



**THE
CUPBEARER**

BARRY SULLIVAN

THE CUPBEARER

BOOK ONE OF THE CUPBEARER CHRONICLES

Barry Sullivan

2014

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First Printing: 2014

ISBN (None)

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Part One: Papa

2234 AD

CHAPTER ONE

As far as good friends go, Noah Meadows is among the best. Still, there are times when I could kill him. As a matter of fact, I almost just did.

"Noah," I shout with a growl, "get up!" I move through the darkness and across the ridge to where he is curled up on the ground, arms wrapped around his head. "Get up, you big oaf," I grunt again, this time nudging his thigh with my foot.

"Nehemiah?" he asks as it dawns on him it's me doing the kicking. "Did you just try to shoot me with your attack stick?"

I reach past him to where my knife blade is lodged in a small tree trunk. "I thought you were a bear... or a thief -- or something," I say as I reattach the blade to the end of the long walking stick. "And, I thought I was *alone*." This last bit I say with emphasis, hoping to make a point. I reach down and offer my hand, pulling him to his feet.

I came up here to Cathedral Ridge to get away from him -- well, not him personally, just people in general. I needed to get away and think, and things inside Petra are just too crowded and crazy. Ever since the dreams have picked up again these last few weeks, I've just needed to find someplace to be alone. Cathedral Ridge seems as good a place as any, even though the Watchmen forbid anyone from coming up here -- especially a couple of fifteen-year-olds.

I had decided to set up camp on the side of the ridge opposite the city. The last thing I want is for someone to see a light up here and send

scouts to inspect. I'm way past the yellow line, and I don't really feel like being confined to our little section of the city for crossing it.

When Noah came up on the ridge, I'd been sitting on a grouping of three large boulders above my little camp, leaning up against a small tree that's grown up in the space between them. Thinking about the events of the last two years, and watching the sun set to the west, I'd lost track of time. It was getting dark quickly and I needed to start a fire. But, just when I was about to get up to do that, I heard a loud rustling near the trail head in the tree line to my left.

I didn't know it was Noah, so I climbed down quietly and reached for my attack stick -- well, it isn't really an attack stick like the Watchmen use, but it's close enough. All I knew was there was something out there and I needed to protect myself. So, when I started to hear footsteps coming across the ridge, then saw the shadow, I aimed the knife toward the center of it.

Just as I was pulling the trigger to launch the knife, Noah called me name. Thankfully I was able to pull the stick to the right just enough as it fired -- but it still sent the knife sailing past his head and into the tree behind him. That's also when he fell to the ground -- probably out of sheer terror from the noise the knife made passing by his ear.

After he is on his feet, and my knife reattached, I lead him over toward my little camp and help him sit down next to the fire I hadn't started yet.

"Noah? What on earth are you doing up here? I could have hurt you, or worse." Immediately I feel my body release the tension that has

built up over the last few minutes, almost as though someone pulled a plug in my feet.

"I'm sorry I startled you," he responds out of breath, "it's just so dark up here."

"How did you find me up here?" I ask, truly confused that he is actually up here on Cathedral Ridge, too.

"You took off so quickly after school, and I wanted to see what you were up to," he began. "Then I saw you empty your pack and head to the market. Before I knew it you were outside the gates and heading on the trail through the woods. I figured you'd come back eventually and I'd be waiting for you by the old tractor." He was referring to an old, rusted out tractor we found in the middle of a field while exploring one day. "But when you didn't come back down, I began to wonder if something happened, so I followed this trail hoping to find you."

"I told you I didn't want to hang out after school today, though," I say with a shake of my head. "Couldn't you just have left it at that?" There are several moments of silence before he responds.

"I suppose... but here we are. And you'd think being my best friend and all, you'd tell me if you were coming all the way up here." He sounds hurt, and I feel bad. I try to put myself in his shoes and imagine how I would feel.

"Listen, I'm sorry," I begin, "but sometimes I just need to be by myself to think things through. Today was one of those times. And, honestly, I've never been up this high before... I just started walking the trail and before I knew it, here I am."

"Well, it's too dark to make our way back. The gates are closed, and the trail is too dangerous at night."

"Yeah, that's why I brought this just in case," I say, motioning toward my shelter, "and I was about to build a fire. Do you wanna help?"

"Yeah, let's do that," he replies, his voice sounding less dejected than a few minutes ago. "Did you happen to bring any food? I'm starving."

"Fire first, food later," I respond with a laugh. And with that, we set to starting the small fire.

I finally have the quiet back since Noah crawled into the shelter several minutes ago. After we ate and joked around a bit, it didn't take him long to get tired and want sleep. I have my attack stick across my lap in case I have any trouble -- well, any real trouble, not just good friends who come looking for you to make sure you're alright. It's much colder up here than I anticipated, but the wool blanket I packed is already wrapped around my shoulders and proving quite warm.

The memory of what happened to my parents is painful to visit again, but that is the real reason I take these long hikes out past the yellow line. I want to be someplace with no distraction -- someplace where I can clear away the fog in my head. Someplace I can take the time to just remember.

I stir the embers with a long stick I've been using to poke the fire, and throw on some more wood. As I stare at the flames, I begin thinking back to that day two years ago when my brother-in-law met me on the street on my way home from school. He and Abbi had been married just under a year and were already expecting. She was about six months along,

so at first when I saw the worried look on his face, I thought something must have happened to the baby.

"Benaiah, what's wrong? Is something wrong with Abbi? Is the baby ok?"

"No, Nehemiah... Abbi and the baby are fine. She's at home waiting," he explained, "She asked that I come get you and bring you to our place tonight." Normally a couple so young would live with one of their parents since extra space was rare in Petra, but Benaiah's parents had been older and had passed away a few years before. They left him their simple home and a small inheritance, so he and Abbi were able to have a home of their own. Still, it was close to ours -- just a couple of streets over -- so they came and went from our house often, making it feel like they were still part of our everyday lives.

"Can we stop by home so that I can get some clothes?" I asked, "I also need to ask my dad if I can bring Asher with us to the market this weekend. His parents said it's ok, but I still need to ask."

"No, Nehemiah," he urged, "we need to go straight to our house. We can't stop."

"Please, Benaiah" I had persisted, "It will only take a minute. I promise to hurry and we'll still get to Abbi before she gets upset." My sister was still famous for her outbursts if she didn't get her way, and the way that Benaiah spoiled her didn't help. The way he was acting, I thought she might have dinner waiting.

"No. I've said no," he spat. He had never spoke like this. That's odd. "We can't go to your house," he continued, "and Abbi has already sent for your things."

"Why does Abbi need to send for my things?" I asked, still not grasping something was wrong. "Mum might have picked out the wrong shirt. I have a tournament after class tomorrow and we're supposed to wear our red..."

Benaiah sternly cut me off, "Nehemiah, why can't you just listen? Your sister sent for *all* of your things because you'll be staying with us for awhile!"

"But why? Has something happened to Mum? Is Papa ok?"

"No... I mean... they," he paused and looked down. "Listen, we just have to go..." His voice trailed off, and immediately I had sensed something was wrong at home -- and I needed to find out what.

I remember breaking into a run and turning down the alley that would lead to our street just a couple blocks ahead. As I passed the little pond a block from my house I could hear Benaiah calling my name and telling me to come back, but I wouldn't listen. I had to get home. And with the crowd on the streets that evening, it made it difficult for him to catch up with me before I reached our house.

When I came around the corner, I was confronted with a torrent of sights and sounds I'll never forget -- there were uniformed Watchmen in the street, and a few coming and going through our front door. A crowd had gathered and many were murmuring and making remarks about how horrible this was, and what a tragic thing to happen on such a quiet street.

There were two large horse-drawn box wagons in the street, both with the red cross on the side that indicated medics were here. The doors of one were open, and I could see two bodies laid out in the back covered with sheets. I recognized Mr. Dumah's light brown leather shoes sticking out from one of the sheets, as well as the bright green material of Mrs. Dumah's favorite skirt. The Dumah's had been renting the larger room in the back of our house ever since I was a child and had become like an aunt and uncle to me.

Oh no, something had happened to them! *This* is why Abbi had sent Benaiah to get me and keep me from coming home.

For a few moments I felt a wave of relief mixed with pangs of sorrow. Relief that it wasn't my parents in that wagon, sorrow that something horrible had happened to these people I cared about. I pushed through the crowd gathered out front, and began to hear whispers as people started to recognize me as the boy who lived here, too. I paused at the edge of the crowd, wondering if the Watchmen would let me through to find my parents -- I wanted to let them know I was alright. That's when Benaiah caught up with me.

"Don't go in there, Nehemiah. It's not good. Your parents... they... it's just..."

This worried me. Why didn't he tell me to just wait until my parents came out to let me know it was OK to go inside? What wasn't he telling me? Even as I said it, I began to realize something much worse had taken place here, and that my life would never be the same. Still, part of me didn't want to accept what deep inside I already knew.

"But I'm just going to let Papa know I'm ok," I had said in a flat voice, staring at all the Watchmen and medics inside our house. "We don't have to go to the market this weekend if he isn't feeling up to it. I understand."

There was a commotion from inside, and some of the medics went running back in. I looked to the right of our house and noticed no one near the garden gate -- this led to a small yard that was off of the kitchen. I slipped away from Benaiah in the confusion and made for the gate, getting it unlatched and slipping into the yard before he realized where I was headed. I quickly made my way to the kitchen door, which I thankfully found unguarded and unlocked. I quietly opened it and, leaving my school pack sitting outside, made my way in to see what was going on.

The house was a mess, and not just from all of the people inside. It looked like a small windstorm had blown through our home, with papers everywhere and drawers from the cupboard in the corner pulled out and emptied on the floor. Even pictures had been moved from the walls, and the cushions from our chairs and couch had been cut open and torn apart. None of this made sense. What had happened here? And why?

I cut through the dining room and made my way towards my father's study. It was a small room he used for entertaining friends who came for one of the long discussions he loved to have with anyone who would listen. I looked to my left and saw two pools of blood on the living room floor, and I remember thinking they must have come from Mr. and Mrs. Dumah. Then as I stepped forward and into the study, I saw the crumpled body of my mother on the floor near the fireplace, a pool of

blood under her head -- and all the sound around me seemed to fade away. A sheet was being pulled up over her face by a medic as another kneeled next to her shaking his head. This isn't real, I thought. This can't be happening.

"Mum?" I whispered in a shaky voice.

"Who let that kid in here?" a voice barked, drawing me back into the moment. "Get him outta here, now!"

"No! No -- I'm Nehemiah Keevah! This is my home! That's my mother!" I pleaded, pointing to the lifeless form of this woman I loved laying on the floor. The shock of what I said took a moment to register on those in the room, long enough for a few moments of silence -- and long enough for me to hear the weak voice of my father calling to me from the floor behind his desk.

"Nehemiah... Nehemiah... come here, son. Come here."

Because of the size of his desk, when I came into the room I hadn't realized he was on the floor with medics working on him. That desk had been his pride and joy, and as I quickly moved around it, I remembered how happy he was the day we discovered it in the market -- and how he spent a good hour talking the man down on the price.

"Papa, I'm here. I'm coming, I'm home." The horror of what I saw as I came around the desk took my breath away. There was blood everywhere, and it was all coming from large wounds in my father's head and chest. I rushed to his side, kneeling next to a medic who was trying very hard to save his life.

"Papa, wh-what happened? Are you OK? Are you..." I asked, then realized the medics were the ones I needed to talk to. "Fix him! Do something!" I demanded, "Why is he still bleeding, why -- "

"We're doing what we can, kid," the medic said, cutting me off, "We've been working on him for a while, but he's lost a lot of blood."

Hearing that didn't help. I began to panic, then I felt my father's hand rest firmly on my arm.

"Nehemiah, listen... there's not much time," he gasped.

"Sir, you mustn't try to talk," one of the medics cut in, "you've lost too much blood and your lung is damaged."

"This... this is my son," Papa said, gasping for air.

"Papa, you'll be ok," I insisted. "You'll be ok -- but Mum, she's..."

"I know, I know... now stop." He was again speaking in-between gasps for air. "Listen, Nehemiah... Son, listen." I got quiet as I heard the urgency in his voice. He weakly reached up with his right hand and gripped my shoulder.

"Do you remember... the day... we brought home... my desk?" His breathing was shallow and he was trying to whisper. He pulled me down so I could hear.

"We laughed... laughed about the... the family jewels... Do you remember?"

I remember wondering in that moment why he was so concerned with *this* memory? Was he hallucinating? "Yes, Papa, of course I remember, but -- "

"Son," he interrupted. "I love you. I love you... now remember... all that I've taught you," he clenched his teeth and fought through great pain to continue, "Remember... our walks in... the market?" he asked through the pain, "I taught you that... this is not... not Shiloh..." He was coughing now, trying to breath.

"Yes, Papa, I remember... but Papa, you'll be OK. They'll take care of you, and then you can come home."

"No, Nehemiah!" he said sternly. "Remember... Nehemiah, this... *this* is not your home!" His grip on my shoulder loosened as his arm fell back down to his side. He gasped for air and instead he began coughing up blood. The medic gently pushed me away so that they'd have room to work.

"We're losing him," the other medic kneeling beside him said, "he's just lost too much blood."

"I'm sorry, Papa! I'm sorry!" I pleaded, thinking that this would somehow make him better. Maybe if he heard me, it would help in some way. "Yes, I remember, this is not my home! I remember! I love you, too, Papa!"

I remember a Watchman came and hurried me back toward the kitchen, telling me to sit at the table. I did as I was told and listened to the sounds of what was going on in the next room. After a few minutes I heard the one with the gruff voice say, "There's nothing more we can do for him -- he's gone. Call it."

Now both of them were gone. The two people in my life I loved the most were now suddenly ripped away from me. Panic and emotion

mixed deep inside my chest and threatened to come tumbling out. I didn't want that to happen there, not in front of all of these strange people. I let myself out the kitchen door and grabbed my bag. Ten minutes later I was in my sister's arms bawling like a baby.

CHAPTER TWO

The hooting of an owl in the tree line below the ridge brought me out of my memories once again. With the fire dying down, I throw on a few logs this time, hoping it will keep it bright for at least a few hours more. I listen for any movement on the ridge, but don't hear anything, so I crawl into my shelter, exhausted from the mix of the long hike and the heaviness of those memories.

I bought this little tent a couple of weeks back in the market from a Bedouin -- one of those nomadic clans that roamed around the Kingdom living wherever they set up their camps. I'm sure he wondered what use a teenager in Petra had for one of these little tent-like structures, but he didn't ask and was perfectly happy to accept my money -- and I was so eager to have it that I didn't even argue with him on the cost.

Noah is splayed out across the full length of the tent, so I roll him to the right to make room for myself. Of course he didn't come prepared so he has one of my blankets, but I should still be warm enough. The view of the stars up here on the ridge is amazing, and I lay there staring at them through the tent flap for what seems a long time. Just before I drift off to sleep, I wonder what it would be like if my parents were alive and we'd made the trip to Shiloh and started a new home.

"Home! I've got to get home!" The thought shot through my mind as the brightness of the morning sun wakes me from a deep sleep. I've overslept, and now I'll be lucky if I make it back to Petra by mid-afternoon. My sister Abbi will be furious.

I nudge Noah to wake him up. He doesn't stir as quickly, so I nudge harder this time, "Noah, c'mon. It's late."

"What?" he says through the blanket pulled half over his face.

"We overslept. C'mon, we have to get going."

"What about breakfast?"

I know we won't have time to sit and enjoy more of the dried meat and fruit for breakfast so I tell him we'll have to eat as we hike back down the trail. It only takes him a couple minutes to stir as I put out the remnants of the small fire. We break down my shelter, and pack our things.

"How long do you think it will take us to get home?" Noah asks, handing my walking stick to me and then motioning he'll carry my pack.

Home. Where is it? In the two years since my parents were killed, I've asked myself that question many times. Yes, I have a house to live in with Abbi, Benaiah, and now little Josef (named in honor of my father), but Papa's last words always echo in my head, and were even beginning to find their way into the recesses of my heart, too.

"It should be quicker than climbing up, since it's all downhill," I respond as Noah starts moving toward the trail head, "so, I don't know, maybe a few hours."

Turning around, I walk to the opposite side of the ridge and realize I am about to see farther than I've ever seen before. The view from up here does not disappoint me. It is a crisp, clear day with very little cloud cover in the sky, and in this morning light it seems I can see forever. I let my eyes take in all they can for several moments before a strong, cool breeze

hits me and send chills through my body. I pull the collar of my shirt up around my neck and silently thank Abbi for suggesting the sweater yesterday morning.

I can just barely make out the caravan road that cuts across the valley floor to the West. I know it travels at least one hundred miles before it comes to the Tiger River. I've learned from there you can either travel South by boat for a few days to get to the larger Eupher River, or continue on another caravan road to get to the same area. From there it is several weeks by boat traveling Northwest to the ruins of Tipshah, then a turn South and several more weeks on foot until you reach the city of Shiloh -- or at least what is left of it.

Of course Shiloh is farther away than I could hope to see from up here. I think to myself how there is so much in-between here and there that is frightfully unknown to me. But, in that moment, I promise myself I will not forget what my father said to me. And as comfortable as I have become in Petra, I cannot allow myself to forget my promise.

"This is not my home. No, my home is out there... somewhere," I think to myself, then whisper out-loud, "Papa, I promise... someday I will return to Shiloh."

Someday -- but not today. Today I have to get back to Abbi, Benaiah, and little Josef. I look around the campsite one last time and head back down the trail. And as I do, I hope we won't be in too much trouble.

"You ready," Noah asks.

"Yeah, let's go."

A couple of hours later we reach the yellow line. It is more imaginary than real, created by a series of yellow posts erected on every path going out from the city. They shape what you could imagine as a great big yellow circle around Petra that tells us how far we can go for it to be considered safe. Every so often, the hunters press outward in their task to make life more secure for the citizens of the kingdom, and the posts are pushed further out. Citizens with enough courage sometimes clear and build on the land, making homes from the logs of the trees they bring down and plant crops to farm the land. We call them the Settlers.

People have to do this because Petra is beginning to feel like a big basket of fish just bursting at the seams. Families are having more and more children - which is a good thing since we are trying to repopulate the kingdom, especially here in its capital. And then there is a steady stream of refugees coming from far away territories still ravished by the after effects of the last Great War. All of this leaves little room in the actual city for everyone, and it's not uncommon to have two or three families sharing a home originally built for just one.

In the center of Petra is the Citadel, a large fortress where the royal family and many of their staff live. It's much more than a palace; it's the center of all authority for the entire kingdom. The sheer size of it somehow makes you feel safe, which is probably why so many want to live in the city. I shake my head at this thought, because it sure didn't prove any help for my family.

It feels strange to be fifteen and have no parents telling me what I can or cannot do. Yes, there are my sister Abbi and her husband, Benaiah -

they certainly do their best to fill the hole my parents' deaths have created, but not being much older than me, there is only so much they can do. Besides that, Benaiah has been so busy with his carpentry business, he comes home later and later each day himself.

So, more and more I find myself exploring parts of the city our parents never took us to when they were alive -- sometimes with Noah, sometimes alone. Eventually I began exploring outside the gates, too, finding myself past the yellow line and up into the hills and then Cathedral Ridge. On days when I need to think, the moment classes dismiss I empty my pack of books and refill it with different fruits, water, and supplies I gather as I travel through the market and make my way out of the city.

Most forms of transportation were taken away years ago to support the war efforts in other parts of the kingdom. The destruction after the last of the wars left little in place to get those things back -- roads were destroyed, train tracks torn up, and you can just forget hoping to see anything that can fly. Of course, cars, trains, and planes are things I've never seen, but we did learn about them in history class. It always baffles me how backward things have become... instead of technology going forward, my teachers say the wars did nothing but throw progress back a couple hundred years.

The King is doing what he can to see things restored, but without electricity what can he do? Right now it is enough to find people with the hands-on skills needed to rebuild this torn-up world we live in... blacksmiths, carpenters, hunters, tailors, bricklayers, farmers, and more. People had grown too comfortable, dependent on all of this being done by

machines until the machines were gone. Now it was taking forever to see our world rebuilt after so much destruction. This is why Benaiah's business was so good and his skill so sought after.

It is late afternoon by the time we walk through the Traveler's gate near the market. Normally I'd want to explore the different stalls and see what the vendors have brought in with them today, like I did with my father when he was alive. But right now I need to get home. Still, just being in the market brings back the memories.

There are some things in life that take you by surprise, not giving you any time to prepare... like losing my parents two years ago. As we walk through the market, the last thing my father had said to me plays over and over in my mind.

"Nehemiah, this is not your home."

That wasn't the first time he'd said it, but it was the last thing he chose to say to me. And aren't those words the most important -- when someone only has a little time left to speak, and they muster the strength to say... whatever it is they'll say? In his dying moment, my father chose to remind me of something he'd said at least a hundred times over the years.

I was probably seven or eight the first time. We were here in the market at the bottom of the Citadel steps near the Eastern Gate, and as always I was in awe of the things the caravans had brought in that day. Trinkets and toys from outside of the Kingdom, and tools and gadgets designed to make life easier as we all tried to etch out this new existence.

I remember feeling so satisfied and safe whenever we took trips to the market. In my little mind thinking by just being there all of my needs

were met. That day I must have been overwhelmed with this feeling, and as I picked up one of those toys that fascinated me so much, I declared, "Papa, I never want to leave this place!"

The weight of my father's hand rested on my shoulder then lovingly slid down and rubbed my back. "Come, Nehemiah... I think it's time for lunch."

That's all he had to say for me to forget whatever was in my hands. To me the most exciting place of all was the part of the market where the food vendors were. As more caravans arrived each week from farther and farther away, the cultures, delicacies, and dishes from those places arrived with them. It seemed each time we came to the market we tried a new food from a different place. But as hungry as I would be -- even with my little stomach growling as my nose filled with those delicious smells -- my father would still make sure we took the time to talk to the man or woman selling us the food before he let me eat it.

"Where are you from? How far did you travel? What is it like where you lived? Tell us about your family?"

These questions frustrated me at first. I just wanted to eat. And I was sure it probably frustrated these people, too, especially since they had things to do. But the more we did this, the more I came to expect it, and the more I actually began to enjoy it. Each person had a fascinating story to tell. And the more my father would ask them, the more they warmed up to this man and his little boy. I liked to watch their eyes because usually at some point as they answered Papa's questions, a life would come into them - like a bright light was being turned on in a very dark room. And

then that light would spread out from their eyes and wash over their faces, and soon enough they'd be laughing or crying as they told us stories of the places *they* once called home.

There was Mr. Chu, the older man and his adult son who sold us the skewers of meat cooked in little pots of oil resting over a small fire of coals. He and Papa would laugh as Mr. Chu tried to explain to me what exotic things like dragons or fireworks were. And Sofia, the large woman with tanned skin and dark hair who loved to tell us stories from her childhood as she baked us the little pockets of dough filled with cheeses and meats. There were so many others we'd met on our walks through the market, but my favorite was the man in the stall my father always chose to visit last. That day was no different.

"Josef! Nehemiah! How are my two favorite customers doing this morning?"

My father laughed as he gave him a big hug. "Benni, all of your customers are your favorites!"

"True, Josef, but you two are at the top of my list," he said with a grin. And as Benni looked at Papa and me over the little round glasses perched on the tip of his nose, I could tell he probably meant it. It was something about the way his eyes smiled at you, and all the wrinkles on his face seemed to agree. "Now, come, sit. I'll have Marta prepare something special for you today."

As I climbed up on the stool I remember seeing his daughter through the doorway behind the counter, in her usual spot hovering over a little stove. She was probably my mother's age, but unlike my mother she

was very quiet. Even at my age I thought she was pretty enough, but she rarely smiled. She didn't seem to be as happy as her father was. I found out later her husband had died many years earlier, and ever since she had lived with her father and helped him with his business.

"Benni," my father began as he messed the hair at the top of my head, "Nehemiah here has just declared that he never wants to leave Petra." For a moment it seemed the sparkle went out of Benni's eyes as he looked down at me from across the counter. He placed his hand on his chin and began to stroke that long, funny beard of his.

"Hmmm. And what is it, Nehemiah, that makes you love this place so?" Benni asked thoughtfully.

I remember pausing for a moment, and turning to look at all the stalls in the market, every one of them full of things I'd wished I could have. And beyond the market I could see the stairs leading up to the doors of the East Gate of the Citadel. At each side of those doors stood a guard dressed in a tan tunic and a polished gold chest-plate lined with deep blue that glistened in the sun. Each held a long spear, used more for show than anything, as weapons were much more advanced in our time. Everything overwhelmed me, yet it all felt so... comfortable.

So, I turned back and looked up, answering, "Mr. Benni, I like it because this is my home."

"Nehemiah, this is my street," Noah says, bringing me out of the memories. "You've been zoning out on me all the way through the market. Everything OK?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm sorry. I'm just thinking."

"OK, well I'll see you tomorrow in class. Don't forget the project is due."

"Right, thanks," I say, watching him hurry off down the street toward his house. That means mine -- or Benaiah and Abbi's -- is just a couple blocks away. As I continue to walk, my thoughts go back to that morning in the market.

"Hmmm. And what is it, Nehemiah that makes you love this place so?"

"Mr. Benni, I like it because this is my home."

As I said this, he smiled at me, but it was more a sad smile than anything -- that's what caused this moment to stand out in my mind, because Benni was always smiling. He wiped off the counter with the rag in his hand, looked at my father for a moment, and then said softly, "I'd better go check on your lunch."

My father and I sat silently for a bit before he spoke, "Nehemiah... *this* is not your home. Our real home is a place far from here."

Confused at what my father was saying, I tried to wrap my young mind around his words. "But, Papa, we live here with Mum and Abbi, and Mr. and Mrs. Dumah. This *is* our home."

"No, Nehemiah... this may be where we live, but this is not our home. Our home - the home of our people - is in a city called Shiloh."

"Shiloh? I've never heard of that place before."

"Well, son, it is very far away. And you've never heard of it before because for a long time we have been afraid and ashamed to talk about it."

He paused for a moment, then cleared his throat and added, "The name Shiloh means 'peaceful'."

"Is it a peaceful place, Papa? And is it as pretty as Petra?"

"It used to be a peaceful place, Nehemiah. And I've only heard stories about how beautiful it was... because I've never been to Shiloh myself."

Now I was even more confused. "But... how can that be our home... if you have never been there?"

So, beginning that morning, and bit-by-bit as I could handle it over the next six years, my father shared the story of our people with me. It took many walks through the market, and many plates and bowls of delicious food that Benni and his daughter Marta would prepare for me - but eventually over each trip and meal, I learned our history.

But for now, I had to deal with my present -- like what to tell Abbi about where I was. As I walk through the front door, I decide to be honest and tell her I got stuck outside the city gates -- but I won't tell her just how far outside the gates that actually was. She'll be mad, but I can only hope she'll understand.

CHAPTER THREE

I am back in that room again. Every time is the same.

My eyes are closed and I am standing completely still, and in my hands is what feels like a large, ornate goblet full of some kind of liquid. I don't know why, but I am also crying -- not a loud cry, but tears are running down my cheeks and onto my neck and collar.

I can hear a lot of noise around me; laughter and light music, the clinging of metal against glass, people talking -- like the background noise at a dinner party. Suddenly the room grows completely quiet, and I startle as I feel the touch of something cold and sharp against my neck. I don't even swallow for fear that the simplest of movements will draw blood.

Finally I open my eyes, but everything looks as though I am in a hazy fog -- the light is muted and I can only make out the colorful smudgy images of people standing around me. I try to look around, straining to make out where I am and what is happening, when, suddenly, things begin to clear. In the few feet around me I can now make out the image of what appears to be a royal guard. It is one of the Watchmen I've seen on the steps of the Citadel. He is holding a long, wicked-looking blade against my neck. But why? My heart begins to race. Where am I and what have I done?

"Nehemiah," a voice from beyond the guard speaks to me. I squint, focusing my eyes to see who it is calling my name. "Nehemiah!" Once again my vision clears and I am able to make out the figure of another man, but his face is so bright that I can't really tell who it is -- only that he

has a crown on his head. King Artex? I've heard him speak a couple of times on feast days, and while his voice is strong, this man's voice is so much more. It is deep, and as he calls my name, it's almost as if it is really the sound of rushing water or crashing waves.

Why am I standing like this before this king? As he calls my name again, two more figures step into clarity and grab me by the arms and shoulders.

"Why am I here?" I ask as I begin to struggle to break free from their grasp. "I've done nothing wrong!" They squeeze tighter, trying to stop me from getting away. "What do you want from me?" I shout.

"Nehemiah!" I sit up in my bed, startled to find my sister Abbi shaking me. "Come on, it's time to wake up. You're going to be late for school."

"OK, OK, I'm awake," I mumble as she finally lets go of me. Sitting up, I try to clear my mind of the lingering cobwebs of my dream. I look around the room to get my bearings. The tall dresser with a picture of my father and I on top from when I was five or six. The desk with an oil lamp and the stack of books I used to research my history report. The overstuffed chair in the corner that I sometimes sat in while reading. And back to my bed. Not much, but better than the room Abbi and I had to share when I was a kid. At least in this one I have a measure of privacy. Well, except right now, or course.

"Were you having that dream again?" Abbi asks as I bring my legs out from under the blankets and let my feet hit the floor. I don't answer because I'm still trying to process it all and remember if anything is

different this time. Abbi opens my closet door and riffles through my shirts before tossing me a dark blue sweater. "Here, it's cold again today."

"Thanks." It was more of a noise than an actual word, since I'm yawning as I say it.

"You're welcome. And you didn't answer my question," she gently presses, bringing the dream back up again.

"Yes, it was the same dream. Nothing different," I mumbled, a little more coherent this time. This was maybe the seventh or eighth time I'd had the same dream in the last two years. The first couple of times I didn't think anything about it, now it was beginning to worry me.

"We can make an appointment with the doctor if you'd like," she suggests, then hesitantly adds, "We can afford it now." Maybe it's why we can afford it now that is causing the dreams. I don't know.

"No, I'll be fine... it's only a dream." It's not so much a lie as it is wishful thinking.

"Well, get dressed and come out to the kitchen. I've already made some oatmeal for you," she says as she picks up a few pieces of dirty clothes off my floor and moves toward the door. "If you hurry, you'll still make it before the second gong."

"Abbi," I call out as she is heading out the door. She stops and pokes her head back in. "Thanks. I mean... for everything. And, I'm sorry about making you worry."

"Just don't let it happen again. Straight home from school after practice today." She gives me one of those smiles that is a mix of happy

and sad, then gets back to heading down the hallway to continue her routine which probably began an hour or two ago.

I take her advice and she's right, I make it into my seat just as the second gong strikes, signaling the start of another school day. Of course, Abbi is usually right about things and I tend to listen to her more these last couple of years than I did when I was younger. Yes, I'm fifteen and she is my older sister, but ever since that night two years ago, things had changed. They had to.

"Hey, Nehemiah," a voice says to my right with a cheerful kind of sigh.

"Hey, Elise," I respond, pulling my books from my pack and placing them on the table we share. "Did you finish your report?" I ask for the sake of conversation. I haven't known her long, but we usually end up sitting next to each other because her last name is Keating and mine is Keevah. Sometimes our teachers got creative and let us sit where we want, but when they don't, here we are.

"Yeah, barely though," she says, sighing again, "I swear, Mr. Gilliam has it out for us - this is the third history report this year!"

"Nah," I respond with a shrug, "I think he just wants to help us learn from where we've been..."

"So we'll know where we are going," she laughs as she finishes Mr. Gilliam's mantra. She playfully hits my arm, eyes lighting up as she does. Elise isn't the best looking girl in school, but she is pretty enough. She is about average height, but seems taller. It's the way she carries herself, and that long, athletic build that always seems ready for action.

Her hair is dirty-blonde and straight, and she only puts it up in a pony-tail when it comes time for playing nets, a game similar to the ancient game of lacrosse. We both play on the school's tournament team, and I hate to admit, but she is better than me. The fact that we go to the best school in the city, with the best coaches probably helps. At least that is what I keep telling myself.

"Mr. Kevah, Miss Keating... anything you want to share with the class?" Mr. Gilliam asks from the front of the room. We both just shrug, so he continues and turns around to point at a spot on the large map on the wall, "If not, let's get started where we left off yesterday -- family history projects." As he says this, a folded note lands softly on my desk, and I see Noah smiling and motioning for me to read it.

Hiding the paper behind my stack of books, I carefully unfold it and read, "Want to hang out this afternoon?"

"No," I mouth to him with a slight shake of my head. Of course, he doesn't like this and wrinkles his forehead under the brown hair that hangs down into his eyes as he frowns. I know this isn't the end of this "discussion".

A few moments later, another note lands on my desk. "Did you get in trouble?" I turn toward him and nod "yes", just as Mr. Gilliam calls Elise's name.

"Miss Keating, your turn."

Elise lets out a sigh, gathers some things off her side of the table, and whispers, "Wish me luck" as she gets up and moves to the front of the class. That means I'll be next.

I reach down and pick up the long staff part of my attack stick -- which isn't really an official attack stick like the Watchmen use... it's more a family heirloom that I had modified after my father died. All around the staff, starting from the top and wrapping their way down, are names. These are the names of my ancestors -- the men in my family going back several generations.

It is the custom of our people for fathers to help each son make a staff like this, and as the son learns the family history, the father carves the names onto the staff. Once you get to your name, there is a special ceremony where the father passes the staff to the son, and speaks a blessing over them. This happens at the age of thirteen. Unfortunately for me, my father was killed just before this was to take place, so Benaiah stepped in his place. But at least Papa was around long enough to teach me our history.

My name is Nehemiah Keevah, and our family is from the clan of Jude, one of twelve from the Kingdom of Omer that lies far to the west of the Eupher River. Shiloh is the capital city of that Kingdom - or it was.

My father taught me that long ago people were not divided into clans and tribes as we are now -- across the world were much larger groups of people called nations. The larger these groups became, the more it seemed they wanted to take over the land that the other groups controlled. This led to small battles which eventually spread and turned into a series of four large wars called the Great Wars.

The last of them was the worst, since there was literally no place you could go where the fighting wasn't taking place. It was so fierce that

eventually fighting face to face was not enough, so nations began to use more powerful weapons that flew through the air and left great destruction. Other specialized weapons targeted power plants and grids, destroying their ability to generate any power at all. This affected every aspect of life, and soon enough, order turned into chaos.

With the cities and electricity gone, the rule of those nations began to crumble. Each nation had systems in place called governments, establishing rules people lived by. They also had armed men called police who enforced those laws locally, and great armies of men who would protect the nation itself. Papa explained they were kind of like the Watchmen we had now -- but how ours now did both.

He also explained how after the wars, people didn't trust these governments anymore. So instead of reestablishing, they went back to a system used long ago, allowing kings to rule over them. I remember that conversation because it was on my tenth birthday and we were in the market once again. Papa had told me I could pick out a special toy for myself, and I couldn't choose between two different sets of toy soldiers.

"Papa," I asked, "what is wrong with these Watchmen uniforms? Why are they red instead of blue?"

"Well, Nehemiah, that's because they are from another kingdom and they serve another king," he explained, "Each king has his own set of colors and his own emblem. See," he pointed to the crest on the different tiny little flags in each set, "those are the marks of each king's family. That's how we tell them apart."

"Hmmm," I responded, deep in thought, "does our family have one, too?"

"Yes, son, I'm sure our family has an emblem, too."

"So why aren't you a king, if we have an emblem, too?"

My father laughed as he explained, "Well, son, it takes more than an emblem to make a king. Usually their families are very powerful, or maybe they had an ancestor who was a king long ago."

"But you're powerful, Papa," I responded, still not understanding, "you know all of the people here in the market!"

"It takes more than knowing a few people here in Petra to become a king," he responded gently. Then my father explained that in many nations the men placed into those positions already had family lines that could be traced back to the earlier days of royal rule. For those places it was easy to give them the authority, but in places with no clear lines to ancient thrones it became pretty bad as powerful families fought against others for the right to rule over a kingdom. Those families that were better connected always seemed to win out in the end, and more times than not these kings turned out to be ruthless rulers who showed little mercy to those under them.

It was many months later that he taught me it was a king like this who had destroyed Shiloh more than two hundred years ago -- his name was Neber, King of Avalar, a realm far to our east. And to make sure we would never rise up against him in revenge, Neber forced the people of Omer to leave their homes and then spread them out around the rest of his kingdom. He didn't carry all of the Omerites off though -- he left

many sick and elderly people behind with only a man named Jerome to watch over them. He was what we call a Seer, someone who was believed to have supernatural insight and able to see what the future holds. King Neber didn't believe in Adonai, the One God of Omer, so instead of just destroying the temple where we worshipped in Shiloh, he ordered every rock from its walls be pulled apart and set on fire.

But, my father used this to teach me that even in the darkest of times we should always have hope. He said it was hard for our people at first, but eventually Neber died and the kingdom of Avalor was overthrown by a man named Cyre, King of Estancia. Cyre was a good King and eventually most Omerites seemed to blend well into life in this foreign land.

After some time, King Cyre allowed a man named Zithri to lead a large group of our people back to Omer to rebuild the temple in Shiloh. He did this not only as a gesture of good will (since the temple was a symbol to Omerites everywhere of our heritage), but my father said also out of reverence. It seems that one of the Seers in Estancia showed King Cyre a passage written in an ancient scroll from several hundred years ago. It said that a King named Cyre would be raised up to bless the people of Omer -- and of course King Cyre wanted to make sure that he was the one to fulfill this prediction.

When Zithri and his group arrived in Shiloh, they sent word back to Petra of the devastation they discovered. What was once a thriving, beautiful city where people from all over the world would come, Shiloh was now an empty and desolate place. After the people had been exiled,

Neber forbade the Omerites to go back to our land, so it remained untouched for seventy years. When I asked why no one took care of it, my father reminded me it was because only the old and sick were left behind, and they couldn't take care of it. Eventually all of them died as well, leaving the land completely untouched. But as discouraging as this was, Zithri and those he brought with him started to rebuild the temple from those stones that Neber had burned so long before.

It wasn't until I was thirteen and just a few months before their deaths that my father and mother explained what could have been one of the darkest parts of the story. That talk wasn't in the market, but at home one night around our table after we ate dinner. I had asked why anyone from Omer would want to go back if everything was so bad there, and everyone was being so good to us in Estancia. It was my mother who told me this part of the story.

"Well, Bohten," this was her nickname for me -- it was the Omeri word for peanut, "there have been many good years for our people here, but there have been bad ones, too - some of them not too long ago."

"Really, Mum?" I asked. "But everyone is nice to us at the market, and I have lots of friends from Estancia at school."

"Yes, Nehemiah," she replied, "but when your father and I were children there was a very dark time where our people were almost completely destroyed."

Then she told me how everything seemed to be going well with the Omerites in Petra until about thirty years earlier. That was when a man called The Agagite rose up to try to destroy us. King Cyre had died and

another good King named Zertex took the throne. The Agagite was his chief advisor, and he held a grudge against my people that went back more than six-hundred years.

So, one night he got the King drunk and made up a story to convince him that the Omerites had devised a plot to kill the King. In his drunkenness the King believed him, and he signed a law allowing there to be a day where anyone in the realm could raise up against the Omerites. They could kill them and take their homes and land as punishment for this supposed plot against the King. The Agagite was extremely happy with this, as he wanted to literally wipe out my people's existence.

This is where my mother began to get excited about this story she was telling me.

She explained there was something The Agagite did not know -- actually, not even the King knew it at the time. The King had just completed a massive search for a new queen where every eligible young woman in the kingdom was to be considered. He ended up choosing an Omeri girl named Etara, but her family told her to keep her heritage a secret at first - they feared that because she was not Estancian she would lose her life if she made her heritage known to the King.

"But, Bohten," my mother said with a sparkle in her eyes, "it was Zertex's love for Etara that saved the people of Omer in the end."

"What do you mean, Mum?" I had asked.

"Well, when Etara learned of The Agagite's plot, at first she was afraid to go before the King to defend her people. But her cousin came to

her and he challenged her -- he told her that if she did not do it, that Adonai would use someone else to save them."

"But from who, Mum?" I asked. "Where else would the help come from?"

"That's just it, Bohten," my mother had replied, "there probably was no one else - it would have been too late. But then her cousin said to her, " she reached over and took my face in her hands and looked right at me, "He said, 'Who knows, Etara, why you've been brought to the kingdom for such a time as *this*.'" She paused and leaned back before continuing. "That convinced Etara to go before the king, asking for his favor and mercy be shown to our people."

It turned out Zertex didn't care what her heritage was - Etara had completely won his heart and he loved her deeply. So, when she came to him about the plot against our people, the King was angry that The Agagite had tricked him. He was also horrified, because a King's law could not be changed once it was written.

"Mum, what did they do? Did we fight back?" I asked with an anger and frustration I rarely felt, "Did a lot of our people die that day?" I didn't like the way this story was turning out.

"Bohten, let me finish," she had said with a laugh. "You are always wanting to know how things turn out -- always thinking ahead to the end of the story. I swear you are thirteen going on thirty."

She then told me how Zertex had the wisdom to create and sign another law - this one saying on the day of the uprising against us, that any Omerite attacked was allowed to defend themselves. This new law alone

was enough to keep most from even wanting to attack our people, and for those who did it didn't go well. So, instead of being destroyed, it turned into a time of great blessing for us. And the stories she told of the celebration around the kingdom were wonderful, but my favorite part of this tale was hearing how the very gallows that The Agagite built to use to hang the leaders of my people, were the ones the King ordered The Agagite be hung from instead.

I remembered my father finishing out the story for me, "So, Nehemiah," he explained, "with an Omeri queen, King Zertex was very favorable toward our people. And little by little groups have been returning to Shiloh. Then when King Zertex died, that is when his son became our King."

"You mean King Artex is Etara's son?" I asked, "He is Omeri?"

"Yes -- well, part Omeri at least... and like his father he has been a good man who allows even more of our people to return to Omer." He leaned forward, and in a whisper full of excitement had said, "And even recently there is a man named Ezer who has been leading people back to Shiloh!" I learned later that this man Ezer was a scribe and priest who wanted to finish the work that Zithri had started on the temple.

"I think that's enough for now," my mother interrupted, giving my father a look of caution. Then she turned to me, "Bohten, don't you have homework to finish?"

"Yeah, a little I guess."

"Good," my father had said, "But first, help Mum with the dishes."

"But what about Ezer? I want to know more about him?"

"Another time. Soon enough you'll know about him." And with that, the last lesson they would ever teach me about our history was over. I didn't know it then, but it was because of Ezer's plans to return to Shiloh that my father and mother would eventually be killed.

"Mr. Keevah? Nehemiah?" I could hear my name being called amongst some giggles. "Class, be quiet." It was Mr. Gilliam.

"Yes?" I asked.

"It's your turn."

"Oh, right," I responded, looking over to see that Elise was already back in her seat and smiling at me. I stared for a moment too long, and her face flushed crimson as her eyes got bigger and motioned toward the class.

"Any time now," Mr. Gilliam urged. "*Are you prepared today?*"

"Yes, sir," I said, and lifted up my staff. I pushed back my chair and made my way to the front of the room. I looked at Mr. Gilliam for some signal to begin.

"Go ahead, Nehemiah."

"Thank you," I say, then clear my throat, "Mr. Gilliam is always saying we can't know where we are going unless we know where we are from. Well, my people take that pretty seriously." I pause for a moment and look at Mr. Gilliam, and he motions for me to continue. "I am Nehemiah Keevah. My father's name was Josef, and our family is from the clan of Jude, one of twelve from the Kingdom of Omer. This is a mattah," I say, lifting up the staff, "We also call it a naming stick. It has the names of all my ancestors carved on it, starting with a man named

Abel of Arbath... then," I trace my finger around the staff and down to the bottom of the list, "ending with my name here."