

THE RESTORATION CHRONICLES • BOOK I

RETURN TO ME

LYNN
AUSTIN



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To my husband, Ken
and to my children:
Joshua, Vanessa, Benjamin, Maya, and Snir



*“Return to me,” declares the Lord Almighty,
“and I will return to you.”*

Z E C H A R I A H 1 : 3



OCTOBER 539 BC

A boom of thunder woke Daniel from a deep sleep. He lay in the darkness, disoriented, waiting for a flash of lightning to illuminate his room. The thunder rumbled again—but it wasn't thunder, it was pounding. Who would pound on his door in the middle of the night?

“Coming,” he called as the noise continued. “I’m coming.” He climbed from bed, his movements slow at age eighty-two, and wrapped his outer robe around his shoulders like a blanket. The stone floor felt cold beneath his bare feet as he groped his way in the dark. He opened the door to a blaze of blinding torchlight. “Yes? Who is it?” he asked, shielding his eyes.

“You’re needed at the palace, my lord.”

Daniel squinted at the bright light. Two men in blood-red tunics. The king’s servants. He wondered if he was still dreaming. On another night years ago, King Nebuchadnezzar had also sent servants to bring him to the palace in the dark of night. The king had suffered a nightmare and would have executed Daniel and all the other wise men if the Almighty One hadn’t shown Daniel the dream and its meaning. He had been a much younger man, back then. Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson summoned him now.

Daniel rubbed his eyes, struggling to shake off his sleepiness. “The palace? Why? What’s wrong?”

“King Belshazzar and the queen mother have called for you. They’re waiting at the royal palace, my lord.” The urgency in the servant’s tone convinced Daniel this was no dream.

“Very well. I’ll need a moment.”

“Please hurry, my lord.”

It was useless to ask why he was being summoned. The servants likely didn’t know the reason, and besides, a summons from the palace couldn’t be ignored. Daniel smoothed his sleep-rumpled hair, changed into his robes, and fastened his sandals as quickly as his age allowed. The king’s servants walked briskly as they led him through the maze of streets and courtyards and hallways to the palace. Daniel had grown into manhood here in Babylon. He had served three generations of pagan Babylonian kings. Nothing these monarchs did should have surprised him, but his stomach churned with dread just the same.

The journey ended at the palace banquet hall. When the towering doors swung open, Daniel saw King Belshazzar and hundreds of guests gathered for one of the young king’s lavish parties. The remains of the extravagant meal lay abandoned on all of the tables along with empty wine vessels and pitchers of strong drink. The party seemed to have halted in mid-motion as if frozen in time. Instead of drunken laughter and merriment, the guests spoke in hushed voices that rustled through the room like dead leaves. As Daniel entered, even the whispering stopped. The air stank of wine and sweat—and fear.

He glanced around as the servants urged him forward. The court musicians stood like statues, their instruments silent in their limp hands. He could tell by the guests’ bleary eyes and sprawling postures that many of them were drunk, yet their expressions were unusually somber. Everyone seemed shaken, as if the earth had quaked, halting the revelry in mid-stride. Daniel saw them watching as he walked forward between the tables, approaching the royal dais where King Belshazzar and

the queen mother awaited him. Gold and silver serving dishes glittered in the torchlight on the head table, and when Daniel recognized the designs on some of them he nearly lost his balance. These treasures had come from the temple, God's holy temple in Jerusalem. Like the Jewish people themselves, these sacred vessels had been torn from their rightful places to be demeaned and abused by pagan people who worshipped idols. The blasphemy of their use at the king's orgy shocked him. *"How long, O, Lord? Will you forget me forever? . . . How long will my enemy triumph over me?"*

Royal magi and enchanters in dark robes hovered around the king like a flock of crows, watching Daniel approach. Again, he remembered the night that King Nebuchadnezzar had called for all of his wise men and wondered if he was Belshazzar's last resort. Typically, these Babylonian rulers sought Daniel's advice only in a crisis. Otherwise, they preferred that he stay far away and not remind them of the Sovereign God of Israel and His laws.

Daniel halted in front of the king but didn't bow down. Belshazzar appeared ill, his face a sickly gray. His voice quavered when he spoke. "A-are you Daniel, one of the exiles my forefathers brought from Judah?"

"I am."

"I'm told that the spirit of the gods is in you." He glanced at the queen mother as if for confirmation. "They say that you have insight, intelligence, and outstanding wisdom."

Daniel didn't reply. Flattery from a man who displayed no common sense or self-control, much less reverence for God, meant nothing to him.

"I want you to look at this." The king pointed to the wall behind him. Daniel took another step closer and saw markings on it, as if streaks of light shone down on the wall from a source high above. But there was no window, no source of light. Daniel

stepped onto the dais and skirted around the king's banquet table as he tried to discern what the markings were. They appeared to be letters and words, writing of some sort.

"I summoned my wise men and enchanters," Belshazzar said, gesturing to the men. "I asked them to read this writing and tell me what it meant, but they couldn't do it."

Daniel silently prayed for wisdom as he examined the wall up close, running his fingers over the rough plaster. "Where did these markings come from, Your Majesty? Who wrote them?"

When the king didn't reply, Daniel turned around to ask him again and saw terror in Belshazzar's eyes. He couldn't seem to speak. One of the men seated beside him said, "The fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall."

Belshazzar nodded, swallowing, and finally found his voice. "It-it's true. I sat right here and watched as a . . . a hand . . . out of nowhere . . . wrote the words that you see."

Had it been a hallucination, the result of too much wine? A lifetime of strong drink led men to delirium. Daniel had heard of men who preferred death to the horrid beasts of their drunken imaginations. But everyone in the banquet hall stared at the writing, too. It couldn't be a mass hallucination. Besides, Daniel saw the writing, as well.

He turned to study the wall, reading the words out loud: "*Mene, mene, tekel, parsin.*" They were three weights, three units of money. Again, he silently asked the Almighty One to show him the meaning.

"Now, I have heard," the king began, his voice shrill with fright. He cleared his throat to start again. "I've heard that you're able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me . . . tell us . . . what it means, you'll be clothed in purple and . . . and have a gold chain placed around your neck . . . and I'll make you the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

The third highest ruler. An honor indeed. Babylon's reigning monarch, King Nabonidas, had gone away for the winter months, leaving his son Belshazzar in charge as second-in-command. But Daniel wanted no part in this corrupt kingdom. He simply wanted to return home to his bed.

It was becoming very clear to him what the writing on the wall meant. He had spent more than sixty-five years as a captive in this nation and had served on the king's advisory council most of that time. But for the past few years, he had watched the Babylonian empire slowly disintegrate before his eyes. King Nebuchadnezzar's dream had foretold that this day would come and Babylon would fall. The statue's golden head would be replaced by a chest and arms of silver. Daniel's own dream of four great beasts had confirmed that the Babylonian kingdom would not last. But the demise had come much sooner than Daniel had imagined. He wondered what Babylon's downfall would mean for him and his fellow Jews, languishing in exile.

"Well? Can you tell us what the writing means?" the king asked.

"You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else—"

"But I demand to know the meaning of the writing! How dare you refuse me?"

"Let me finish," Daniel said, holding up his hand. "While I don't want or need your rewards, nevertheless I will read the writing and tell you what it means." He waited until the murmuring stopped and a hush fell over the room. He would speak for God, declaring the truth, and whatever happened after that . . . his life was in God's hands, as it always had been.

"O king, the Most High God gave your forefather Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and splendor. All nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those who the king wanted to put to death, he put to death. Those

he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote he promoted. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, God deposed him from his royal throne and stripped him of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal. He ate grass like cattle and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men.”

Belshazzar gestured impatiently. “I’ve heard my grandfather’s story. Get on with it. I want to know about the writing.”

Daniel drew a breath, exhaling slowly to steady himself as he prepared to confront the king with God’s judgment. “But you his heir, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you admit that you knew about Nebuchadnezzar. Instead, you’ve set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. These are God’s holy vessels,” he said, gesturing to the banquet table. “They were consecrated for use in His temple, yet you brought them here so that you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines, could drink wine from them. You praise gods of silver and gold, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you don’t honor the God who holds your life in His hand. Therefore, God has sent the hand that wrote that inscription.”

The young king stared at him, waiting. Daniel could see that even after this dramatic reminder, Belshazzar’s heart overflowed with fear, not repentance.

“This is what these words mean,” Daniel said, his voice gathering strength. “*Mene*: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.”

Murmurs chased around the room. The drunken king lowered his head to his chest for just a moment, then lifted his chin again, defiant.

“*Tekel*,” Daniel continued. “You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.” The king’s wise men seemed appalled

that Daniel would speak so bluntly. He didn't care. "*Peres*: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

Loud voices reverberated all over the room. Nervous laughter. Outrage. Daniel turned away from the writing, preparing to leave.

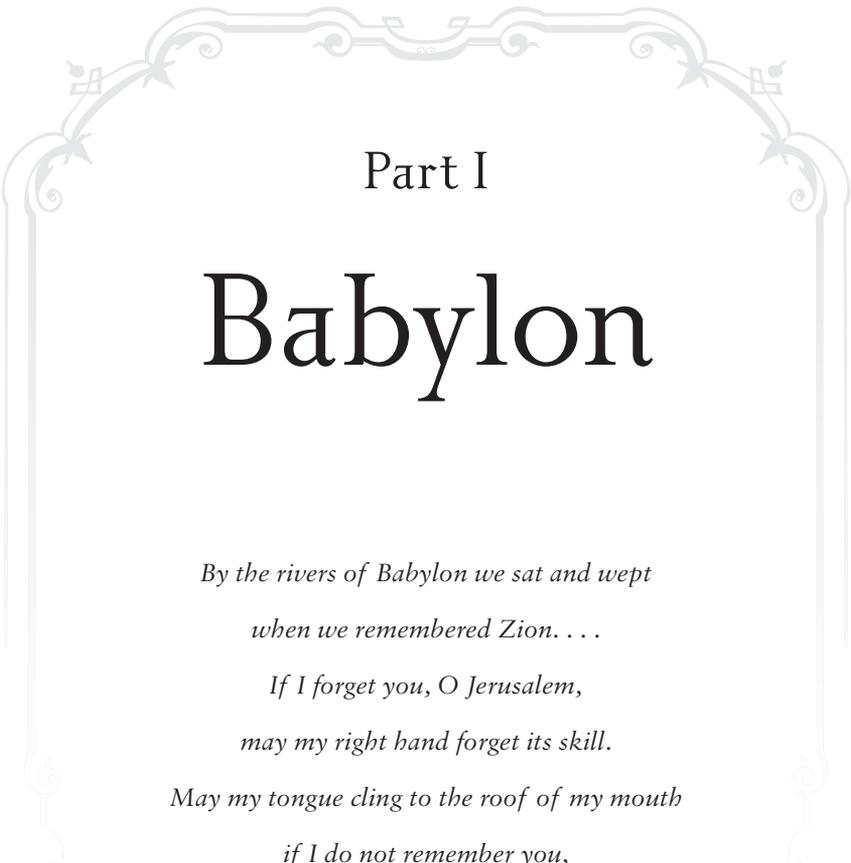
"Wait!" the king commanded.

Daniel halted. What now? He tried to draw a deep breath but couldn't.

"Clothe him in purple. Place my gold chain around his neck. Tomorrow Daniel shall sit at my right hand, the third highest ruler."

Daniel's shoulders sagged in relief. He shook his head in disgust. He didn't want the honor, but Belshazzar seemed determined to follow through on his promise. It took Daniel thirty minutes to free himself from the ongoing drama and return to his bedroom. The sun still hadn't risen, but Daniel thought he heard sounds of turmoil in the city streets below the palace. Had word of the startling events at the banquet hall spread so quickly?

Daniel didn't concern himself with such things. God had made it clear tonight that the kingdom of Babylon was finished, Belshazzar and his father, Nabonidas, were doomed. What their downfall would mean for Daniel's own life or for his people, he couldn't guess. Ever since the Babylonians had taken him captive in Jerusalem as a young man, his life had been in God's hands—the same hand that had written on the wall tonight. And so it would always be. No matter what came next, Daniel rested safely in the grip of his Sovereign God.

A decorative arch frame with ornate scrollwork and floral motifs, framing the title and text.

Part I

Babylon

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion. . . .*

*If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.*

May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth

if I do not remember you,

if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

PSALM 137:1, 5–6





CHAPTER
1



Iddo awoke from the dream, gasping. The nightmare had nearly devoured him. He heard his wife's soothing voice, felt her hand resting on his chest as if trying to calm his pounding heart. "Shh . . . It was just a dream, Iddo. Just a dream . . ."

But it wasn't a dream, at least not the kind that other people had when they slept, seeing visions that made no sense in the light of day. In Iddo's dreams he relived memories, powerful memories, as real as on the day he'd lived them as a child. The images and sounds and horrors had imprinted on his soul the way a stylus presses into soft clay. The kiln of suffering had hardened them, and they could never be erased.

He drew a shaky breath, wiping his hand across his face, scrubbing tears from his eyes. "I'm sorry, Dinah," he whispered. "I'm sorry . . ."

"Are you all right?" she asked. "I'll make you something warm to drink."

He rested his hand on her arm, stopping her. "No, stay in bed. Why should we both be awake?" Iddo rose from their mat, groping in the dark for his robe. He wouldn't be able to sleep now.

During the daytime he could control the images that circled the edges of his consciousness like jackals by looking up at the

cloud-swept sky or studying the perfection of his infant grandson's tiny fingers. But at night, when darkness hid the Creator's beauty, the images and sounds closed in on Iddo, scratching and clawing, refusing to be silenced. Once they pounced they would strip him of everything he had accomplished, ripping at the man he now was, reducing him to the ten-year-old child he had been when Jerusalem fell—helpless, terrified, naked, and shivering before his enemies. Forty-seven years had passed since he'd lived the real nightmare, and Iddo had spent those years here in Babylon. He had a wife, children, grandchildren—all born here. Yet the atrocities he'd seen in Jerusalem remained as vivid as the world he saw every morning. The nightmare never faded, never blurred.

He waited for his heart to slow, his breathing to ease, then shuffled to the door, opening and closing it soundlessly so he wouldn't disturb his household. Outside in his dark courtyard, he traced the familiar silhouette of the mud brick houses in his neighborhood, the spiky date palms growing along the nearby canal. He lifted his chin to watch stars disappear, then reappear behind the playful night clouds. "When I consider your heavens," he whispered, "the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?" The psalms of King David were another weapon he used to keep the jackals of fear away.

The terror that had destroyed Jerusalem was the Almighty One's punishment. All of the prophets had said so. God no longer dwelled with His people because they'd been unfaithful to Him. His temple was destroyed, His people scattered among the nations, living among pagan gods. Iddo's only hope, his family's only hope, lay in studying God's Law, filling his heart and mind with the Torah, obeying every word of it every day of his life. If he sought the God of his fathers with all his strength, maybe the Holy One would show mercy and return to His people again.

Iddo shivered in the cool fall air, waiting for the nighttime peace to still his soul. But instead of the deep silence that he craved, he heard remnants of sounds from his nightmare: a low rumble like hundreds of marching feet, faraway screams and cries—or were they only the cries of birds? Iddo had spent many nights awake, but the sounds from his dreams had never lingered this way. Was he imagining things? He climbed the outdoor steps to his flat rooftop and looked out at the city. Lights danced in the distance like summer lightning—only it couldn't be lightning. The star-filled sky stretched from horizon to horizon in the flat landscape, the night clouds mere wisps.

A sudden movement in the street below caught his attention, and he squinted down at the shadows. His neighbor, Mattaniah, stood with his hands on his hips gazing toward the center of Babylon. Beside him stood another neighbor, Joel, who was a descendant of temple priests like Iddo. Could they hear the sounds, too?

Iddo hurried downstairs and out through the courtyard gate to the street. The two men turned at the sound of Iddo's footsteps. "Did the noise wake you, too?" Mattaniah asked.

"What is it? What's going on?"

"We don't know," Joel said. "The Babylonians are holding a festival of some sort for one of their pagan gods tonight, but my son Reuben thought it sounded more like soldiers marching."

"Yes . . . I thought so, too," Iddo said.

"We were wondering if the armies of the Medes and Persians had attacked the city," Mattaniah said.

Joel shook his head. "They'll never succeed. Babylon's gates are heavily fortified and the city walls are twenty feet thick. They're impregnable!" But Iddo remembered Jerusalem's topped walls and shuddered. "My son went to have a look," Joel continued. "We're waiting for him to come back."

Iddo stood with his neighbors, listening to the distant sounds,

talking quietly as they waited for Reuben to return. By the time the young man finally jogged home, flushed and breathless, an arc of pink light brightened the eastern horizon. “You won’t believe it, Abba! I walked all the way to the plaza by the Ishtar Gate, and the streets are filled with soldiers all around the southern palace. Thousands of them!”

“Babylonian soldiers?” Iddo asked.

“No, sir. They weren’t like any Babylonian soldiers I’ve ever seen.”

“Then it is an invasion!” Mattaniah said.

“It can’t be. How would the enemy get past our walls?” Joel asked.

“I think I know how,” Reuben said. “I followed the river on the way home and the water was only this deep . . .” He gestured to the middle of his thigh. “The soldiers could have waded into the city beneath the walls, using the riverbed for a highway—like that story in the Torah when the waters parted for our people, remember?”

An invasion. Iddo turned without a word and hurried back to his walled courtyard, closing the wooden gate behind him, leaning against it. He must be dreaming. He hadn’t awakened from his nightmare after all. Any moment now Dinah would shake him, and he would wake up. He closed his eyes as he slowly drew a breath, then opened them again. He was still in his courtyard, still aware of the distant rumble of marching feet.

If this wasn’t a dream, then for the second time in Iddo’s life enemy soldiers had invaded the city where he lived. His nightmare had become a reality once again. He took a few stumbling steps toward the house, stopped, and turned in a useless circle, like an animal trapped in a pit. He had to flee, had to escape with his wife, his family. Maybe it wasn’t too late. Maybe they could wade out of the city and hide in the marshes beyond the walls. Maybe the Almighty One had parted the waters just for

them, so they could escape. He took two steps forward and stopped again.

The Almighty One.

Would He help them? Iddo needed to pray, to ask for His wisdom and protection before fleeing. He climbed the stairs to the rooftop—barely able to manage them on trembling legs—and fell prostrate, facing west toward Jerusalem. “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe—” He stopped. His father and grandfather had lain prostrate in the temple courtyard in Jerusalem with all the other priests, praying day and night for help and protection and salvation. Their prayers had gone unanswered.

“Blessed art thou, O Lord our God . . .” Iddo began again. Maybe something would be different this time, and the Almighty would hear His people’s pleas for mercy. Iddo and the others had obeyed everything the prophets said: “*Marry and have sons and daughters. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.*” Iddo had done that. He and the other priests had not only tried to obey every letter of the Law, but they had constructed a fence of protective laws around the Torah to make sure no one even came close to breaking one of God’s commandments. They honored the Sabbath day as best they could, even when their captors denied them a day of rest. They gathered for prayer three times a day as the three Patriarchs had done, and—

Iddo lifted his head. Why was he praying all alone? The other men must be awake by now. He would go to morning prayers, gather with the others, and decide together what to do. His household was stirring when he went downstairs to fetch his prayer shawl and phylacteries. Dinah knelt in front of the hearth with a fistful of straw, blowing on the coals to start the fire. His daughter, Rachel—lovely, vulnerable Rachel—hummed as she folded the bedding. Iddo heard murmuring in the other rooms,

as well, the rooms he had added onto his house for his sons Berekiah and Hoshea and their wives and families. His newest grandson was crying to be fed, and his helpless wail sent shivers through Iddo as he remembered the children in Jerusalem who had been too hungry to cry. Would it be the same in this invasion? The suffering, the starvation?

“I’m going to morning prayers,” he told Dinah.

She looked up at him in surprise. “So early? You never go this early.”

“I need to talk with the others. Something has happened, and I’m not sure—”

“What do you mean? What happened?” She rose to her feet, studying him with dark, worried eyes. Her long hair still hung loose and uncovered, and Iddo resisted the urge to gather the soft weight of her curls in his hands. Not a single strand of silver marred Dinah’s dark hair, while his own hair and beard had turned completely white ten years ago, when he was still in his forties. “Are you all right, Iddo?” she asked.

He looked away. “Joel’s son came home this morning with . . . with some news. I need to talk with the others to understand what it means.”

“What news?”

He couldn’t say it out loud, couldn’t speak of an enemy invasion. “Just make sure you and the other women stay here. The children, too. Don’t let anyone leave our courtyard until I come back. Don’t go to the marketplace or the well or the ovens—”

“Iddo, you’re scaring me!”

“Don’t worry,” he told her. Useless words. If what Reuben said was true, they had every reason to worry. He turned to go, hesitating in the doorway for just a moment, wondering if he should ask his sons to come with him. But no, Berekiah and Hoshea rarely went to morning prayers—why should today be any different? “I won’t be long,” he told Dinah. He had no idea if it was true.

The *Beit Knesset*, or house of assembly, was nearly full when Iddo arrived. It didn't take long to learn that the rumor was true: Foreign soldiers had invaded Babylon. One of Israel's elders—a member of The Great Assembly—had traveled all the way from the other side of the city with the news. “The Persians and Medes diverted the water of the Euphrates into a canal north of the city,” he told them. “Their armies waited south of the city until the water was shallow enough to wade through and then entered beneath the walls in the middle of night.”

The room went silent for the space of a heartbeat, two heartbeats. “How could this happen?” someone finally asked. “How could Babylon's king and his army be taken by surprise? Didn't they post watchmen? Didn't they see?”

“The Almighty One's hand is in this,” the elder replied. “He promised that one day the Babylonian empire would fall, and last night it happened. The Babylonians were holding a festival to their idols and didn't even realize that the Medes and Persians were inside their walls until it was too late. King Belshazzar is dead. Thousands of his noblemen have been executed. Darius the Mede has taken over his kingdom.”

Iddo sank onto one of the benches that lined the room's perimeter as everyone began talking at once, flooding the room with panicked questions.

“Will these Medes and Persians slaughter and pillage like the Babylonians did?”

“How can we protect our families?”

“Should we flee the city?”

“How can this be happening to us a second time?”

They were the same questions that Iddo lacked the strength to ask. The elder held up his hands for silence. “Listen . . . please . . . We're waiting to hear what Daniel the Righteous One and Judah's princes have to say, but in the meantime you should all return home. The Babylonians are staying inside their

houses today, and so should we. If the city is still quiet by the time of evening prayers, we'll gather here once again. Maybe we'll have more news by then."

As Iddo prepared to leave, a single question filled his thoughts: How could he protect his family? The truth was, he couldn't. While younger men hurried home to barricade their doors, preparing to protect the people they loved with kitchen knives and clubs, men like Iddo who remembered Jerusalem knew they couldn't save themselves.

Dinah had the morning meal ready when he returned. His sons and daughters-in-law and grandchildren had gathered in the large, central room of their house. "What's going on, Abba?" Berekiah asked. "Mama said you looked worried—and that you told us all to stay inside."

The room grew quiet as Iddo explained what little he knew about the invasion. Even his young grandchildren grew very still. "What will this mean for us?" his son Hoshea asked when Iddo finished.

"No one knows. But one of the elders from the Great Assembly promised to return with more news when we gather for evening prayers. We'll find out then. In the meantime, we must all stay inside like the Babylonians are doing." He looked at Dinah, and the fear he saw in her eyes made him reach for her hand. He was her protector, the patriarch of their family, and it grieved him to know that he couldn't keep her from harm.

"Can't we go to the well for water?" his daughter asked.

"No, Rachel. Nor to the market or the ovens."

"But—what will we do?"

"We'll stay here at home. Like we do on the Sabbath."

"But what if we run out of water?"

"We can manage until sundown, Rachel." His words came out sharper than he intended, but her question brought back memories of the long siege of Jerusalem, when the city had run

out of food as well as water. He remembered his mouth being as dry as sand and the unending ache in his stomach. He remembered the vermin he had eaten to try to fill it, the brackish water that hadn't quenched his thirst. "We'll spend the day praying for mercy," he said, looking at his sons. "I'll be up on the roof if you'd like to join me there." He laid down his uneaten bread and went outside to climb the stairs.

Iddo's neighborhood and the distant city looked eerily still from the rooftop. The low rumbling of marching footsteps had finally ceased, and as he knelt on the sun-warmed tiles, he couldn't decide if the silence was a good sign or a bad one. On an ordinary day, he and his sons would have begun work by now, Iddo laboring as a scribe, tallying business accounts for the Babylonians, handling their correspondence, keeping track of their shipments and trading ventures spread throughout the empire. His two sons had formed a trading partnership of their own that had made steady profits—until now. Who knew what would happen now? But Iddo and his sons, like their forefathers, were born to be priests of the one true God. If they lived in Jerusalem instead of in exile, they would be offering sacrifices at His temple, just as Iddo's father and grandfather had done, all the way back to Israel's first priest, Aaron. Iddo remembered Jerusalem's temple, remembered watching the sacrifices as a boy, inhaling the aroma of roasting meat, listening to the Levite choirs and the trumpets. Now the holy temple was gone.

But Iddo was still a priest. As soon as he'd reached adulthood here in Babylon, he had begun his apprenticeship with the older priests who had been exiled with him, learning the regulations, trusting that one day the temple would be rebuilt as the prophet Ezekiel had promised. "It's a waste of time, Abba," both of his sons had said when they'd reached the age of apprenticeship. "Why learn dead rituals for a dead religion?" Were they right? Were the faith of their father Abraham and the laws given to

Moses mere relics of the past, as dead as the corpses that had filled Jerusalem's streets?

The city of Babylon remained quiet the entire day. None of Iddo's fears of death and destruction had materialized—yet. “Come with me to the house of assembly to pray,” he told his sons that evening. “I want you beside me to hear whatever news there might be. Then we can decide together what to do.”

“Shouldn't we wait a few more days until the dust has settled before going out?” Berekiah asked. “We don't know what our new captors will be like and—”

“No. You should set an example of faith for your children.” Iddo gestured to Berekiah's oldest boy, Zechariah, who was nearly twelve years old and Iddo's favorite. He had fetched his father's prayer shawl for him and stood with it in his hands, watching them, listening. “We need to pray. Don't you realize how serious our situation is?” Iddo asked.

“Of course I do. And I am thinking of my children. What if our new Persian overlords misinterpret our gathering and think we're planning a rebellion?”

“I'm willing to take that chance. Come on, it's time to go.”

“May I come, too?” Zechariah asked. Before Iddo could reply, Dinah gripped their grandson from behind and pulled him close.

“No, Zaki. Stay here. We don't know if it's safe yet.”

The knowledge that he couldn't make his family feel safe fanned Iddo's anger into flames. He would fight this enemy of fear, replacing it with faith. The Holy One was with them, not their enemies. He reached for Zechariah's hand. “Yes, you may come with us. The Almighty One will keep us safe.” He hoped it was true.

No one spoke as Iddo and his sons and grandson walked to the house of assembly. Hundreds of men had already jammed into the room and a tremor of excitement rippled through the gathering. “What's going on?” he asked one of his fellow priests. “What did I miss?”

“It’s *Rebbe* Daniel,” the priest whispered. “He’s alive! He survived the invasion and came all the way from the king’s palace to pray with us.”

Iddo’s uneasiness melted in relief. *Rebbe* Daniel the Righteous One was highly revered in Babylon, not only among the Jewish community, but among the Babylonians and their leaders, as well. If the Medes and Persians had let him live, then there was hope for Iddo and his fellow Jews. Iddo had only seen this legendary man twice before, and he was overjoyed to see him now, glad that his sons and grandson would hear what he had to say. The room fell quiet as the elderly man stepped onto the *bimah* to speak.

“We have nothing to fear from our new rulers,” Daniel said. “Darius the Mede has asked me to serve him as I served the Babylonians.”

“We’re safe, then?” someone asked.

“Yes. We’re all safe.”

Iddo closed his eyes as the news sent murmurs of relief rippling through the hall.

“There’s more,” Daniel continued. “I have been praying and studying the prophets’ words for some time now, and the Holy One has shown me that the years of our captivity are nearing an end. He spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, saying that we would serve the king of Babylon for seventy years, and when those seventy years were fulfilled, He would punish the Babylonians. This invasion by the Medes and Persians is the beginning of that punishment. More than three thousand of our captors have been executed, including the king and his noblemen. Our exile is coming to an end. We will soon return home to Jerusalem.”

A shout went up from the gathered men. Iddo laid his hand on Zechariah’s shoulder to steady himself. Home. To Jerusalem. He longed to shout praises along with the other men, but the

news had stolen his breath. He was afraid to believe it, afraid to put his faith in something as impossible as returning to Jerusalem. And even if it did turn out to be true, could he bear to return to the ghost-filled ruins he had left behind as a child?

“Our captivity began when King Nebuchadnezzar brought King Jehoiakim here to Babylon in bronze shackles,” Daniel continued. “I was part of that first group of exiles sixty-seven years ago. That means our seventy years of captivity are nearly over. We need to pray today and every day that the Holy One will now have mercy on us and restore us to the land He promised our father Abraham. That’s what I’ve come here to do with all of you tonight—to pray.”

“Did our new captors say that we could return?” someone asked.

“Not yet—but God promised that we would. We’ve endured punishment for a time, but the Holy One promised to take us back, to restore our fellowship with Him, to continue His plan to redeem all mankind through our people.”

As Rebbe Daniel prepared to pray, Iddo turned with the other men to face the *Aron Ha Kodesh*, where the sacred Torah scrolls were kept. Daniel prayed aloud, lifting his hands to heaven, and the faith and conviction in the man’s voice sent shivers through Iddo.

“O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with all who love Him and obey His commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled. All this disaster has come upon us, just as it was written in the Law of Moses. But now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand, hear our prayers and in keeping with your mercy, forgive us! Look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. We don’t make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! For your sake, O my God, don’t delay because your city and your people bear your name.”

The prayers went late into the evening, and by the time they ended, Iddo's legs could barely carry him home. But his worry had vanished as if lifted from his shoulders to ascend with his prayers. "See, Zechariah? The worst is over now," he said as they entered the gate to their courtyard. "But we must do as Rebbe Daniel told us and continue to pray. The Almighty has promised that if His people humble themselves and pray, then He will forgive our sin and heal our land. We will return to Jerusalem and—"

Berekiah took Iddo's arm, stopping him before he entered the house. "Abba. You don't really believe that we'll return to Jerusalem, do you?" he asked quietly.

"Of course I do! You heard what Rebbe Daniel said. The Almighty One has promised through His prophets that we will." Iddo looked down at his young grandson, eager to reassure him, but the boy's father nudged him toward the door.

"Go inside, Zechariah. Your grandfather and I will be there in a moment." Hoshea also waited behind, and Iddo saw his sons exchange worried looks.

"Listen, Abba. It's crazy to believe that we'll be allowed to return," Hoshea said. "Slaves never go free, and exiles never return to their native lands."

"The slaves went free under Moses," Iddo said. "It must have seemed just as impossible back then, too."

"And who will dare approach this new 'pharaoh' and demand that our captors set us free?" Berekiah asked.

"Maybe the Almighty One will send Rebbe Daniel to—"

"To do what? Can he perform miracles like Moses did? Will God send plagues and darkness to convince this army of conquerors to free us? You don't really believe all those tales, do you?"

Iddo couldn't reply. What had seemed so believable as he'd prayed in the house of assembly seemed absurd as he faced his sons' doubts.

“Abba, you of all people should know that prayer isn’t a magic formula. The Holy One doesn’t do our bidding. If He did, we would still be living in Jerusalem and offering sacrifices at the temple, not living here in Babylon.”

“But the Holy One must bring us home,” Iddo said. “If our people remain here, our faith will become extinct. I see it happening little by little every day. How can we survive if we stay here, surrounded by pagan people and their wicked practices? We’ll become just like them.”

“But our faith hasn’t been extinguished, Abba, it has endured—even here.”

“Then why don’t you practice it? You hardly ever come with me to pray or to study the Torah.”

“There’s a difference between ritual and belief,” Berekiah said. “Just because I don’t pray three times a day with the other men doesn’t mean I don’t believe.”

“But now that our leaders have asked us to come together and pray for our freedom, are you going to join us? Do you believe the Holy One’s promises?”

When Berekiah didn’t reply, Hoshea answered for both of them. “We think our leaders are wrong to raise everyone’s hopes when the truth is that we’ll never be allowed to return. It won’t happen.”

“Enough! I won’t listen to another word!” Iddo yanked his arm free and climbed the stairs to the roof alone, to pray.

He knew it was his fault that his sons didn’t believe. When they were boys, Iddo’s own faith had been too weak to support the weight of their doubts and questions. Now they were grown men, more concerned with the world in front of their eyes than with the unseen world of faith and prayer.

But Iddo would teach his grandson Zechariah to believe. He would do everything right from now on. Maybe then the Almighty One would hear their prayers and end His people’s exile.