



LILAH

MAREK HALTER

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

397 BC: In Susa, the opulent capital of the Persian empire, where the Jews are living in exile, one extraordinary woman risks everything.

Her name is Lilah.

Lilah is due to marry a Persian warrior well known at the king's court. But her beloved brother Ezra is opposed to their union.

If she follows her heart, Lilah must renounce all ties with Ezra, but she knows that he has been chosen by God to lead the Jews to Jerusalem and to revive the laws of Moses: laws that promote justice and fairness.

Abandoning the promise of a golden future, Lilah stands by her brother, urging him to leave for Jerusalem. But Ezra is blinded by his faith and he orders that all foreign wives should be rejected.

At the risk of losing the one person she still has left in her life, Lilah speaks out against her brother's fanaticism, ensuring the survival of hundreds of women and children.

But her stand against extremism comes at great personal cost . . .

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About the Author

Also by Marek Halter

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Lilah

Marek Halter

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And God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone.
I will make him a suitable helper.'

Genesis 2: 18

'If he deserves it, she is a helper; if not, she is against him.'

Midrash Rabbah, on Genesis 2: 18

The fewer dogmas there are, the fewer quarrels;
and the fewer quarrels, the fewer calamities:
if that is not true, then I am wrong.

Religion is established to make us happy
in this world and the next.
What do we need to be happy in the next world?
To be just.

To be happy in this world,
in so far as the poverty of our nature allows it,
what do we need?
To be lenient.

Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, Chapter XXI

Prologue

Antiones is coming home.

My heart trembles.

My hand trembles. I hold the stylus tight between my fingers to make sure that the words the camphor ink is laying down on the papyrus are legible.

Antinoes, my beloved, is coming home!

Last night, a messenger in dusty tunic and sandals brought me a wax tablet. I immediately recognized my beloved's writing. A sleepless night followed. Tossing and turning, I pressed the tablet to my breast as if to stamp the words into my flesh.

Lilah, my sweet, my love, in three days and three nights I shall be with you again. Count the shadows of the sun. I am returning nobler and more victorious! And yet until I have you in my arms, until my lips are sated with the taste of your skin, I will have achieved nothing in two years of separation from you.

My heart is beating faster than it does before a battle. Soon, by the will of your God of heaven and of the mighty Ahura Mazda, god of the Persians, we shall at last be man and wife.

All night long, my heart has been drinking in Antinoes' words. If I close my eyes, they are still before me. If I try to forget them, I hear my beloved's voice whispering them in my ear.

That is my madness. And if I tremble, it is also with fear.

This should be the hour of peace. The darkness is receding. All is silent in the house. The handmaids have not yet risen, the fires are not yet lit. The light of dawn is as white as the milk that they say conceals poison at the banquets given by the King of Kings.

Man and wife, that was our promise. Antinoes and Lilah!

A children's promise – a lovers' promise!

I remember when we were like the fingers of one hand. Antinoes, Ezra and Lilah. To see one was to see the others. Two boys and a girl, always together. That one was the son of a lord who attended the meals of the Great King and the others the children of exiled Jews mattered little.

The roofs of the upper town of Susa echoed to our laughter. Whenever our mother called us, we heard a single cry: 'Antinoes, Ezra, Lilah!'

Then my mother's voice fell silent. My father's too.

A deadly disease spread through Susa, through the fields along the river Shaour as far as Babylon, striking rich and poor alike, not only in Persia, but also in Sion, Lydia and Media.

I remember the day when Ezra and I, drained of tears, stood before our mother and father, asleep in death.

We held hands with Antinoes – our grief was his too. We stood shoulder to shoulder. The three of us had become one, like some strange animal whose limbs had become inextricably entwined.

I remember the scorching summer's day when Antinoes led us into his magnificent home and presented us to his father. 'Father, this is my sister Lilah, and this is my brother Ezra. Whatever they eat, I eat. Whatever they dream, I dream. Father, let them come to our house as often as they wish. If you refuse, I will have no other roof over my head than that of their uncle Mordechai, who has taken them in now that they have neither father nor mother.'

Antinoes' father laughed until he could laugh no more. He called the handmaids and told them to bring fruit and cow's milk. When our stomachs were full, we hurled ourselves into the great pools of the house to cool ourselves down. Children are greedy for happiness.

Once more our days were carefree. 'My brother Antinoes!' Ezra would cry, and Antinoes would answer, 'My brother

Ezra!’ Together, they forged swords, bows and spears in Uncle Mordechai’s workshop.

Oh, Yahweh, why must we stop being children?

I remember the day when the games ceased, and the laughter faltered at the touch of a caress.

Antinoes, Ezra and Lilah. Two men and a woman. A new expression in their eyes, an unaccustomed silence on their lips. The beauty of nights on the roofs of Susa, of embraces, the joy of bodies catching fire like over-heated lamp oil.

The three of us becoming one: that was over now. Now it was Lilah and Antinoes, Lilah and Ezra, Antinoes and Ezra. Lovers and siblings, jealousy and rage.

I remember it well, it churns in my memory, like the dark waters of the Shaour in the rainy season.

The handmaids have risen now. The fires are lit. Soon there will be shouts and laughter. It may be a fine day, alive with hope and promise.

As I write, my face is reflected in the silver mirror above the writing desk. Antinoes says it is a beautiful face, that my youth is the scent of springtime. Antinoes loves and desires me, and loves the words that speak of his love and his desire.

But all I see in the mirror is a furrowed brow and anxious eyes. Is this the face – this sad, preoccupied beauty – that will welcome my beloved on his return?

O Yahweh, hear the plea of Lilah, daughter of Serayah and Achazya, I who have no other god than the God of my father.

Antinoes is not a child of Israel, but he is faithful to his promise. He wants me for himself, as a husband must want his bride.

Ezra will say to me, ‘Ah, so now you are abandoning me.’

Yahweh, is it not your will that our bodies should grow beyond childhood? That we should become men and women, each with his own breath, his own strength, the joy of his own senses? Is it not your will that the man’s caress

should delight the woman? Is it not your Law that a sister should find other eyes to love, another voice to hear and admire than her brother's? Is it not your teaching that a woman should choose her husband according to her heart, as did Sarah, Rachel and Zipporah, the wives of Abraham, Jacob and Moses?

Whichever I am faithful to, the other's pain will be just as strong.

Why must I cause pain when my brother and my lover have an equal place in my heart?

O Yahweh, God of heaven, God of my father, give me the strength to find the words to appease Ezra! Give him the strength to hear them.

Part One

Two Brothers and a Sister

The Roofs of Susa

IN HIS MESSAGE, Antinoes had not specified the place where they would meet. There was no need.

As she approached the top of the tower, Lilah's heart beat faster. She stopped, closed her eyes, put her hand on her stomach, and tried to catch her breath.

It was not because of the dark, narrow staircase. She had found her way again easily enough. She had climbed these brick steps so often that it was no problem to find her footing. No, what made her breathless was the knowledge that Antinoes might already be up there, on the terrace, waiting for her.

In a moment, she would see his face, his gentle eyes, hear his voice, touch his skin.

Had he changed? A little? A lot?

She had often heard women complain that when their husbands returned from the wars, they were like strangers. Even when their bodies were intact, they themselves had become colder, more aloof.

But she had nothing to fear. Antinoes' message was eloquent enough: the man who had written those words had not changed in any way.

She moved the gold and silver fibula that held her veil to her beautiful tunic and adjusted her belt, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Her bracelets jangled, and the sound echoed like bells against the blind wall of the tower.

Light-hearted and smiling, Lilah climbed the last flight of stairs. The door to the terrace stood open and the setting sun blinded her. She shaded her eyes with her hand.

No one was there.

She turned, looking round the little terrace.

No voice called her name.

No cry of impatience greeted her.

Disappointment pierced her heart.

Then she smiled with relief. She was behaving like a child.

Beneath the canopy that covered most of the terrace was a low table, surrounded by cushions and laden with fruit, cakes, and pitchers of water and beer. A large red ceramic vase held an enormous bunch of pale roses and lilac from the East, her favourite flowers.

Her disappointment faded away. No, Antinoes had not forgotten anything. Wars and battles had not changed him . . .

On their first night of love, he had covered their bed with rose petals from his father's garden. The summer heat had been stifling, but Antinoes had shivered with desire.

That evening, that first night, seemed to Lilah both very close and very distant. So much had happened since . . .

Slowly eating grapes, translucent in the twilight, Lilah rested her elbows on the parapet. At this hour, when night was approaching like a caress, there was nothing more splendid than the view from this terrace.

A hundred cubits above the river Shaour rose the immense cliff walls of the Citadel. The royal courtyard, the Apadana, was lined with marble columns, carved in Egypt and transported by thousands of men and mules, which gleamed like bronze flames in the sun, and themselves were surrounded by marble terraces even more vast than the place. Giant sculptures of bulls, lions and winged monsters guarded the Apadana, which was reached by flights of steps so broad and so high that they could have held the entire population of the city. Few, though, were entitled to climb them.

At the foot of the walls, enclosing the Citadel like a casket, were the palaces of the royal city, with their many gardens.

In a last flash of brilliance, the rays of the setting sun, reflected in the lazy meandering of the Shaour, lit the gardens, then faded amid the dense cedars and eucalypts.

The royal city was encircled by a brick wall, pierced with small square windows and flanked by tall, crenellated towers, coloured red, orange and blue, which separated it from the busy streets of the upper town. These streets, squeezed between flat-roofed whitewashed houses, ran as straight as if they had been cut with a double-edged sword. They stretched far to the east, north and south: dark, crowded trenches, which Lilah could barely make out from here. She could still hear the hum of activity, though, and imagined a mass of people bustling about as the awnings on the stalls were lowered.

Antinoes' house and garden occupied a rectangular strip in the patricians' quarter, close to the royal palace. The garden was old and luxuriant. The elegant palms and cypresses that lined the path from the outer wall to the house were as high as the tower.

There was a sudden sound and Lilah froze. The shadows were already lengthening in the twilight. She looked at the door leading to the staircase.

All she had heard was a slight rustling. But she knew he was there.

'Antinoes?' she called.

A face emerged from the shadows, a face she had so often evoked in her daydreams: the broad, aquiline nose, the finely drawn nostrils, the well-defined lips, the arched eyebrows, the narrowed lids, the look in the eyes that made her tremble.

He spoke her name, very softly: 'Lilah.'

He wore the dress of a Persian warrior: a short, close-fitting, long-sleeved tunic, purple with large fawn circles, and equally close-fitting ankle-length trousers. The straps of his sandals were tied high up his calves. His belt was as wide as a hand, its gold buckle adorned with a lion's head.

Three chains, of silver, gold and bronze, linked it to the bull's-head brooch on his right shoulder. A felt ribbon embroidered with gold thread held his oiled and scented hair in place. A dazzling smile gleamed within his finely plaited beard.

He repeated her name, laughing now, almost shouting. 'Lilah! Lilah!'

Lilah began to laugh, too. He held out his hands to her, palms upraised. She moved forward slowly, a touch stiffly, and placed her palms on his. Antinoes' hands were hot. They closed over hers, and the mere touch was like an embrace. Antinoes' eyes sparkled in the setting sun.

'You're here,' she murmured, hardly aware that she had spoken.

He raised their entwined hands to his lips. He was still laughing, silently, as if he were out of breath. A caressing laugh, a laugh of pure joy, which enveloped them and carried them away.

They let go of each other's hands, the better to embrace. The laughter was swept away by their kisses. The kisses were swept away by their impatience.

For a long moment, the terrace around them seemed to contain the whole world. Susa had vanished. Time and troubles had evaporated. Only the deep, translucent sky of the dying twilight remained.

They undressed with all the clumsiness of long-separated lovers. Time, memory, impatience and fear faded away in their turn.

Once again, they were Antinoes and Lilah.

The silence of the star-studded night lay heavy on the city when, both out of breath, they untangled their limbs.

Here and there, torches glowed in the courtyards of the great houses. Naphtha flames, held in wide dishes, danced on the walls of the Citadel, as they did every night, forming a royal diadem that hung in the darkness.

Antinoes freed himself from Lilah's arms and stood up. He groped for a little applewood chest, which contained a flint and a wick. A moment later, a torch crackled into flame.

Now Lilah saw clearly the body she had held in the darkness. Antinoes' waist was slimmer, and there were two dimples low on his back above his buttocks. During the war against the Greeks, when the King of Kings' brother had kept him far from her, he had grown harder.

He turned as he slotted the torch between the bricks of the parapet, not far from the table still piled high with food, and she discovered the scar. 'Your thigh!'

Antinoes smiled with a touch of pride. 'A Lydian sword at Karkemish. It was only the seventh time I'd been in close combat, so I wasn't very experienced. He was on the ground. I should have been more careful.'

Lilah's fingers followed the twists and turns of the pale furrow in Antinoes' solid thigh.

He leaned down and seized her fingers, entwined them again with his own. 'It's nothing. It took only a moon for the wound to heal. Since then, I've only fought in a chariot. When you're in a chariot, the enemy doesn't aim at the legs, but at the heart or the head. As you see, I still have both of those.'

Lilah fell back, and stared up at the sky. 'How many times,' she murmured, 'when the night and the stars arrived, I thought about that. Even though you were beneath those same stars, you were far away, and I imagined you dying. Or you were seriously wounded and you wanted to see me, but I had no way of knowing. A spear went through you, and then the wax tablet informing me of your death went through me too.'

Antinoes laughed. 'It would never have happened. The Greeks and Cyrus the Younger's mercenaries learned to fear me.' He knelt, keeping a slight distance between them, and looked at Lilah in silence, serious now. 'I know every inch of your face,' he whispered, closing his eyes. 'That was what I

thought about. Your eyes, so black that I can see myself reflected in them even by daylight, your lashes, your long straight brows, as delicate as a wisp of smoke. Your high, stubborn forehead, like a young bull's, your cheeks that blush both when you're angry and when I kiss them. I know every line of your mouth – I've drawn them a hundred times in the sand. The upper lip is longer and fuller than the other. A mouth so sweet, so alive, that I can always tell what you're thinking.'

His eyes still closed, he reached out his hand, trembling slightly. With his fingers, he traced the curve of a breast, glided over her belly, and stroked her hair, which hung loose down to her hips.

He opened his eyes. 'In the last two years, I've seen many women,' he went on. 'The beauties of Cilicia or the northern Euphrates, the wives of the great warriors of Lydia . . . The more beautiful they were, the more they made me think of you; the more foolish or provocative, the more I dreamed of you. And whenever I came across one who could compare with you, I was angry at her for not being you.'

He caressed her gently, as if reinventing her body with his fingers, imprinting every curve, every inch of skin, on his palm.

'When I fought, you were with me. Arrows and swords could not touch me. The mere thought of your beauty protected me.'

Lilah gave a throaty laugh, leaned forward and embraced him, ready to kiss him again. She pressed her hard nipples against Antinoes' chest as if she wanted to be absorbed by him.

'I was never afraid when I fought,' he murmured, 'but every day, I was afraid you would forget me. Every day I dreamed you might forget Antinoes. The men of Susa, I told myself, would be mad not to see your beauty.'

'So, we both felt the same terror.' She bit the back of his neck, and he shivered.

‘Don’t laugh!’ he cried. ‘Now we’re together for ever.’

For a brief moment Lilah froze at his words. But Antinoes’ kisses wiped out the cold. Her belly was soon on fire again, as Antinoes’ member swelled against her thigh. She gripped his shoulders and pushed him down onto the cushions, her love’s warrior and her lover’s enchantress.

The moon was rising above the Zagros mountains when she whispered that it was time for her to return home.

‘Stay the night!’ Antinoes protested.

She smiled, and shook her head. ‘No, not tonight. We’re not yet man and wife, and I don’t want my aunt Sarah to find my bedchamber empty in the morning.’

‘Oh, come on! Your aunt Sarah knows perfectly well that you’re here, and she’s delighted.’

Lilah gave a little laugh and stroked her lover’s eyelids, tracing his eyebrows with the tip of her index finger. ‘Then I’m the one who wants to get back to my bedchamber by dawn, thinking about you, smelling your scent on my skin.’

‘You’ll smell it all the better if you remain here. Lilah, why must you go? We’ve only just been reunited.’

‘Because I’m your lover,’ Lilah whispered, kissing his brow. ‘Your lover, but not your wife.’

She started to move away, but Antinoes sat up and gripped her wrist. ‘When? When will you be my wife?’

She found it hard to meet his eyes. The darkness and the warm, flickering light of the torch made the shadows on his face seem harsher. She thought of how his face must look in battle.

‘I’ll go to see your uncle first thing tomorrow,’ Antinoes insisted. ‘We’ll name the day. As far as I’m concerned, everything is ready. I’ve made offerings to Ahura Mazda and left a tablet with your name on it for the royal eunuchs. That’s the law for high-ranking officers. As you know, the King and Queen may oppose a marriage . . . between a Persian officer and someone who is not of our race.’ He

broke off with a grimace and shook his head. 'Lilah, what is it? Don't you want to be my wife?'

'I want nothing else,' she said with a smile.

'Then why delay?'

Lilah gathered her hair to cover her breasts, and searched for her tunic among the cushions. Antinoes waited for a reply, but when none came he stood up abruptly and walked to the parapet, barely illumined by the light of the torch. 'I came back to be your husband,' he said quietly. 'I shan't leave Susa again until that house down there is your home.' He pointed up at the diadem of the Citadel, shining unperturbed in the night. 'There, in a few days, I shall wear a helmet with red and white plumes and a leather breastplate with the insignia of the heroes of Artaxerxes. But without you, without your love, even a Greek child could vanquish me.'

He spoke without looking at her. Lilah put on her tunic. As she was about to hook the sides together, Antinoes came to her and seized her arms. 'It's Ezra, isn't it? It's Ezra who's holding you back.'

'I have to talk to him.'

'Hasn't he changed? Does he still hate me?'

Lilah did not reply. She freed herself from his grip and fastened her tunic.

'Does he know I've come back?' Antinoes asked.

'No. I'm going tomorrow.'

'To the lower town?'

Lilah nodded.

Antinoes grunted, and moved away from her. 'What a fool!'

'No, Antinoes, he's no fool. He does what he thinks is right. He studies and learns, and that's important.'

An ironic look on his face, Antinoes was about to reply, but Lilah raised her hand. 'Don't mock, that would be unfair. Soon after you left, an old man came to see him in the lower town. His name is Baruch ben Neriah. He used to live in

Babylon. That's where he found out that our family possesses the scroll of the laws given by Yahweh to Moses. He's a gentle old man, and very learned. All his life he's studied from copied and incomplete papyri. He invited Ezra to join him in his studies. Since then, both of them have been immersed in the texts. Ezra is becoming a sage, Antinoes, a sage of our people, like those who led the children of Israel before the exile.'

'That's fine. Let him study! Let him become a sage! What do I care, provided he leaves you free to marry me?'

'Antinoes! You used to love Ezra as much as I did.'

'That was a long time ago.'

'Not too long ago to remember. You know as well as I do that Ezra is not cut out for everyday life. One day he will be a great man—'

'No. To be a great man, he'd have to stop being jealous. Jealousy lessens him, just as hatred weakens a warrior before a battle.'

Lilah fell silent, and tried to smile. She went up to him, stroked his naked torso, put her head on his shoulder, and held him tenderly. 'My one desire, my one joy, is to be the wife of Antinoes. Be patient a little longer.'

Antinoes buried his face in Lilah's hair. 'No! I've been patient long enough. I want you with me for the rest of our lives. I came back so that we could be together. And we will be. If Ezra can't accept that, we'll become man and wife in spite of him. All we need is your uncle Mordechai's approval.'

Lilah took away her arms. 'Antinoes . . .'

But Antinoes was not listening. He clasped her again to his naked body, indifferent to the growing coolness of the night. 'And if we can't be man and wife,' he went on, 'we'll be lovers for ever. If we have to leave Susa, we'll leave Susa, and I'll relinquish my chariot captain's breastplate and baldric. We'll go to Lydia, to Sardis. The sea is wonderful there, and I'll become a Greek hero . . .'

Lilah took his face in her hands and kissed his mouth to silence him. Passion inflamed them once more. 'I shall have no other husband but you, my beloved,' she said. 'Give me time to convince Ezra. I don't want our joy to be his sorrow.'

Bad News

THE YOUNG SLAVE pulled on the reins, the mules champed at their bits, snorting, and the chariot halted in the shade of a medlar tree.

Lilah stepped down, and signalled to Axatria to help her.

The handmaid took the huge basket from between the benches, and arranged the leather straps so that her mistress could hoist it onto her shoulder. 'It's too heavy.' She frowned. 'It's not for you to carry such a load.'

'It'll be all right,' Lilah replied, resting the basket on her back. 'No need to worry.'

'Of course I worry! I'm ashamed, too. Your tunic will be rags by the time you get to Ezra's house. God in heaven, what do you look like?'

Axatria tried to smooth the fabric, creased already by the straps, and adjusted the half-moon brooch that held Lilah's transparent shawl on her hair.

'Your hair will be out of place by the time you get to your brother's house - and he loves to see you looking beautiful. And what would your aunt say if she could see you laden like a mule while your handmaid sits comfortably in the chariot?'

Lilah smiled. 'Ezra will be happy to see his sister even if she's a bit rumpled, and I won't tell Aunt Sarah, I promise.'

Axatria seemed neither amused nor appeased by this answer.

Giving a little shake to make sure that the straps rested against her hands, Lilah walked away from the chariot, along the street that cut through the last gardens in the upper town. She had not gone far when she tripped on the