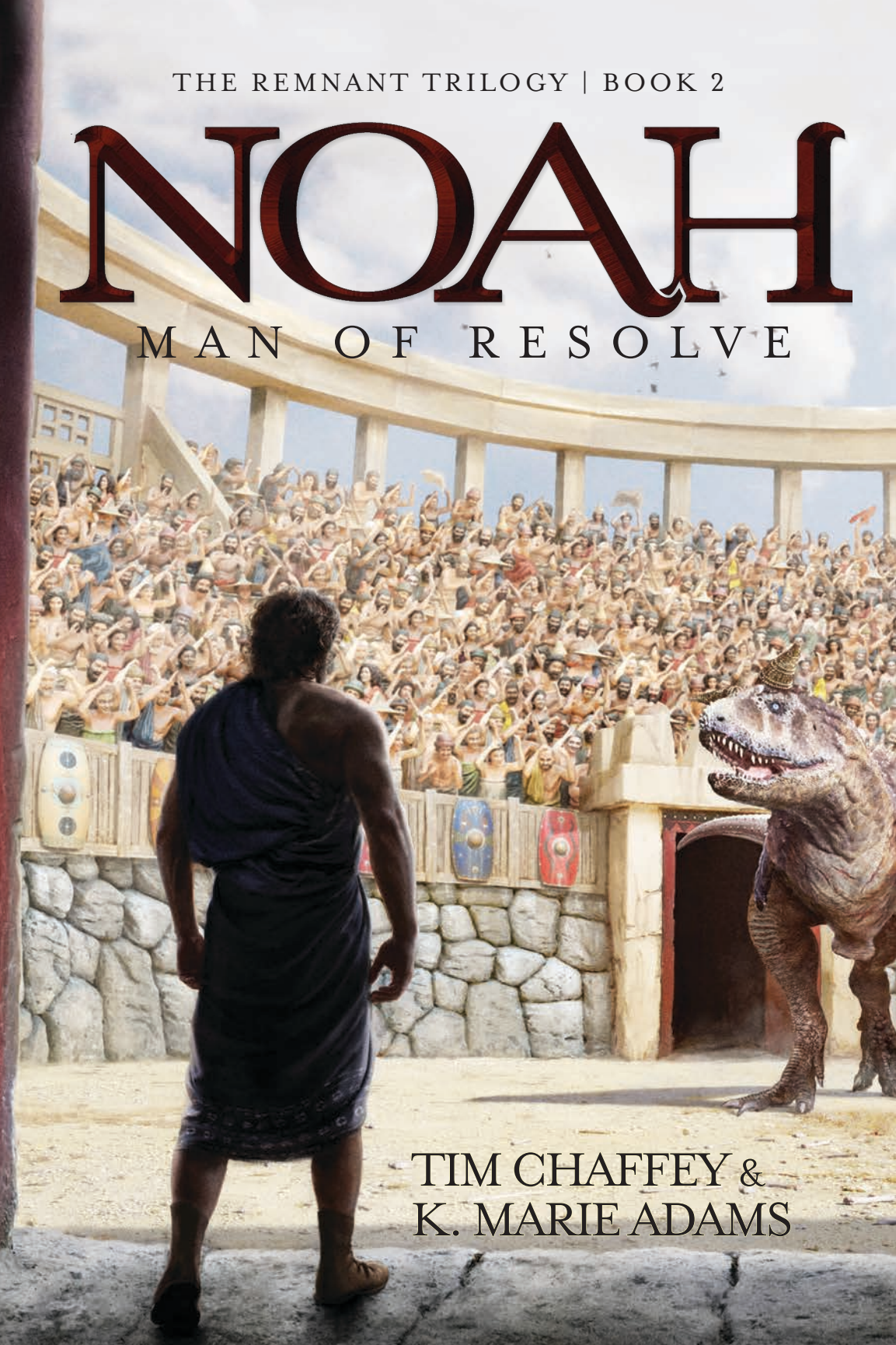


THE REMNANT TRILOGY | BOOK 2

NOAH

MAN OF RESOLVE

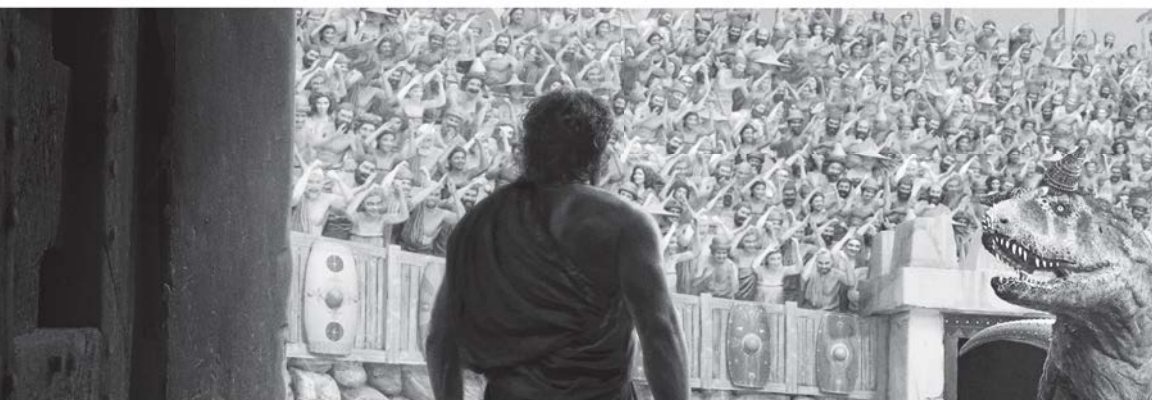


TIM CHAFFEY &
K. MARIE ADAMS

THE REMNANT TRILOGY | BOOK 2

NOAH

MAN OF RESOLVE



TIM CHAFFEY &
K. MARIE ADAMS

Thank You

While our names can be found on the front cover, we recognize that many others played a significant role in helping us complete this book.

The team at Master Books, we can't thank you enough. Tim, thanks for choosing not only to read a work of fiction, but to publish it as well. Brittany, Laura, Katie, and others, you've been a delight to work with, and you make even the mundane fun.

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To all those in our lives, who shape our writing by walking out the experiences of the day to day with us, we love you and thank you.

Most of all, we thank our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Thank You for dying in our place and then conquering the grave. Thank You for revealing so much about who You are through Your word and world. Thank You for godly examples like Noah and for growing our own faith and understanding of You as we wrote this novel.

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DEAR READER,

Thank you for joining us for another look at what Noah may have been like in the years prior to the Flood. In the first book, we followed Noah on a coming-of-age adventure when he left home to work as a shipbuilder's apprentice. He faced many challenges along the way as he learned more about the world beyond his hometown. He stood for justice, met his wife, resisted temptation, and faced a growing evil in the land. Book Two picks up right where book one ended.

As we mentioned in the opening of the first book, we realize that so much of the story we are telling is made up. The Bible provides scant information about the world in which he lived and what Noah was like before God instructed him to build the Ark. Our story is rooted in those small details revealed in the first six chapters of Genesis.

We certainly do not want to be guilty of adding to Scripture, so we have spent considerable space near the end of both novels explaining why we depicted people, places, and events in certain ways. We stated in the first novel that one of our objectives in writing these stories was to use fiction to help readers learn to discern between fiction and biblical fact. That may sound like a strange goal for a novel, but stories can be used as powerful teaching tools. One need look no further than the parables taught by Jesus. While our story is not a parable or an allegory, it is intended to teach biblical truths in the context of fiction.

We have intentionally avoided many of the stereotypical views about Noah that are not spelled out in Scripture in an effort to challenge the reader to pick up the Bible and pay close attention to what it actually states. The nonfiction section in the back of the book is also designed to help the reader distinguish between fact and fiction, as well as highlighting areas where the novel intersects with exhibits that can be seen at the Ark Encounter theme park in Williamstown, Kentucky.

Welcome aboard for another journey as we respectfully imagine what life may have been like for our great, great . . . grandfather Noah.

Sincerely,

Tim Chaffey and K. Marie Adams



CHAPTER 1

Havil — Noah's 46th year

Emzara sprinted behind Noah, her eyes on the flap, flap of his robe as they fled the courtyard and the golden stare of the serpent idol Nachash. Her weary mind ran circles around the events of the day: the excitement and pleasure of exploring a new place with her new husband, his enjoyment at her delight when she picked out Tubal-Cain's extravagant surprise gift. And later, the knock at the door, the guards grabbing Noah, the dread that he had been killed. And now this: Noah returned safely and the guards saying it was all a misunderstanding. *So why the rush?* As sickened as she was by what she had seen tonight, the sensuality and godlessness of the ceremony didn't pose a serious threat to their lives, right? *Why won't he look me in the eye?*

Without warning, Emzara crashed into Noah's back as he halted in the middle of the street. She grabbed onto him to steady her balance. "Sorry."

Unfazed, Noah reached out his arm and stopped Zain. Pointing to one of the guest homes, he whispered, "I sent Farna straight to the boat, so tell his crew to pack everything immediately and meet us there as soon as possible."

"What happened?" Zain asked. "Why are we in such a hurry?"

"We have to leave before that ceremony ends. Naamah's preoccupied for now, but Garun told me I'm not safe in this city. Be on alert for her guards."

Zain gave a curt nod. "Is it something you've done?"

"No, quite the opposite actually." Noah glanced back down the road. "I'll explain later."

"Let's hope they've already resupplied the ship for the return trip," Zain said.

"Indeed."

Zain paused and looked back toward the city square. "One more problem. We have no idea where Ashur is."

"Ashur." Noah sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. "Now what?"

"You two grab our things," Zain said. "I'll tell the crew to get going, and then go look for Ashur."

"With that crowd?" Emzara's voice shook.

"What choice do we have?" Zain's question hung in the air for a moment before he continued. "You get to the boat. The important thing is to have you leave safely. If I'm not back, go without me."

Noah held up an arm. "But . . ."

"You're the one in trouble, not me or Ashur. We'll find our own way back, if necessary. Let's go."

Noah reached out and gripped the councilmember's arm, delaying his momentum. "May the Creator guide and protect you."

"And you, my friend. Now go."

Grimly, they made their way to their luxurious quarters. Zain hustled to the house on the left, while Noah and Emzara entered their lodging. The room was completely dark and unguarded.

Emzara turned to light a wick, but Noah stopped her with a hand over hers.

"No, let's work in the dark."

She frowned, peering up into his face and wishing for the light just so she could read his expression. "Very well."

Hurriedly, they grabbed their belongings. Emzara laid one of Noah's tunics on the ground in a long rectangle and arranged their folded garments on top. Strands of piks and pikas, clothing, and a few toiletries gave shape to the growing mound.

In her haste, she bumped into Noah, and a bottle of ointment flew from her hand. It shattered in a far corner, filling the air with the sharp scent of herbs and spices. "Sorry."

Already turning away to resume his work, Noah said, “Leave it. Are you hurt?”

“No, but look at me.” She put a hand on his arm, her eyes searching out his. “Please tell me what happened.”

For the first time since he had been returned to her, Noah held her gaze. “I promise I’ll tell you everything, but there’s no time right now.” He bent down and kissed her forehead, muffling his voice against her skin. “We need to hurry.”

* * *

Naamah twirled, her bare feet tracing the same intricate steps to the dance that she performed earlier in the evening. Tap, tap, tap-tap-tap. In the final steps of the choreography, her toe gracefully patted against the sandstone flooring that lined the gardens on top of the palace. She dipped her left shoulder and glanced over it to where the seer lagged slightly behind, his lanky frame dark against the backlighting of the torches. Laughing, she ran back toward him and swirled around several potted kalum trees, enjoying the spicy aroma their flowers gave off.

“How did I do tonight?” she asked, looking up at him and hoping he approved.

“Very well, my child.” The old man lightly patted her cheeks, as a father who was proud of his child would do.

“Did I?”

“Yes, your singing mesmerized the people. Hearing your talent in person was greater than I imagined.”

“I’m so glad.” Unable to keep still, she spun as they walked toward the waist-high parapet marking the edge of the expansive rooftop garden.

“You’re a natural leader, and tonight you received some of the recognition you deserve.”

Naamah glowed under his high praise and leaned against the low stone wall. “There were so many people. Look at all the lights below, even this late at night.”

They both peered out at the city, which still bustled. Pockets of people moved about the streets below, laughing with their companions and calling out good-naturedly to other groups that passed by. The sheer number of lit windows indicated that the celebratory atmosphere moved

beyond the streets. Music and drumbeats sounded out from a variety of places.

She flung her hands wide. "Isn't the city magnificent?"

"It's quite a sight. And you are its only princess."

"Yes, I am. Everyone got to watch me."

"And as priestess." He stroked the serpent image atop his staff. "Introducing them to Nachash was your greatest achievement tonight. Against the backdrop of your talents, the people saw the beauty in following him."

Naamah pressed her hands together and trembled with excitement. "I can't wait for next year's celebration. I'll dazzle them even more."

The seer gave a patient chuckle. "I have no doubts, but listen to me." He grabbed her hands. "Tonight was only a first step for you. With my guidance, you can achieve power you've never dreamed of. The success you now feel — and deserve — is only a glimpse of what is to come."

"More?"

He swept his arm out. "All that you see here — the might of your father's soldiers and the skill of your craftsmen." He shook his head slowly. "It's nothing compared to the power available through Nachash."

Intrigued, Naamah looked up and rubbed her chin, pondering the implications.

"The first time we met I saw greatness and giftedness in you. And power — that few can possess and even fewer will be able to resist."

Naamah leaned in closer. "Show me. Teach me everything."

A crooked smile spread across his lips. "Patience. It takes time. I'll guide you in the ways of Nachash, and as you learn, your power and wisdom will grow."

Hearing the rustle of leaves, Naamah stepped back as she glanced around. "Who's there? Speak."

Nivlac stepped forward from the foliage into the well-lit patio area, accompanied by Tsek, a mountain of a man. Nivlac bowed. "Princess, the king's captain has a message for you." Nivlac retreated to his post a short distance away.

Tsek bowed. "Evening peace, Princess. I'm here on behalf of the king. He wishes to inform you that he's pleased with your part in the festivities. Because of your efforts, the people learned how great a leader

they have. Now they have a god worthy of the leader who has done much to build this city into what it is. And you, Naamah, played a part in that.”

Naamah stiffened as Tsek droned on. *It's just like Father to take what should've been a simple compliment and make it all about himself.* Discouraged, she looked up at Tsek's strong jaw line as she waited for him to finish. *Power? Can I really be as powerful as the seer promised? Could I turn Tsek's loyalty to me instead of my father? Imagine that. His own captain following me.* She grinned.

“I'm glad that you're pleased with your father's report of the evening's successes.”

Pulled suddenly from her reverie, Naamah blinked quickly, attempting to speed up her brain's responses. “Of course. I'm happy as long as my father is happy.”

Tsek bobbed his head. “Do you have anything you want me to take to the king in reply?”

She looked at the seer, who had taken a seat a short distance away, while she searched for the right phrase. Stepping close to Tsek, she brushed an imaginary speck from his broad, tanned shoulder, being sure to let her hand linger longer than necessary. She cast him an alluring look as she backed away. “Tell the king that my victory rests in his vast accomplishments.”

Tsek searched her face before replying. “I shall relay that. And may I say that, personally, I thought you were the highlight of the evening.”

She flashed him a broad smile. “You are most kind, Tsek. Thank you for bringing words from my father.” She dismissed him with a small wave of her hand.

He bowed and looked back at her twice as he walked through the garden.

The seer rejoined Naamah, wearing a slight frown. “That was not the type of power I was alluding to.”

With a flip of her head, she tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Oh, I care nothing for him, but it wouldn't hurt to have his complete loyalty.” She turned around to look at the city again. “There is, however, someone that I'd like to bring to his knees before me. Do you think you could help with that?”

“Perhaps. Tell me what's on your mind.”

“A man slighted me twice. He dismissed me once a while ago and again just today.” She let tears gather at the corner of her eyes, playing the role skillfully and without hesitation.

“Would this be the man your guard mentioned this evening? Noah? The shipbuilder?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“And just what do you want to do?” He gently touched her shoulder. She wanted vengeance. *But how?* “I — I . . . never mind.”

“Capture this man’s wife so that he has to beg you for her life.”

Once hidden in the recesses of her mind, her darkest thoughts became clear. And yet, the seer spoke them calmly and with even tones, as if he were simply discussing what would be served for the next meal.

Naamah’s eyes widened. “How — how did you know?”

The seer looked steadily at her. “I’ve been trying to tell you that the power I can teach you is beyond anything you’ve imagined.”

Still awed by his ability, she stared into the wrinkled face before her.

“If you’re bent on making this man pay, then call your guards to go get his wife. But I must say, you’re setting your ambition too low.”

She shook her head, brushing off his disapproval. “Maybe I am. But if I put this behind me, then I can focus more fully on what you have to teach me.” She raised her voice so that the sentry stationed on the terrace might hear her. “Nivlac!”

Her most dependable guard hurried across the roof and stood before her. “Yes, Princess.”

“I have an urgent mission for you.”

CHAPTER 2

About halfway there,” Noah said as they crested a rise in the road. “Are we going too fast for you?”

“No, I’m alright.” Emzara ducked behind Noah’s broad shoulder, thankful for his presence. The whole moon was bright and cast many shadows over the cobbled streets they raced through. Since Havil was built into hilly terrain, several retaining walls rose up, supporting other roads that followed the curvature of the landscape. The way the roads crisscrossed over each other reminded Emzara of a braided hairstyle in which lengths of hair looped and intersected and were tucked out of sight behind other strands. *I sure hope Noah knows where we are.*

Her lungs burned as she followed Noah down yet another hill, but the distinct sound of the waves slapping the shore told her they were close. Suddenly, Noah stopped and gently moved her against the stone retaining wall that towered over their heads on the left. Little bits of grass poked brazenly between the edges of some of the rocks. The cool grit grated against her skin as she looked up at her husband’s face. Making no noise, he jerked his head in the direction of the wall, signaling her to move toward it, before flattening himself against it.

Emzara tucked herself even farther into the protective shadows. “What is it?”

“We’re close to the shore. I just want to make sure we can reach the boat without any interference.” He leaned forward and scanned both directions. “Looks clear from here. Come on.”

They walked quickly toward the beach. Finally reaching the gravel road that ran parallel to the water, she spotted the gentle curvature of the peak which formed the bow of their boat. The light hanging from the edge was lit. *Farna and the crew are on board!* Rejuvenated, Emzara readied herself to burst toward it, but Noah stopped her and pointed.

Four guards sat where the dock met the shore, blocking the path. Emzara shrank back and followed Noah, ducking out of sight behind a large building. She looked at him wide-eyed, wondering if he would come up with a solution.

He blinked. "So what now?"

"I'm scared." She ventured the words as quietly as she could.

Noah pulled her close and she clung to him. "Hang in there," he whispered against her ear, tendrils of her hair brushing against his cheek. "It's not over yet."

"What can we do?"

"I don't know." Noah let out a breath of frustration.

"Are they from Naamah?"

"Hard to say, but I don't think so. They're not paying too much attention." Noah ruffled his hair. "How do we get through?" He lightly pounded his forehead with his fist, as if such an action could speed up his thoughts.

Be brave. Don't give up now. Suddenly, an idea came to mind. She placed a hand on his chest and looked at him with a gleam in her eye. "Let's go swimming."

"What?"

"Well, you're not as fast as Aterre, but we don't need speed, just silence. Forget about using the dock. Let's swim to the boat."

"They'll see us for sure." He stared at the sky. "Unless those clouds block the moonlight." He pulled his head abruptly back down and looked at her. "Wait. I didn't know you could swim."

"I grew up on the water, with a shipbuilder for a father. Of course I can swim."

Noah shook his head and tightened his grip on her, pride and amazement spreading over his features. "I could just kiss you right now."

She tilted her head and studied his eyes as he looked into hers. His love and admiration shone back at her without a trace of deception or guilt. Whatever had happened earlier with Naamah, his conscience was

clear. She smiled. “Well, since we have to stay here for a bit, what are you waiting for?”

He eagerly accepted her offer. Suddenly pulling away, he looked at her closely.

“Em, you should know what happened earlier tonight. And I’d rather tell you sooner than later.”

“Very well.”

“Here.” He led her parallel to the water, circling around to approach the boat from the other side. Hiding behind an outcropping of trees, they made their way close to the shoreline, putting them more than two hundred cubits from the guards.

“There, I can see them between the leaves of the brush.”

“So tell me about today.” She nestled close to him.

“Em. . . .” Noah paused, looking serious. “This whole thing . . . the arrest. . . . All of it was a setup. Naamah, she, uh, offered herself to me.”

“What?” Emzara took a step back so she could see his face.

“She staged the execution so she could pretend to rescue me. She wanted. . . .” He stopped.

Emzara gently rested her hand on his cheek, and he drew a deep breath.

“The whole point,” he went on, “was to get me to her room where she did her best to seduce me. One moment we were talking about the ceremony, and the next I had to keep my eyes closed.”

The gaze he fixed on her showed no deceit, but she couldn’t stop the question hovering on her lips. “So nothing happened?”

“Absolutely nothing. She repulses me.”

Emzara balled up her fists while she turned and glared at the ground. *How dare she! How dare she try to take my husband!* For a long moment she stood there, warring with the anger at Naamah and, she realized, even at Noah.

Closing her eyes, Emzara pulled in and released a deep breath. No. She could not blame Noah for being pure, for being blind to Naamah’s trap. Unsure of what to say, she softly leaned her head against her husband’s chest.

“I got out of there as soon as I could. Garun was on duty, and he helped me reach you at the ceremony. He also cautioned me that she may not give up and might seek revenge as soon as the ceremony’s over.”

She shuddered. "I need to know. Were you ever attracted to her?"

Though she wasn't looking at him, she felt Noah shake his head. "I can't deny that she's beautiful and talented, but she could never measure up to you in any way. You completely captivate me."

Straightening her shoulders, she turned back to face him. "I trust you. It's hard to hear, but I'd rather know than not."

Noah nodded. "And I wanted you to know right away, but not in front of the others."

The two sat together in the silence as Noah watched the sky. She closed her eyes and silently thanked the Creator for giving her a faithful husband. After some time, Emzara's thoughts drifted to home. She imagined walking hand-in-hand with Noah near the waterfall where he had proposed to her, but her brief reverie ended as Noah kissed her forehead. "It's as dark as it's going to get. And you have some swimming skills to show me."

Emzara reached up and brushed his face with her hand. "Do you really think this is a good plan?"

Noah nodded. "We'll make it."

She pursed her lips and turned away. *Why are you always so optimistic?* Then she shook her head, realizing that his confidence was one of the many aspects she admired about him. "Well, either way, we're in this together." She hitched up the loose fabric that hung around her ankles and wove it into the sash in the middle of her garment, noting that her husband was fully aware of her preparations. Queasiness struck her as her mind pictured his earlier encounter with Naamah, but it dissipated as she reminded herself of his faithfulness to her. "Ready?"

The two eased slowly into the cool water, packs strapped around their waists. They paddled noiselessly into deeper water, and she could feel the tug of the extra weight from the soaked belongings. Kicking harder and keeping her nose above the water, she concentrated on the safety of the boat. Noah kept close to her as they made slow progress. *Just a few more strokes.* She kept her limbs beneath the water, ensuring silence and minimal splashing.

"Stop!"

She slowly turned toward the dock, still paddling in place to keep her head above water. The guards now stood and blocked two figures from stepping onto the dock.

Noah gestured for her to hurry. "I don't know what's going on, but let's take advantage of the diversion."

When the side of their vessel loomed above them, Noah pulled himself aboard, then turned to haul up the sodden bundles Emzara handed to him. She held up a hand, and he lifted her from the water with a gush of sound that made her wince. Across the deck, a crew member turned.

Emzara held up a finger in front of her mouth, and the man's lips snapped closed as he recognized her. A familiar voice rang out from the shore, causing the crewman to spin in that direction.

Ashur!

"Look, we simply want to get onto our ship. That one." There was a pause, as if the unseen speaker were pointing. "We've no interest in the other. Why would we try to steal the king's vessel, when we're with the company that brought it?"

"He speaks truth." Farna's strong voice joined the conversation. "You may let them pass."

"You know this man?" one of the guards asked.

"Of course," Farna said, sounding almost bored. "He came with our delegation. Ashur, what are you needing this time of night?"

"We couldn't sleep after the festival, so we decided to pay you a visit."

It's Zain! Emzara slid behind a large cargo crate, squatting so Noah could crouch over her as they both peeked around the corner to see the action on the dock.

"Do they have your permission to proceed then?" the guard called.

"Sure." Farna chuckled. His sandals made a hollow slap as he jumped onto the dock and strode toward the cluster of men. "Well, maybe not the shorter fellow. You may want to detain him."

One of the soldiers reached for Ashur but was stopped by his leader's hand on his chest. "He was being sarcastic, Kotic."

"Sorry about that." The guard pointed to the other side of the dock, where Lamech's boat rocked in the gentle swell. "The king wants to make sure his new acquisition is protected."

"Can't be too careful," Farna said. He led Zain and Ashur to the boat and helped them climb aboard. Keeping his voice down, he said, "Now we just need Noah and Emzara."

Noah shifted and stuck his head out from behind the crate, speaking barely above a whisper, "We're here."

“How did . . .?”

“We saw the guards and didn’t want to risk it.”

Farna took in their soaked state and then looked at his crew. “Get us moving now.” He turned back to Noah and Emzara. “Two of those men are the ones I’ve been teaching to sail the ship. But I’m glad you played it safe.”

Noah turned to Ashur. “I can’t believe Zain found you so fast. What happened?”

Ashur shrugged. “I was having a good time when I looked up and noticed that you had all left. I made my way through the crowd, toward the guesthouses, and ran into Zain.”

Zain shook his head. “I’m just thankful I didn’t have to wade through that mob again.” He shot Noah a sober look. “Naamah was already gone, and things were rapidly getting out of hand.”

Farna gestured with his hand and stated in a husky growl, “Loose the ropes, men. Let’s get out of here.”

The crew jumped to obey, freeing the boat, then grabbing pushpoles to shove away from the dock.

“You there!”

Emzara looked up to see about a dozen men with torches approach the dock. The leader called out again. “You! Guards!”

The four soldiers stood at attention as Emzara ducked out of sight.

“Have you seen a man and a woman come this way? We’re under orders from the princess to find them.”

“No woman, sir. Just the captain and crew and a few of the delegation.”

“Be on lookout. No one gets on or off that ship.”

On the deck, the puddles left by Emzara and Noah now glowed faintly gray as the first flush of dawn eased over the horizon. “Guess it was worth that swim.”

He flashed a grin. “Completely worth it.”

“Why is that ship moving?” the leader of the newcomers asked.

“It’s — hey! Stop!”

“Move.” Farna barked the order, and their sail shot up, flapping then stretching taut as the wind filled it. The ship jerked forward.

Emzara wrapped her arms tightly around her middle as the men on the dock rushed into the king’s ship.

Farna glared at the sail. "Come on," he muttered, rapidly tapping his fingertips. "From where they sit, they can still cut us off."

Emzara stood with the others, watching breathlessly as the bow of the Havilite ship pivoted, facing theirs. A few hard shoves from the shouting men would make Farna's warning a reality.

Suddenly a long screech accompanied by a dull groan filled the early morning air. A yell and two distinct splashes followed. Emzara gripped the side of the boat. *What now?*

Farna swabbed his face and let out a laugh. "Looks like they forgot their lessons already."

Puzzled, Emzara squinted toward the other boat. The last upright of the dock was severely bent. In fact, the whole dock looked lopsided, and the stern remained in its original position. *It's still attached!* In their haste and inexperience, the new crew had forgotten to check all of the moorings and the last one held their ship firmly in its grip. Two crewmembers were in the water. One swam for the dock, and the other struggled to stay above water. A guard on the boat quickly shed his armor and jumped in to help him.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Emzara turned her eyes to what she hoped would be her last view of Havil before taking her place at Noah's side.

CHAPTER 3

Iri Geshem — Noah's 49th year

Noah kissed Emzara on the top of the head and loosened his embrace. "I'll be home in a little while."

Emzara glanced at Tubal-Cain and Adira, who were busy saying their farewell for the evening, and then at Aterre, who rested on a low bench on the other side of the room. Shaking her head at Noah, Emzara curled the left side of her mouth. "Behave yourself."

"Me? Of course." He chuckled and hitched a thumb toward Aterre. "I'm not the one you need to worry about."

"Mmhhh." She gave him a quick kiss. "Let's go, Adira."

"I'm coming."

As Emzara turned to leave, she called back over her shoulder, "Don't let my husband get too silly tonight."

Tubal-Cain laughed. "I'm sure he'll do that on his own."

"Evening peace, Zara." Aterre's playful tone demonstrated he had no intention of heeding her request.

"And that's our sign to leave." Emzara shook her head as she held the door open for Adira. She took a final glance at Noah and smiled. "Evening peace, boys."

Noah smirked and watched her for a moment before closing the door. He picked up his leaf brew from the low table and relaxed on a cushion across from Aterre.

Aterre shifted to make room for Tubal-Cain. "I hate to say it, but pretty soon you won't have to let her go each night."

Sitting down, Tubal-Cain sighed. He put his feet up on the table in the center of the room. "Our wedding can't come soon enough."

"You two complement each other well." Aterre turned up his palms one at a time as if weighing one against the other. "She's pretty and sweet, and you're ugly and grumpy."

Tubal-Cain slapped Aterre's arm with the back of his hand. "You sure you aren't thinking about Zara and Noah?"

"Oh, them too."

"Well, if that's how it works," Noah said, "then I must be all sorts of dreadful things, because Em is wonderful in every way."

Tubal-Cain pretended to gag. "Stop him before I lose my evenfeast."

Noah grinned and threw a pillow at him. "As if you're any better. Lately, it's always 'Adira this' and 'Adira that.' And you aren't even married yet."

"He's right," Aterre said. "She's all you talk about."

Clasping his meaty hands together behind his head, Tubal-Cain reclined. "Beats discussing the weather or blacksmithing." He eyed Aterre before continuing. "She's all I want to think about every waking moment of each day."

"Ugh, you two are intolerable." Aterre held his palms up. "Since when did our game nights turn into this?"

"Since Adira agreed to be my wife." Tubal-Cain let his words trail off as if he were daydreaming about her.

"Not again." Aterre let out an exasperated sigh while the two other men laughed.

"So you really don't care what your father will think?" Noah asked, eyeing Tubal-Cain.

"I wouldn't say that I don't care. Of course I want my father to like her, but we're so far from him, I'm not sure it'll be an issue."

"But isn't the son of a king supposed to marry another person of high status?" Aterre asked.

"I've heard of that in other places, but my father's the first king of Havil, and he hasn't been in that position very long. I'm not sure if he's even given much thought about his successor. That will probably be centuries from now."

“I can’t imagine you being the king of Havil,” Aterre said.

“Really? Why?”

“I just don’t picture you enduring the strict schedule and all the formalities.” Aterre tilted his head. “And there’s that whole ugly and mean thing.”

A not-so-gentle nudge from Tubal-Cain resulted in a lighthearted wrestling match.

Ignoring the two of them, Noah sipped his brew before setting the vessel on the stony floor. Across the room, salty air wafted through the open window facing the beach, carrying a soft chill along with it. To Noah’s right, a short hallway led to Tubal-Cain’s room across from a kitchen and dining area.

Beyond the outer wall of the house to Noah’s left stood Tubal-Cain’s busy forge. In just three years, the blacksmith had taken on two apprentices, and he still needed another one to meet the steady supply of orders for his metal implements. Noah himself often came by on days off to learn the basics.

“Your place looks like it’s almost ready,” Noah said.

Tubal-Cain tried to catch his breath. “And I have you to thank for that. I’ve told you before, you’re the best woodworker I’ve ever seen.”

Noah winked. “I know.”

Aterre cleared his throat. “And you have me to thank for getting you and Adira together.”

Tubal-Cain laughed. “Yes, I suppose I should thank you for the hundredth time for locking Adira and me in the forge’s office so that I’d be forced to talk to her.”

“You’re welcome,” Aterre said. “Come to think of it, Noah, I’m the one that brought you and Zara together, too.”

“Yes, and I believe I’ve already thanked you a hundred times. Isn’t that enough?”

Aterre grinned. “Once more would be nice.”

“Thank you for embarrassing me in front of Em.”

Tubal-Cain stroked the short beard on his chin. “You know, you should open up a shop where you find matches for people. You could call it, You’ll Thank Me Someday.”

The three men laughed as Noah and Tubal-Cain tried to outdo one another over names for the proposed store.

Noah sat up straight and looked at Aterre. “Wait, I have a better idea. A much better idea.”

“Well, it can’t be any worse than the last one.” Aterre dramatically dropped his head into his hands.

Noah pointed at his friend. “Since you played such a key role in helping each of us find a wife, I think we should return the favor.”

Tubal-Cain bolted upright. “That’s a great idea. It’s our turn to play matchmaker.”

Aterre shook his head. “I was wrong. It could be worse.”

“No, this is perfect.” Noah squinted as he pretended to size up Aterre. “Let’s see. I’ve got just the right person in mind.”

Aterre feigned disinterest. “Who?”

Noah tried to stifle his amusement. “How about Pahal?”

Aterre crinkled his nose. “No thanks.”

“Why not? She’s a good baker,” Tubal-Cain said. “You’d be well fed and. . . .”

“Not interested.”

“Why not?” Noah asked, knowing full well the answer. Aterre frequently complained about her squeaky, high-pitched voice. “Just think, she could sing you to sleep every night.”

Aterre snorted. “No, thank you. I’d rather listen to Taht sing a lullaby.”

Through momentary breaks in his laughter, Tubal-Cain said, “I’ve got one.”

Aterre rolled his eyes. “This ought to be good.”

“What about Bakur’s niece, Ehiluel?”

Aterre folded his arms. “Nope. Not interested.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Tubal-Cain asked. “She’s nice. She’s pretty. She’s intelli — oh, that’s the problem. She’s smart.”

“No, that’s not it.” Aterre folded his arms across his chest. “I’m just not attracted to her.”

“Fine, so you’re not interested in the pretty type.” Tubal-Cain looked at Noah and shrugged. “Picky picky.” He stared at the floor before shifting his gaze back to Aterre. “I know!”

Aterre rolled his eyes. “How long do I have to put up with this?”

“As long as it takes,” Noah said, enjoying the chance to tease his friend.

“Fletti, the stonemason’s daughter.”

“Are you crazy?” Aterre asked.

Tubal-Cain feigned offense. “What? I think she likes you.”

“Yeah, she asked about you the last time I saw her.” Noah leaned in and winked. “She said she wanted to kiss you.”

“Ah, I knew it,” Tubal-Cain said. “She’s the one.”

Aterre shook his head. “Right, like she’d say that to either of you madmen.”

Noah angled his head to one side and challenged his friend. “But what if she did?”

Aterre yawned. “I’d rather kiss a grendec.”

All three erupted in laughter.

After several moments, Noah tried to catch his breath as an idea came to mind, but it only made him laugh harder. Finally, he held up a hand and fought to put on a serious face. “Alright, I found your perfect match. Last one.”

“It’d better be.” Aterre’s expression showed that he had grown weary of this game.

“Who is it?” Tubal-Cain asked before taking a drink of his leaf brew.

Noah strained to keep his composure. “She lives close by.”

“Who?” Aterre asked.

“You’re comfortable around her. She’s got several qualities to make the ideal wife and . . . she’s not *too* much older than you.”

Noah waited to allow the tension to build. When he could no longer hold it in, he blurted out, “Nmir!”

Aterre stared at Noah in disbelief. “She’s probably 600!”

Tubal-Cain sprayed the contents of his mouth all over the table as he keeled over in raucous laughter. Stoically, Aterre crossed his arms until he cracked and joined Tubal-Cain’s merriment.

Noah reared back and howled until his stomach hurt.

The cacophony almost drowned out a knock at the door. Being closest to the entrance, Noah barely heard the sound and pulled himself up, desperately trying to gather his wits.

Another knock sounded, followed by a woman’s voice. “Hello? Are you still open for business?”

As if he had been bitten, Aterre jerked to his feet and pushed his fingers through his hair. “I’ll get it.”

Tubal-Cain blocked his path. “She’s asking for the blacksmith. That’s me.” Tubal-Cain walked to the door and opened it. “May I help you?”

“Evening peace.” The woman’s soft voice stood in sharp contrast to the male jocularly moments earlier. “I’m sorry for disturbing you this late at night, but the latch to our bovar pen broke, and we need it repaired as soon as possible.”

Tubal-Cain took the damaged copper part from her. “Certainly. Please, come inside.”

Noah started to introduce himself, but then he recognized her as Jitzel, Cada’s daughter. No longer the little girl who brought water to her father’s farmhands on hot days, Jitzel had transformed into a beautiful young woman. Standing nearly as tall as Aterre, her braided brown hair dropped to the middle of her back beneath her broad shoulders. Her strong, dark arms reminded Noah of his mother’s arms — arms that had labored outdoors for countless days.

Her light brown eyes blinked. “Oh, hello, Noah. I haven’t seen you in so long, but Aterre talks about you from time to time.”

Noah nodded. “It’s good to see you again.”

Jitzel looked past Noah and quickly glanced away. “Aterre. What are you doing here?”

Aterre hurried to join them near the door. “Evening peace. It’s um . . . I, uh . . . what happened to the gate?”

Jitzel peeked up at him and blushed. “I’m not sure. All I know is that Father wants it fixed right away. And I . . .” She looked at Aterre again. “And since I was already planning to head into town, here I am.”

“You came to the right place.” Tubal-Cain bent down to tie on his sandals. “I can bend this piece back into shape, and that should last you for a little while. But give me a few days, and I’ll make one that’s much stronger.”

“Wonderful.” Jitzel turned away from Aterre and faced Tubal-Cain. “Father will be so grateful.”

“I like when the boss is happy,” Aterre said. “Jitzel, what . . . why were . . .” He took a deep breath.

Noah had never seen his friend flustered like this before. *Is this what I was like around Em? Oh, this is going to be amusing.*

“Why were you planning to come into town tonight?” Aterre finally asked.

Jitzel smiled and looked away again.

A knowing grin crept across Noah's lips, and he wished his friend would look over to catch his expression, but Aterre was too absorbed to notice.

"I wanted to pick up a few supplies." She gestured to the small pack slung over her shoulder. "And I haven't been across the river in a long time. I guess I missed seeing different faces."

Tubal-Cain stepped past her into the doorway. "The tools I need are in the shop. Anyone want to join me?"

Although longing for some playful revenge, Noah decided not to embarrass Aterre. At least for now.

"I'd like to see your workplace," Jitzel said before following him outside. She glanced over her shoulder. "Are you coming too?"

"We'll be right there." Noah put a hand on Aterre's shoulder to prevent him from rushing after her. Keeping his voice down, he asked, "Would you rather continue stammering in here, or do you prefer to make a fool of yourself in the shop?"

Aterre tensed. "Don't you dare say anything."

"No wonder you weren't interested in any of the women we mentioned." Noah grinned.

"I mean it, Noah."

"So now you know how it feels to be on the other side. It's not easy, is it?"

"I hate it. I wish I could say the right words around her."

Noah chuckled. "I could do it for you."

"Don't. I work for her father, and. . . ."

Noah raised his eyebrows. "That didn't stop you from embarrassing me in front of Em."

Aterre's eyes widened. Noah had rarely witnessed this level of desperation in his friend. "Please. I'm begging you."

Sighing, Noah held the door open. "I'll behave."

Aterre eased his shoulders. "And in return for that, I promise never to set you up with anyone ever again."

"Haha. Deal."

They stepped outside, into the fading light, and Noah spotted Tubal-Cain and Jitzel close to the forge. "Come on, Aterre. Don't let her get away." He jogged to catch up to them, Aterre on his heels.

“Jitzel,” Noah said, “it’s already getting pretty dark, and this will take a little while.” He grinned at Aterre. “I think one of us should make sure you get home safely.”

“Thank you, Noah,” she said. “That’s very sweet of you, but . . .”

“I’m sure Aterre wouldn’t mind, would you?”

Aterre scratched the back of his neck and looked at her. “No, um, I mean, I’d be happy to walk you home.” He inhaled. “That is, if you don’t mind.”

Jitzel blushed. “I’d like that. Thank you.”

Aterre flinched and bit his lip.

“I think that’s his way of saying, ‘You’re welcome,’ ” Tubal-Cain said.

Jitzel looked away. “I know. He doesn’t talk much.”

“Who? Him? He talks all the time.” Tubal-Cain paused and then slowly lifted his head as he seemed to grasp the situation.

“Does he?” A bemused expression crossed Jitzel’s face, and she laid a hand on Aterre’s forearm. “You’re so quiet at work when I bring you your midmeal.”

“That sure is strange.” Noah caught Tubal-Cain’s attention. “Any idea why he’d be so quiet at work?”

Tubal-Cain looked straight at Jitzel. “I can only think of one reason.” He held up the broken latch. “I’d better repair this so you two can enjoy your evening together. Just the two of you. Walking and talking.”

Aterre froze and Jitzel stared at the floor. But she didn’t let go of his arm.