

THE RESTORATION CHRONICLES • BOOK 3

ON THIS FOUNDATION

LYNN
AUSTIN



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



*So this is what the Sovereign LORD says:
“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who trusts will never be dismayed.”*

ISAIAH 28:16



THE CITADEL OF SUSIA, PERSIA
THE FOURTEENTH OF ADAR 473 BC

Mordecai knew what it was to wrestle with death and win. From his room in the citadel in Susa, he had listened to news of the battles all day, his messengers racing in and out like bees to a hive. The angel of death had hovered close from the time the sun set on the Twelfth of Adar, throughout the night, and all day on the Thirteenth. According to the last report Mordecai received as the pale, early spring sun finally set on this murderous day, his fellow Jews had slain five hundred of their enemies in Susa. He had prayed for the children of Abraham scattered among the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire and wondered how they had fared. In particular, he wondered about The Land Beyond the River, where his fellow Jews held such a precarious foothold in Jerusalem. Within the vast Persian Empire, the Jews' enemies outnumbered them and certainly outmanned them in terms of military experience. Mordecai's people were tradesmen and farmers and scholars, not soldiers. Even so, he knew they would fight hard for their families and their lives. And clearly, God had fought with them.

The night grew darker. He should snuff out the sputtering oil lamps and go home now that the Thirteenth of Adar—and the danger—had ended. But he was too weary from the strain of several sleepless nights to manage the walk and the stairs. Mordecai unstrapped the sword that he'd worn all day in the event that their enemies prevailed and laid it on the floor. He sat down on the window seat overlooking the moat and slumped back against

the pillows. The open window was a dark void, the moon and stars hidden behind a gray blanket of clouds. He inhaled the crisp spring air and closed his eyes for a moment to rest.

A knock on his door startled him awake. Instinctively, Mordecai reached for his weapon. He unsheathed it but remained seated. “Who is it?”

“Just me, my lord.” The door slowly opened, and one of the soldiers who had been stationed outside his door for the past day and a half appeared in the shadowy opening. “I’m sorry for disturbing you, my lord.”

“You may come in.” Mordecai’s shoulders relaxed as he laid down his weapon. “What hour is it?”

“The third watch, my lord.”

Mordecai rubbed his eyes. He had slept on the window seat longer than he’d intended. The night was more than half over.

“Your aide, Yaakov ben Hashub, has asked to speak with you. He says it’s important.”

At this hour of the night it must be. Apprehension helped Mordecai shake off his sleepiness and come fully awake. “Send him in.” It was an indication of the extreme duress they were all under that even Yaakov, who had been Mordecai’s right-hand man throughout this ordeal, needed permission to enter his chambers. Yaakov’s pale face and dark-rimmed eyes revealed his exhaustion after this long, bloody day. Surprisingly, he herded three small boys into the room as he entered.

“Forgive me for disturbing you, my lord, but . . . but it seems the fighting hasn’t ended after all.”

Dread made Mordecai’s skin crawl. “What do you mean? According to the king’s edict, the fighting was supposed to end at sunset. The Thirteenth of Adar is over.”

“The fighting isn’t in the streets—it’s here. In the citadel.”

“What?”

“Several members of your personal staff and their families were attacked in their homes an hour ago.”

Mordecai scrambled to his feet, his movements stiff. “No! That’s impossible. We’ve had guards stationed everywhere.”

“Yes, we did. But we sent the guards home too soon—all but the one outside your door. And we trusted the wrong people. Our enemies found breaches in our security and used them to attack your closest staff members.” Yaakov’s deep voice trembled with emotion. “Two men and their families were slaughtered before we could sound the alarm.”

“And your home, your family . . . ?”

“The warning reached me before the assassins did. My family is safe.”

“Which of my staff members were killed?” Mordecai asked, fearing the answer.

“Bani ben Zaccai and his family . . .”

“God of Abraham, have mercy,” Mordecai whispered.

“And your scribe, Hacaliah, and his wife.” Yaakov swallowed, battling his grief. “These are Hacaliah’s three sons. They survived, but they saw . . .” He didn’t finish.

Mordecai needed a moment to regain control. He scrubbed his hands down his face, pulling his beard. He wished he could awaken all over again and discover that this had only been a dream.

Yaakov cleared his throat. “This retaliation was personal, my lord. Against your administration. The assassins knew who to target, where they lived, how to circumvent security. They deliberately waited until after sunset, when we believed the fighting was over and returned home to get some sleep.”

“These attackers were already waiting inside the citadel?”

“It appears so, my lord. All of the outside gates and doors have been under guard for days.”

Mordecai moaned. “I’m responsible for this. How could I have been so shortsighted? We made so many meticulous plans to safeguard our people in all parts of the empire, and yet I failed my closest associates, right here in the citadel.”

“None of us expected it, my lord. But we believe that all of the murderers have been captured or killed. The ones taken alive will talk before morning. We’ll learn the extent of the conspiracy.”

“It has to be Haman’s sons and their allies, seeking revenge. I would stake my life on it.”

Mordecai paced some more, battling exhaustion and rage as he tried to decide what to do. “I’ll send word to Queen Esther and ask her to petition the king. The ten sons of Haman will all hang for this. In the meantime, we need an extra day to finish destroying our enemies. Esther must ask the king’s permission to track them down and kill them today, too. We’ll find them wherever they’re hiding. This isn’t finished.”

He crossed to his worktable and scabbled around in the dim lamplight, searching for a pen, for parchment. “Have someone summon Hathach, the queen’s eunuch,” he told Yaakov. “He’ll need to deliver my message to Esther without delay. She’ll have to take the initiative again as soon as possible and approach the king unbidden with this request.”

“Wouldn’t it be quicker to petition him yourself, my lord?”

“Perhaps. But Xerxes will be more inclined to act if he understands that his wife’s life is threatened.”

Mordecai was so caught up with fury and regret, so angry with himself for letting down his guard, that he forgot about the three small boys until he heard a shaky sob, a snuffle. He looked up. They still wore their nightclothes, their dark hair sleep-tousled. The youngest child rubbed his eyes, his face damp with tears. All three wore the same blank-eyed look of desolation and horror that he remembered seeing on his young cousin Esther’s face the day she’d been orphaned, the day he had adopted her as his own. Mordecai hadn’t been responsible for the deaths of Esther’s parents, but he was responsible for these. The retaliation had been directed against him and his staff.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head as he carefully banked

his roaring anger, letting the hot coals simmer for a moment so the warmth of compassion could replace it. When he was in control again, he lifted his head and stepped toward the children. He guessed the oldest to be around seven or eight years old, the younger boys four or five, young enough to still have their baby teeth. Mordecai crouched in front of them.

“What’s your name?” he asked the oldest one.

“Nehemiah ben Hacaliah,” he answered in a whisper. His eyes were dry, as if he was trying to be brave and not cry. His gaze met Mordecai’s for only a moment before darting frantically around the room as if more assassins might leap from behind the curtains or the closed doors.

“And these are your brothers?”

He nodded. “Ephraim and Hanani.” The last was an affectionate name, probably short for Hananiah. The youngest child’s narrow chest shuddered with quiet sobs. Judging by his red-rimmed eyes, he’d been crying for some time. He looked up at Mordecai, his dark eyes brimming.

“I want my mama,” he said.

Mordecai longed to hold the boy and comfort him, but the oldest brother, Nehemiah, appeared so wary that Mordecai feared he might attack anyone who tried to touch his siblings. Nehemiah grabbed Hanani’s hand and pulled him closer to his side.

“Were these children there when it happened?” Mordecai asked his aide. “In the same house?” Yaakov nodded.

“We hid when the bad men came,” Nehemiah said. “I told Ephraim and Hanani to be very quiet.”

“I’m glad you did, son. That was a very wise thing to do. You’re a brave young man.”

“No, Abba was the bravest. He fought back.”

Mordecai didn’t know what to say. Was it better to let the boy talk and tell what he’d seen and heard, or would it be kinder to encourage him to forget this terrible nightmare? As

if he ever could forget. Mordecai cleared the lump from his throat. “I’m so very sorry for what happened,” he told the children. “Your father, Hacialiah, was a good man. He worked for me here in the citadel. I know I can never take his place, but I promise to take care of you from now on. You will lack nothing.”

Except parents to love and nurture them. What a stupid thing to say. Mordecai searched for better words, words of comfort or hope, watching helplessly as Nehemiah’s gaze continued to scan the room like a trapped bird desperate to escape. His slender body, braced to run, was so tense that Mordecai feared he would jump out of his skin if anyone tried to touch him, even to reassure him. The two younger children were the opposite, limp and boneless with fatigue and shock, as if they might collapse into a heap any moment. They needed sleep. Mordecai wondered if they would ever truly rest again.

“You’re safe now. I won’t let anything happen to you. And if there’s anything you need—”

“We need a place to hide,” Nehemiah said.

Mordecai waited a long moment before saying, “Yaakov and one of my guards will take you someplace safe, where you can get some rest and—”

“Will the bad men try to kill us, too?” Nehemiah asked. He continued his eerie scanning of the room—window, door, second window, then back again. Never resting.

“The men will never come back. I promise you that the enemies who did this will be found and executed. You have my word. Until then, the guards will watch over you. They’ll stay with you for as long as you’d like.”

“But Abba knew the men who came to our house. He opened the door to let them in, but they tricked him.”

“You heard all of this?” Mordecai asked, and Nehemiah nodded. “Lord, have mercy . . .” he whispered beneath his breath.

He turned to Yaakov. “Take them to my home. See that they have something to eat and a place to sleep.”

“Yes, my lord.” Yaakov turned toward the door, motioning to the boys to follow him, but Nehemiah didn’t move. His brothers didn’t either. The two younger ones inched closer to him, clutching him tightly, clearly terrified. Mordecai didn’t know what to do to calm them.

“Would you rather stay here with me? Have a look out the window and see how high up we are. And the soldiers outside my door won’t let anyone inside.”

Nehemiah nodded, eyeing Mordecai’s sword, lying unsheathed on the window seat. He led his brothers in a tight huddle as he went to inspect the view.

“Very well,” Mordecai decided. “The three of you may stay here, then. Yaakov, can you find one of my servants and ask him to bring some blankets and more cushions, and maybe something simple to eat? Then send a messenger to Hathach, Queen Esther’s servant.” Mordecai crossed to the window seat and closed the shutters. “Come,” he said, patting the cushion. “You can lie down here and rest.”

Nehemiah helped Hanani onto the seat and the two younger boys immediately lay down, curled into tight balls. Mordecai wasn’t surprised when Nehemiah remained sitting upright on the bench, his eyes open and watchful. His dangling legs didn’t even reach the floor.

Even with the shutters closed, the cold night air seeped into the room, so Mordecai removed his outer robe and covered the children with it. Alone while he waited for his servants, he allowed the dreadful news to fully sink in.

He had failed the men closest to him. Two of them had died because of his lack of foresight. So had their families. How naïve he had been to believe that his enemies would restrict their murderous revenge to a single day. How foolish to imagine that his people would be free from all threats after a mere night

and day of fighting. Throughout their history, God's people had always had enemies who tried to wipe them from the face of the earth, as Haman had just attempted to do. Would the children of Abraham ever find peace and rest?

Mordecai sighed. No. There would be no rest until the promised Messiah finally came to set them free.

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

Part I


*The Lord determined to tear down the
wall around the Daughter of Zion.*

*He stretched out a measuring line and did not
withhold his hand from destroying.*


*He made ramparts and walls lament;
together they wasted away.*

*Her gates have sunk into the ground;
their bars he has broken and destroyed.*

LAMENTATIONS 2:8–9A



CHAPTER
1



SUSA, PERSIA

DECEMBER, TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS LATER

Nehemiah descended the winding staircase to the palace kitchens, then paused in the arched doorway, savoring the warmth from the blazing hearth fires and enormous ovens. The aroma of roasting meat and baking bread greeted him. He enjoyed this part of his job, especially on early winter days like this one when it was difficult to heat the cavernous palace rooms upstairs. He watched the sweating, red-faced cooks and scullery lads bustle around, chopping vegetables, skinning a goat, and plucking waterfowl. These men would probably prefer to work in a cooler room.

No one glanced up as Nehemiah entered the huge work area, which was large enough to prepare food for the king and thousands of his guests. As the king's trusted cupbearer, Nehemiah inspected the palace kitchens and storerooms daily, making sure that nothing and no one who might pose a threat to King Artaxerxes ever passed through the delivery doors and into the kitchen and up the stone stairs to his dining room.

The narrow windows stood open, and Nehemiah heard the rumble of wooden wheels outside and the heavy tread of oxen

as a delivery wagon approached. The shipment of wine he expected had arrived. He crossed the smoky work area to unlock the wide delivery doors, opening them to a blast of chilly air that rushed inside along with a swirl of dried leaves. A cart piled high with clay storage jars and cushioned with straw pulled to a halt outside. Nehemiah unsheathed his sword as he prepared to probe the straw for stowaways. “Good morning, Shaul,” he said to the driver who had led the yoked team of oxen. The driver finished fastening the reins to a post and turned. It wasn’t Shaul. It was a stranger. Nehemiah tensed.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“I’m Shelah ben Hobiah. I’m making deliveries for Shaul today.”

“Not without consulting me, you’re not! Why wasn’t I told? Who let you through the gate? Who’s responsible for this?”

“I said it would be all right,” a voice from behind Nehemiah said.

He spun around to face Joed, the palace clerk who kept track of deliveries and payments.

“Shelah is a friend and—”

Nehemiah still had his sword in his right hand, but he gripped the front of the clerk’s tunic with his left one. He pulled Joed close until their faces were inches apart. “No one enters this citadel without my authorization, understand? No one! I want both of you *out!* And don’t come back.” He released Joed and pushed him outside through the open door.

“But . . . m-my lord . . .” Joed sputtered. “I’ve known Shelah since childhood. I can vouch for him and—”

“I don’t doubt that you can. And King Xerxes also knew the man who entered his bedchamber and murdered him. One of his own courtiers.” The familiar rage boiled up inside Nehemiah, and in an instant he was back in his bedroom the night his father opened the door to an acquaintance and forfeited his life. He gave the clerk another shove, propelling him backward and

causing him to stumble against one of the oxen. “King Xerxes’ heir can’t afford to trust anyone,” Nehemiah said. “Every leek and lentil and wineskin will be carefully inspected by my staff and me before it enters this palace—along with every man who delivers it, cooks it, or serves it. It’s the only way to keep our sovereign King Artaxerxes safe and secure.”

“Please, my lord . . . I won’t let it happen again—”

“You’re right, Joed. You won’t. Guards!” He shouted for the king’s guards, watching from their posts inside the kitchen. “Escort these men all the way over the bridge and out of the citadel.”

“And the shipment of wine, my lord?” one of the guards asked.

“Send it back. Tell them the next time there’s a new delivery-man I need to be informed.”

Nehemiah turned and went inside again, slamming and locking the door behind him. All activity in the kitchen had halted, as if the icy wind had frozen the men in their places. He saw two young cook’s assistants exchange looks, as if they thought him an unreasonable tyrant. They hadn’t worked in the kitchen very long, and even though Nehemiah and his staff of cupbearers and security personnel had thoroughly investigated these newcomers’ backgrounds, they would always be suspect until they’d proven themselves. He walked toward the table where they had been plucking a brace of fowls, the feathers sticking to their hands and dusting the table like snowflakes. “You think my actions are extreme? That I’m being overly cautious?”

“No, my lord.” Both young men shook their heads, but the look they had exchanged said otherwise.

“Listen, all of you,” he said, addressing the entire kitchen staff. “In just a few months the king’s official representatives will arrive from every satrapy and province in the empire, and the annual round of banquets will begin. The month-long event could easily turn into a security nightmare if we let down our

guard. The Persian court has a history of intrigue and power struggles and assassinations. One tiny slip, such as accepting a shipment from an unknown deliveryman, and King Artaxerxes' life could be in danger." Indeed, as his cupbearer, Nehemiah would also forfeit his life.

He gazed at the cooks and assistants and scullery lads until satisfied by their submissive cowering that they understood the seriousness of today's breach. "Back to work, then. The king expects to be fed on time."

Nehemiah stayed at his post in the kitchen for the remainder of the morning, watching over the kitchen staff as they finished preparing the midday meal. When King Artaxerxes called for his food, Nehemiah ascended the winding stone stairs to the dining room along with the waiters who carried and served the lavish meal. He bore the king's flask of wine and golden drinking *rhyton* himself, his presence assuring Artaxerxes that every morsel of food, every drop of wine had been carefully inspected. If the king so desired, Nehemiah stood ready to taste each dish and sip from every flask before the king did.

After the meal, Nehemiah was on his way down to the kitchen again when one of the other cupbearers met him on the stairs. "There's a man at the Gate House asking to see you."

"Do you know who it is? Not that hapless clerk I fired this morning, begging for his job back, is it?"

"No, my lord. I've never seen him before. But judging by his clothing and appearance, he's a Jew."

Nehemiah wondered if his fellow cupbearer or any of the other security personnel he worked with knew that he was also a Jew. Probably not. Like them, Nehemiah wore the uniform of the palace staff.

"I'd better go and see who it is. Take over my duties until I get back." He strode through the palace corridors and across the open plateau to the Gate House, annoyed at the disruption. Whoever the visitor was, he would have to pass a security check

before being allowed into the palace and citadel. Nehemiah swung open the door, prepared for an argument—and there stood his brother. Was he seeing things? He gave a cry of joy before swiftly crossing the room and sweeping him off the floor in a massive bear hug.

“Hanani! What in the world are you doing here? You’re supposed to be in Jerusalem!”

Hanani gave a gasp of laughter. “Put me down, you crazy man! I can’t breathe!”

Nehemiah set him down again, laughing as he held his brother at arm’s length. “Let me look at you! I can’t believe you’re here! I didn’t think we’d ever see each other again.”

“Nor did I,” Hanani said, wiping his eyes.

“How long has it been, my brother? Twelve years?”

“Nearly thirteen.”

Nehemiah embraced him again, then said, “I should have gone to Jerusalem with you and Ephraim. As soon as you left, I regretted my decision and wished I had chosen differently.” He remembered praying all night as he’d agonized over whether or not to join Rebbe Ezra’s caravan and move to Judah with his brothers. At the time, he felt that he owed Mordecai a great debt.

“You look wonderful, Hanani!” he said. “The Promised Land must agree with you. I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you! How is Ephraim?”

“He’s well. Married with a baby on the way.”

“And you? Are you married?”

A grin lit up Hanani’s face. “Yes. My beautiful wife has given me a little son and a daughter. What about you, my brother?”

Nehemiah waved away the question. “Too busy to look for a wife. But tell me, why are you here? You haven’t decided to return, have you?”

“No, not at all,” Hanani said. “I’m an aide with the official delegation from Judah. I work as a scribe, like Abba did.”

Nehemiah’s smile faded at the mention of their father. For

the second time that day, he felt a stab of grief as he relived the night when their father opened the door to his assassin. “Do you remember Abba, Hanani? You were only four.”

“Not very well. I remember that he was very tall with thick black hair—like you. And I remember his laughter, booming like thunder, and how he used to throw me up in the air and catch me.”

They both fell silent for a moment. “So, why are you here?” Nehemiah asked again. “Your delegation is a few months early for the tribute ceremonies.”

“We came to present our report to King Artaxerxes ahead of time and request a reduction in tribute. The drought in Judah has lasted for two growing seasons. Our people are suffering. And we’re required to pay taxes to the provincial treasury, too.”

“Is Governor Ezra with you?”

“No. He retired as Judah’s governor a few years ago. The nobles and district leaders convinced him that he had accomplished his work as our leader and teacher. He’s writing and studying now, using his vast knowledge to compile a history of our people. I understand it’s something he has always wanted to do.”

They had remained standing all this time, and now Nehemiah felt restless to be on the move again, unable to contain the nervous energy that fueled him and kept him working from before dawn until long after sunset. “Would you like to walk with me, Hanani? I’ll show you the palace courtyards and the *apadna*, where the king holds banquets for several thousand people. They’re quite impressive.”

“Maybe tomorrow. I was hoping you would come with me to meet the others. There’s so much to tell you.”

“Now? I would love to hear about life in the Promised Land but . . .” Nehemiah glanced around for a moment, wondering if he could spare a few hours this afternoon. He scrolled through a mental list of his responsibilities before deciding. “Very well. I’ll come with you. But I can’t stay long.”

Hanani led the way out through the King's Gate and across the bridge to the city. "I had forgotten how imposing the citadel of Susa is," Hanani said, glancing over his shoulder at the towering palace. "Some of the others who've never been here before were awestruck by the sheer size of everything. They said they feel like ants beside all these soaring buildings."

"That's exactly the king's intention," Nehemiah said. "Such grandeur is a fitting backdrop for the throne of the Persian Empire."

"Yes, but does the king understand the true cost? His taxes are crippling us. Many of the people in his empire are destitute, including our fellow Jews in Judah."

"Truly? I had no idea." Nehemiah wondered if living here in Susa all his life had blinded him to the empire's problems. If he had returned to Jerusalem with his brothers, would he also view such Persian opulence with different eyes?

"So, what's your job now, in such a splendid palace?" Hanani asked, breaking into his thoughts as they walked.

"I'm King Artaxerxes' cupbearer."

"Really!" Hanani halted in the middle of the crowded street, causing several pedestrians to bump into them.

"Yes, really. It's my duty to ensure the safety of his food and wine. But the job involves much more than that. The king's cupbearers are responsible for many other aspects of security in the citadel besides the food. As you can imagine, Artaxerxes is extremely concerned about safety after what happened to his father." He paused, then added, "Of all people, you and I can understand that. Right, Hanani?"

"Of course. And I'm very proud of my big brother. Tell me," Hanani said as he continued walking through the busy streets, "how did you rise in prominence to such an important job? When I left, you were working as a government aide."

"King Artaxerxes assigned court security to Mordecai when he learned that, years ago, he had uncovered a plot against the

king's father and was honored for it. He asked Mordecai to find and employ trustworthy court attendants to handle security in the citadel. I didn't want the job at first. I couldn't see how I could serve the Almighty One as a cupbearer. But Mordecai convinced me that God needed men of prayer and faith in all occupations, that a cupbearer held a position of even greater trust than a palace guard. And he was right."

They reached the Jewish section in the lower city of Susa, breathless from the vigorous walk, and went inside the house of assembly. A fire blazed in the brazier, and Nehemiah removed his outer robe in the overheated room. "I'd like you to meet my brother Nehemiah," Hanani told his delegation from Jerusalem. He introduced each man to Nehemiah before adding, "He now serves in an even more important position in the palace than he did when I left—he's cupbearer to the king."

Everyone seemed pleased at the news, but Nehemiah quickly set them straight. "Unfortunately for your delegation, my work as the king's cupbearer isn't going to be of much help to you. If I were an aide, I might have been able to make sure your petition reached the throne room. But while I have very close access to King Artaxerxes and enjoy his utmost trust, I am not allowed to speak in his presence unless he bids me to. However, I will be happy to contribute any insights into the Persian court that might be helpful to you."

"That would be much appreciated."

"Maybe it would help if I had a clearer picture of the situation in Judah," Nehemiah directed. "For starters, tell me about Jerusalem."

The room fell silent, as if he had asked about a tragic death. Indeed, the leader of the delegation gave a heavy sigh before speaking, his face somber. "Our fellow Jews who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace."

His words and the grave tone with which he spoke shocked

Nehemiah. He let them sink in for a moment before leaning forward in his seat. “Go on.”

“When I look at this magnificent city of Susa with its towering walls and pillars, the stunning citadel perched on the hill, they reflect the splendor of the king who reigns here. Our reigning King is the Almighty One, yet His city is a pitiful reflection of His power and glory. The walls of Jerusalem are broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

“Wait,” Nehemiah said, leaning closer still. “Are you saying there are no walls at all around the city? That the people are defenseless against their enemies?”

“That’s right. When the Babylonians burned the city, not only did the gates burn, but the heat of the flames caused the limestone building blocks to crumble. The Babylonian army demolished all our fortifications.”

“And even though the eastern approach to the city has always been protected by a steep slope,” another man added, “all the supporting terraces have disintegrated, first from the fire, then from rain and weather.”

“Some men in our community attempted to rebuild the walls a number of years ago,” the leader continued. “But the enemy nations around us were able to get an edict from the Persian king, forcing us to stop. They even made us destroy what we had begun to build.”

“That’s outrageous!” Nehemiah’s anger flared like oil on hot coals. “What about the Holy One’s temple? Surely that’s protected and secure?”

“No, the temple is also unprotected. And without walls, the Levite guards have their hands full safeguarding the temple treasury. We can’t trust the governor in Samaria or his provincial guards to protect us, even if he agreed to send them. We’re hated by all of our surrounding neighbors—the Samaritans and Edomites, the Ammonites and Arabs. They would like nothing better than to see us all in our graves.”

“There’s no way to fortify the city?” Nehemiah asked.

“If we attempted to do it without King Artaxerxes’ permission, it would be interpreted as an act of rebellion. And where would we get the funds? As it is, we’re here because we can’t afford to pay the taxes he has imposed. Rebuilding the walls would be an impossible undertaking.”

Nehemiah shook his head, unable to grasp what he was hearing. “So you’re telling me that the city and the temple mount are both completely vulnerable? Our enemies could come in and kill our people and destroy Jerusalem and the Almighty One’s temple all over again?”

“Completely vulnerable,” the leader confirmed. “And because of it, the number of robberies and vicious attacks has been escalating after two years of drought. Our enemies strike at night, looking for food and grain because of the famine. No one feels safe.”

“A young friend of mine named Yitzhak ben Rephaiah was killed several months ago,” Hanani added, “when his home in Jerusalem was robbed. Yitzhak was about to be married and had just built a new home for his bride. The thieves killed him and emptied his storehouse. In fact, he lived very close to Ephraim and his family. It could have been him.”

Nehemiah felt a powerful anger building inside him as the picture of the city’s helplessness grew clearer. Security was his livelihood, his passion. He was beginning to understand what their leader had meant when he’d said their people were in great trouble and disgrace. But what could he do? “I need to return to my responsibilities in the citadel. We’ll talk again,” he promised as he left them.

The leader’s words continued to echo in Nehemiah’s mind throughout the afternoon and evening, long after he returned to his spare living quarters in the citadel for the night. “*Great trouble and disgrace.*” The report appalled him, not only for the sake of the people who were being robbed and killed by

their enemies, but for the Almighty One's sake. Nehemiah unbuckled his sword and removed his uniform. His bed had been prepared for him, but he wasn't ready to sleep. He opened the shuttered window and looked out at the vast sprinkle of stars above the roof of the palace.

Just as the magnificent city of Susa brought glory and honor to the Persian king, so, too, should the city and temple of the one true God bring glory and honor to Him. The lack of city walls and gates meant shame and disgrace. The heathens could easily destroy Jerusalem again as they had 140 years ago. Even worse, this vulnerability sent a message to their enemies that the Holy One was unable—or unwilling—to protect His people.

Nehemiah closed the window and paced the floor. Then, knowing that his work would begin before dawn and that he needed to sleep, he snuffed out his lamp and sank onto his bed. Somehow, seeing Hanani again and being reminded twice today of their father's tragic death made him feel like a child—helpless, vulnerable. He had saved himself and his brothers on that long-ago night by hiding in a hollow corner between the wall and the huge wooden chest his father had propped at an angle in the room. Nehemiah and his two brothers had often hidden in that space when playing games. And although all of Nehemiah's instincts urged him to find a way to protect his brothers once again—to protect all of his people in Jerusalem—he had no way to do it.

“Our fellow Jews who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace.”

Alone, in his room, Nehemiah didn't try to stop his tears.