become orphaned?” Vashti longed to kneel to the child’s height, but in her condition she could only look down at the girl. She moved to a bench and sat, inviting the two to join her.

“Her father died of a fever before her birth, and her mother died shortly after childbirth. Hadassah has been with us these past six years.”

“And may I ask your name?” Vashti looked at the woman, then coaxed the child to sit beside her. Hadassah glanced at the woman for permission, then climbed onto the stone seat.

“Levia. My husband is Mordecai. He works as a scribe at the king’s gate.”

Vashti touched the child’s curls, suddenly hoping her child would be a girl despite the need to bear a son. “Then he is a good man,” she said without looking up. “It is unfortunate the child has lost so much.”

Hadassah looked into Vashti’s eyes and searched her face as though she was seeing beyond her ability to comprehend. She reached a small hand to touch Vashti’s face, then placed a hand on Vashti’s protruding middle. “You will have a baby soon,” Hadassah said. “You are pretty and have kind eyes.”

Vashti sat straighter. She took the child’s hand. “And you are young to say such things.”

“She has always been a bright child,” Leviasaid.

Vashti nodded. She had no reason to detain the woman or the child, yet a part of her longed to do just that. At last common sense won out, and she cupped Hadassah’s face and slowly rose. She looked at Levias. “Take good care of her. She is one who could come to great favor or great harm for her beauty.”

“Thank you, Majesty. I will be extra watchful for your warning.”

Vashti dismissed them, wondering what had caused her to say such a thing, yet feeling some strange sense that she had done well. She watched Levia, with Hadassah in hand, walk toward the gate, where Hadassah looked back at her and smiled. Warmth like the break of dawn after the darkness washed over Vashti, and she wondered if she had touched the face of an angel.