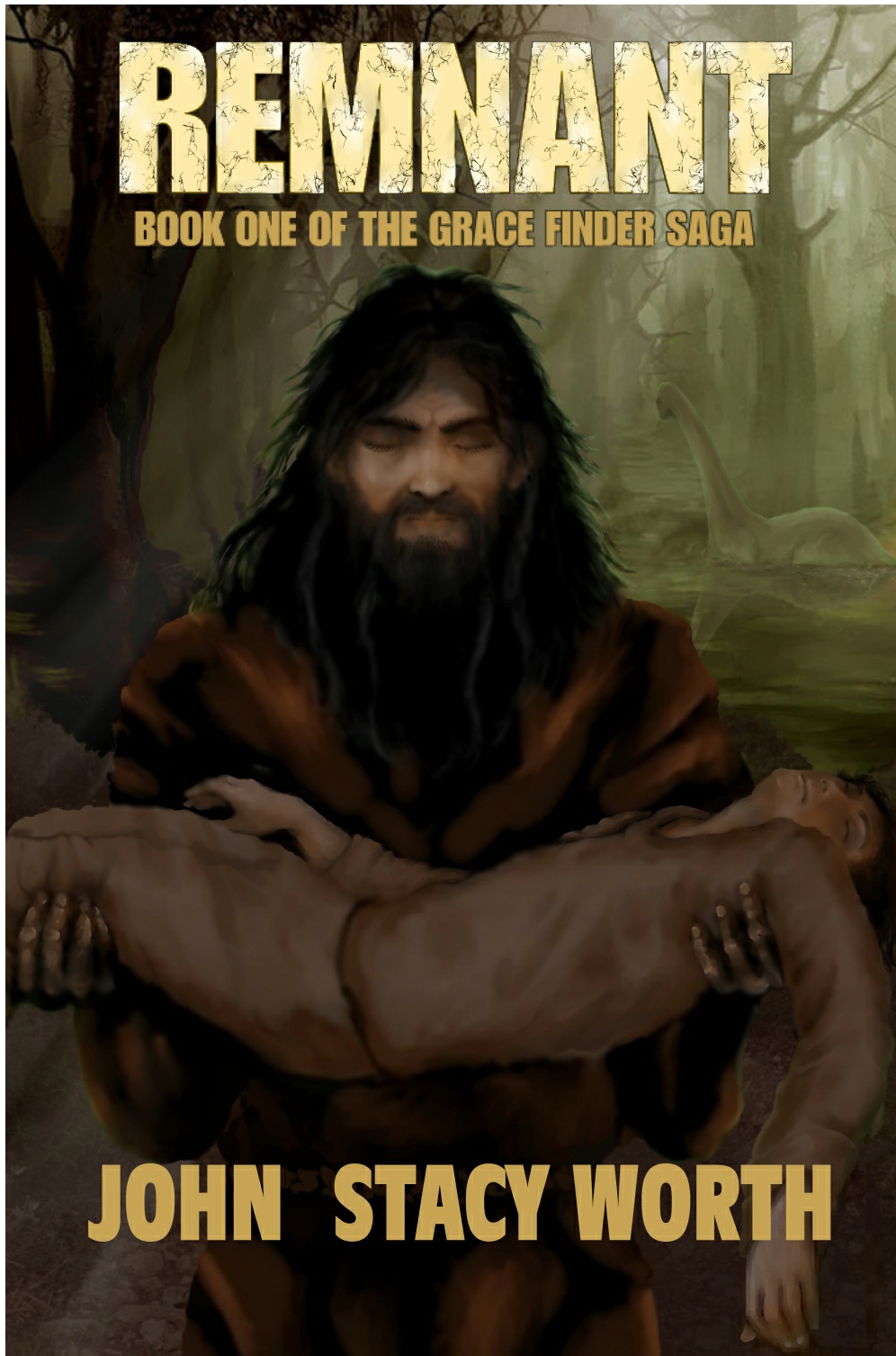


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REMNANT

BOOK ONE of the

GRACE FINDER SAGA

by John Stacy Worth

This is a work of fiction.

All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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The readers group will mainly be used to announce new releases, special promotions, price drops, and other updates, the Facebook group will be for updates, 'behind the curtains' information on progress, and just whatever I'm pondering from time to time.

Since I can't guarantee that something I put on Facebook will be seen on your feed, I use the readers group to update everyone of major release or updates that you might want to read on the website.

Hope you enjoy the series!

John Stacy Worth Oct 2016.

Series Titles Include:

REMNANT - Book One of the Grace Finder Saga

REPROBATE - Book Two of the Grace Finder Saga

REQUIEM - Book Three of the Grace Finder Saga

This book is dedicated to my wonderful wife Staci. You are the love of my life and a beautiful example of God's patience and grace. You are the best mother our boys could ever have and such an incredible help-meet to me. I love you with all my heart.

November 2016 JSW

Remnant: Book One of the Gracefinder Saga

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Years ago, in a world so sin-wracked and depraved that the **Almighty** was moved to destroy His creation, there lived a certain man named **Noah**, the Ark-builder and Grace-finder.

Chapter 1 - You saw nothing

Another string of profanities echoed along the hallway.

Beth uncurled atop her goat hides, her eyes adjusting in the moonlight from the room's high window. "Kenian," she whispered, reaching across. But he was not there.

Oh, Kenian, not again.

She wasn't really surprised. Whereas she left in the mornings, after giving the place a quick cleaning, her twin escaped at night—sleeping the day away when he could, running on adrenaline when he must.

Beth listened to Tarn's curses. It was true anger, not just her father's habitual swearing. She sat up. Perhaps Kenian was on the receiving end. If so, she couldn't just lie there. Though unsure exactly what she *would* do, she got up, smoothed her worn nightgown, and stepped outside her room. With her way lit only by moonlight streaming from the eastern doorways, Beth padded along, barefoot and quiet as she could be.

She followed the winding hallway as it snaked toward the great room. The smell of strong oils and perfumes nauseated her as she passed Irad's bedchamber. He was in the city this time of night, plying his trade. Onath's room was likewise empty.

Beth had been seven when she learned how her eldest brother earned his coin. Onath had spent a week in the wilderness beyond the western mountains, and it was another day east to where the Dorshan army guarded their border. He stopped in to eat before making his delivery. He was lighter in skin than Irad, wider of girth, with flat, stony eyes. Coarse, red hair covered his arms and face like the pelt of the animal he wore, so that it was nearly impossible to tell where the garment ended and his own hair began.

She'd peeked into his bag. Usually it hung empty, slung across his back, but this time it was bulging and sat untended while he ate. She almost vomited when she realized the misshapen form was a human head. Onath only laughed upon discovering her. "Deserter. Izla pays me a Bardra per head. I can also remedy sour business deals, thin out competition, even take care of meddling officials."

More shouting brought Beth back to the present. She felt along the rough stone walls with trembling fingers. Finally she entered the great room. In the darkness the large domed chamber was even more disturbing than usual.

Upon the perimeter wall hung shields of bronze and iron, adorned with the skulls and scales of various giant reptiles. *Don't look at them. They aren't the ones shouting.* But she did look. Each skull was at least as long as her torso, painted black, red, and white—teeth bared and jaws gaping. Onath's handiwork. Spears jutted upwards aside each shield, while around the ceiling iron, bronze, and flint tipped arrows ran end to end, as if part of some endless, circular volley.

She gazed across to the arched entrance that led to her father's room. The source of the shouting. It had to be. There were only three passageways; the one she had just exited, the one before her, and one to her left. And the rooms in that third hallway were all unoccupied. The only thing of interest was at the end. Like each of the passageways it terminated in a sealed chamber, the doors of which had been kept shut for as long as Beth could remember.

Again curses echoed, confirming the hallway before her. Beth gathered her courage and strode forward, toward the hall entrance with its twin axes. Crossed above the archway they seemed locked in combat. No, wait. She looked up, hesitantly. There was only one, and the faint dirtied outline where the other had been. Fear crawled up her spine to raise the hairs of her neck. She looked again to the moonlit hallway and entered.

"She's a slave, what do you care!"

Who was that? Surely not Irad. Onath? She was about to turn back when she realized who the '*she*' must be. *Kalia. They're arguing over Kalia.* She walked on.

"You know better than to take what's mine," Tarn bellowed.

Beth tread as swiftly as she dared. Finally, she approached the room occupied by her father's slave-girl.

Keeping to the shadows, Beth pressed herself against the stones, half hidden by a bend in the hallway. Carefully, she moved so that she could see through the door. Kalia was nowhere to be seen, while Onath lie naked atop a mammoth hide, backed into the far corner.

"Father, would you really kill me over this whore?"

She's no whore. The slander infuriated Beth. If Kalia slipped beneath her master's hides at night, it was only to keep him from turning his lust toward the only other female in the house. If she also allowed herself to be brutalized by his two eldest sons, it was of course for that very same reason. *Me*, thought Beth, *she does nothing but protect me.*

Her heart pounded as Tarn stepped into view. He squared himself before the doorway, blocking Onath's escape. Beth saw on her father's back golden droplets of sweat, reflecting candlelight from the room's nearest corner. He wore only his elk hide breeches and working boots. She could smell the alcohol leaching through his pores.

Tarn lifted a battle-ax. "Onath, you fail to recognize the true issue here."

Though his speech slurred, Beth knew her father was still deadly with a weapon. Indeed, Tarn had taught Onath everything he knew.

He took a step toward his son. "The issue is *respect*."

"Father, no!" Onath moved desperately for the window.

Beth screamed at the sight of Tarn driving the weapon into his first-born, but she could not turn away. Blood spattered as Onath struggled to escape. Tarn yanked the ax from his son's shoulder, then buried it in his ribs. Onath reached for the windowsill.

Tarn tore the ax free again, rending bone and sending a spray of blood to the ceiling. Onath coughed up a bloody froth. The third blow fell, cleaving the spine and rendering Onath a gored, motionless heap. Tarn released the ax, leaving it in his son's body.

While she was still screaming, Beth caught a glimpse of movement in the shadows. *Kalia!* She saw the young woman's frightened face, illumined in a flicker of candlelight as Tarn turned from his son.

Kalia dashed for the window. Onath's corpse saved her, as Tarn stumbled in a drunken rage over his son's body. She leaped higher than Beth would have thought possible, gripped the windowsill and pulled herself through. Tarn's fingers only slid across her heel as she fell away into the night.

All this time Beth never stopped screaming. Until Tarn turned again, realizing finally that the screams came not from Kalia, but from the hallway. She fell silent as he rushed out toward her. She turned and ran. But even stumbling along, his stride was twice hers. He caught up by the second bend. Grabbed her long hair and yanked hard.

Beth felt her father's slick arms coil around her and smelled his dank breath.

"You saw nothing! It's only the two of us here, so you'd better do exactly as I say."

Tears trembled down her cheeks.

"If you ever tell anyone I'll kill you. Better yet, I'll kill Kenian. You love your twin brother don't you?"

She could barely nod, his grip was so tight.

"Then hear this. Kalia's gone. Until I catch her or get a new slave there are certain duties you'll have to perform. Don't worry, I'll teach you." He turned her head aside. "And don't forget, you saw nothing. In fact, it was Kalia that killed Onath and then fled."

He planted a kiss on her cheek. Beth started to shake uncontrollably.

"Stop that!" He laughed, seeming to relish her fear and pain. "Now then." His breath was hot on her cheek. "Your first lesson."

Chapter 2 - Tell me if they hurt you

Noah motioned to Japheth. "Another board." A length of Cypress changed hands. As sweat streamed down his muscular back, Noah set the wood and started nailing. Taking mental inventory, he mumbled, "We'll need more tar." He stopped nailing to speak to his younger son. "Shem, do you remember the way to the pits?"

The boy's wiry body drew taut. You would think he'd never been there, tagging along behind Japheth—who by merely breathing seemed to garner their father's trust. Shem tugged with nervous fingers at the dark hair curling past his brow. "Down to the lotus patch. Turn right. On the other side of the poplar trees." Just because Japheth was a whole head taller and could chop down Cypress...

"Good!" Noah finished nailing. Like both his sons, he stood stripped of outer attire, shed for the heat of the day. The arms of his undergarments were tied about his hips so that he was clothed only from waist to knees. "You *have* been paying attention."

The bark of approval brought Shem's thoughts back on task. *Finally! Father is finally letting me do something.* He shoved his arms through the sleeves of his undergarments and wrestled with a vest of tanned buckskin—which seemed bent on being either upside down or inside out. It was a cast-off from Japheth, who was tall enough to wear their father's clothes and had already inherited several. Another reason he was favored, Shem supposed.

Shem finally got the buckskin on and began a similar struggle with his breeches. Growing frustrated, he tied the drawstring around his waist and started off, but was halted by a strong hand upon his shoulder.

"Easy, Shem. I know you want to be a help, but don't run off without thinking. Here, you'll need this." Noah picked up a bronze container, its outside tarnished and the inside blackened with a thick crust. He pressed it into Shem's twelve-year-old hands, then picked up and passed an equally used ladle.

Shem held the items close as he struggled to tie up his breeches, which had come undone and were sagging. *Great, he finally sends me and I act just like the scatterbrain he thinks I am.*

"And there's your safety. We can't overlook that." Noah knelt and motioned his sons down with him. He placed a hand upon Shem's head, the other on Japheth's shoulder.

Though this had long been Noah's custom, Shem suddenly found it irritating. He thought back. Did their father pray this way every time Japheth was sent on errand? Of course not. Japheth could do anything. Shem glanced over and spied his brother looking at him. Japheth sneered, but closed his eyes

before Shem could react.

"Yahweh," Noah began, head bowed and eyes closed. "Thank You for being with us as we have shared in Your work this day. We ask You to be with Shem now. Watch over him and keep him safe from man and creature alike. Guide his feet along safe paths, giving him speed and a well-done task. For Your glory, Amen."

They stood and Noah finished his instructions. "Be careful passing the lake. Japheth and I saw a Behemoth in the reeds two days ago. Go straight to the pits and come straight back. And be mindful. They film with water sometimes and you won't recognize the tar for what it is until you're fast in it. I've seen many an animal perish that way."

So had Shem. Even so, he kept exasperation from his voice. "Yes, Father." Clutching the tar-encrusted pot to his body, he dropped a wooden ladle into its mouth. "May I go now?"

Noah studied his son. Was something troubling the boy? Probably just nervous, wanting to do a good job. That was it. He smiled. "Go on." At once Shem darted away. Noah yelled after him, "And don't stop for berries. We're eating right after we pitch this last section."

"Yes, Father, I won't forget." Shem turned a corner, passing from sight.

Noah sighed and motioned for a board. "Think he'll be alright?"

Japheth wondered if his father was simply talking to himself again. Still, he passed a Cypress plank and answered, "He'll be fine," when he wanted to say—*Don't worry, nothing will happen to Shem, not when you give me the dangerous task of felling trees.* "I was fetching tar when I was ten, remember?"

The big man nodded absently. "The animals, though. There are so many of them now. It seems more arrive every day. They've actually beaten paths all along this region, crisscrossing our own roads so that anyone who doesn't know the way is bound to get lost."

"But Shem knows the way, Father. He won't get lost."

Noah shook his head. "Japheth, you only think that because *you've* always been more responsible." He nailed the plank firm. "Which is why I rely on you to help me in the man's portion of our work."

Japheth put another board in his father's callused hands. *So I am first in your eyes after all. Then I'll prove worthy of that trust. I'll even help Shem with all he needs to know. As long as I know you haven't forgotten my birthright, I'll do all that's expected of the eldest.*

Noah noticed the way Japheth beamed at his praise. Always easy to read, reliable even with his countenance. If only Shem were so easy. He worked the board into place and said, "Your brother will begin shouldering his load, I assure you, but I need to know he can handle the smaller tasks before I trust him with the rest. Besides, he is small for his age." It was almost the whole truth. What Noah knew in his heart though, he couldn't speak to his firstborn.

God has chosen your brother's bloodline, though for what He hasn't yet told me. Noah drove the nails and wiped the sweat from his brow. *If that means I've got to watch him more closely, then that's something we'll all have to live with. God has decided to be done with this world, while we alone have found grace. And for some reason Shem is special.* He took another board from his eldest son. *Whatever happens, your brother has to survive.*



Kenian stood at the bush, basket in hand. He was harvesting for sale in the market, where his efforts would bring one copper coin. As he carefully selected and picked off the berries, a familiar form came trotting up. He raised the basket and hailed, "Shem!"

Shem raised a hand but kept his pace. "Can't talk. I have to get to the pits."

Kenian smirked, donning the thin, sheep-hide vest that had passed down from all three of his older brothers. "Your father still working on that *boat* of his?" The question was an accusing goad more than anything. It stopped Shem in his tracks.

"Do you have to say it like that?"

"Come on, Shem, don't be so sensitive all the time. I was just trying to get to you. You know how I am. Here, have some berries."

Yes, I know how you are. Shem put up a hand and shook his head. "Father told me not to stop. We're eating right after the ship is tarred."

Kenian squinted. "Did he tell you not to eat, or simply not loiter? Surely a few won't matter. Come." He put a hand to Shem's back, urging him along. "I'll accompany you to the pits. It's on my way after all. Have some berries." He held the basket out.

"No. I'll have your company, but Father definitely meant no eating."

A blonde lock had fallen across Kenian's eyes. He tossed his head and fell in step alongside. "I'm sure he only meant no picking. He didn't want you to waste time getting to and from the pits, that's all. As you can see, I've done the picking for you. All you have to do is eat." He pulled forth a handful of berries. "Just a couple, what harm can that do?"

Shem sighed, taking two. "Okay, but only a few. I'm not to spoil my appetite."

Kenian grinned. "My point exactly. He just didn't want you to dawdle around or spoil your appetite." He emptied his palm into his mouth.

They came in view of the lotus patch, which lay clustered in the side of a large body of water. Kenian reached up as they passed a stand of poplars, stripping off a fistful of leaves. He tossed them over his shoulder then scooped another handful of berries.

"No more, thanks." Shem waved off the outstretched offering.

“Suit yourself.” Kenian tossed a berry into his mouth. He smacked loudly. “Mmmmm.” Then laughed at Shem’s dour expression.

Turning, they approached the steaming pits. Shem immediately set to work. Kneeling at the nearest edge, he began to carefully spoon the black liquid into his container.

“So they’re finally letting you do something besides stand around.” Kenian smiled, propping against a nearby poplar. When Shem ignored the taunt, he simply went on; “Won’t that thicken by the time you get back?”

Shem bristled. “Somewhat. That’s why we heat it over a fire before we spread it.” He passed the ladle back and forth until the container was full, then spoke to himself, “That should do it.” He set the hooked end of the ladle over the rim, resting it along the outside, then picked up the container, this time by the leather strap lashed to holes in either side of its wide mouth. The pot was cumbersome but Shem hefted it with relative ease. Though his duties consisted mainly of carrying supplies and cleaning away debris, the work, which Noah had begun even before his sons were born, was tempering Shem hard and lean.

With pot in hand, he turned to his friend. “See you tomorrow?”

Kenian smiled. “Not if I can find that widow.”

That widow. Shem frowned. Kenian liked to brag that his golden hair and blue eyes attracted attention from girls and women alike. The girls just smiled shyly and giggled, while the women tousled his hair and paid him twice what his berries should bring. Either way, Shem knew it was the worst thing for his already insufferable vanity.

“If she gives me two coins like last time, I might just stay in the city until late tomorrow.” Kenian took another berry. “You should come with me sometime.”

Shem looked away. “Nothing in the city I want.”

Kenian laughed and pushed away from the tree. “Like you would even know. You haven’t seen half of what the city has to offer. Besides, I’ll bet your father has already planned out your entire life. Just like for that ship of his, everything all drawn up and plotted out. You don’t know what you want without him telling you first.”

Shem’s temper flared. “Just because *your* father doesn’t even notice when you spend all night in the city, that doesn’t make mine a tyrant. If your father were responsible, he would put limits on you, Kenian. If he really loved you—”

“What do you know about it? All you’re doing is spitting out the lies your father’s fed into *you*.” Kenian’s eyes narrowed. “We’re twelve years old, Shem. So, naturally my father treats me like a man. You’re just mad because Japheth has birthright of the eldest, comes and goes as he pleases, while you get babied and fenced in—”

“I need to get home.” Shem turned to leave.

“Yes, go home. To your precious father and his precious boat! Run home, Shem. That’s all you ever do.” With that, Kenian started for the city.



Jenah placed the freshly baked loaves and ripe fruit on the table. Her handmaiden, Beth, was likewise busy, taking a pot from the coals. Carrots, peas, squash, everything that Noah loved, stewed to perfection. The girl had been helping Jenah for nearly a year, having no mother to teach her such things. It was a miracle she was permitted to come at all. Her father only allowed it so that she could learn to better serve in her own home, which Jenah knew was actually the hand of God bringing about what would have otherwise been impossible.

Jenah smiled, pushing a wayward strand of auburn hair behind her ear. She set out a stone plate for the pot and asked, “Beth, would you stay for supper? You help me so much, but you never stay to enjoy your own efforts.”

The girl set the stew-pot on the stone, then doffed her cooking mitts and tucked them into her sash. “I would stay, but my father will be in from the market soon, and if I’m not there…”

The child needn’t say more. The bruise Jenah had seen just a week ago told well enough what could happen. On an outstretched forearm, Jenah had spied it by chance when, in reaching, the girl’s arm extended past the hem of her sleeve. When pressed to explain, Beth said she had fallen. But Jenah knew she was lying, and told her so. Beth confessed then her father had given the mark, though claimed it was accidental.

“I understand you have to go,” Jenah said. “But take some food with you. Maybe it will bring you favor when your father arrives.”

Beth shook her head. “I can serve only what he and my brothers bring in. He would know if even one pear on his table came from someone else’s efforts. That’s how he would see it, not as kindness, but as someone trying to outdo him. Trying to shame him in his own house.” It was true enough. Though often Tarn’s goods were obtained by ambushing traders on their way into Dorshan. It was all right for the men in the house to *steal*, but a daughter was never to accept even the slightest gift.

Jenah began to wonder. Hadn’t she sent Beth home that week with a basket of fresh dates? “I’m responsible,” she cried, reaching out to her handmaiden. “The dates, he knew didn’t he? And beat you for it.”

Beth started to protest, but then turned her eyes away. “Like I said, he misinterprets kindness.”

Misinterprets? Was the girl actually defending that beast? “He can’t show it and can’t receive it, you mean.” She let go of Beth and went to the door, staring out with fists clenched. “That fruit wasn’t for him anyway. They were because I love you and wanted you to have them. Why, the day I’d lift even a finger to help a—”

“Don’t.” Beth rushed to put her arms around Jenah’s waist. “Don’t be like them.” She buried her head in the folds of the woman’s dress. “Didn’t you say we should love those that hurt us? That your God loves us all, no matter what we’ve done?”

Jenah sighed. *You listen too well, little one. Yes God loves us, but even He has limits to what He’ll tolerate.* She stroked the girl’s long blonde hair. *As do I. If God doesn’t get to him first...*

She stopped. Not wanting to think along such lines. She knew that it was God alone who should avenge. Indeed, hadn’t the Lord even told her husband that He would soon destroy the wicked?

Finally, Beth stirred and looked up at her, joy dancing again in those bright blue eyes. “Besides, I can’t take food that you’re going to need for nourishment. I know why you stepped into the woods this morning. You have the morning illness.”

Jenah gasped. Could the child really be that perceptive, to guess at what even she wasn’t completely sure of? What did the girl know of such things anyway? Hadn’t her own mother died while giving birth to her? It was too early to know yet. Wasn’t it?

Not at all.

Jenah recognized His voice immediately. As always it came like a word dropped directly into her heart, silent but unmistakable. Though this time it sounded to Jenah as if He were actually *smiling*.

I’m giving you another son.

She touched her stomach and felt a thrill. “Tell no one, child.”

Beth smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll let you tell your husband yourself. Besides, I’ve really got to go now.” Beth donned her cloak, a modesty of dress almost no women practiced anymore.

She’s learning from you.

Yes Lord, it seems she is. May I always have her to teach.

Jenah looked closely at Beth then, wondering. The girl had all but disappeared beneath clothing that had, until recently, hidden all outward signs of abuse. But what bruises might there be upon her soul? Indeed, what else might have happened?

“Child, your father and brothers, have they ever...” She searched for a delicate way to put it. “Have they ever touched you inappropriately?”

Beth looked back with calm, steady eyes and lied. “No. Father only loses his temper sometimes. And Kenian keeps the older boys off, so they’ve never raised a hand to me. I know you think he’s trouble for Shem, but he does have a decent side.” Beth’s eyes teared up and she looked away.

“What is it?” Jenah placed her hands on the girl’s shoulders.

“It’s just that... lately Kenian’s been spending so much time in the city. There’s something going on with him. Something bad I think.”

Jenah took the girl and held her close. To grow up in such a wicked world, how hard it must be to have no one looking out for you.

But she does have someone. I AM watching out for her. She also has you.

Yes Lord. As long as you deem me worthy to use, I’ll be your willing handmaiden, and as much a mother to this girl as I can be.

Jenah whispered to Beth. “I want you to know you can tell me anything. I’m here if you ever need me.” *Tell me if they hurt you.*

Beth stood there, quiet and still. There were tears on her cheeks when she finally pulled away. Stepping outside, she said, “You’re like a mother to me. Of course I’ll always come to you.” She wiped her eyes, bowed and turned to go.

Jenah watched until she was out of sight.

Precious Beth. Though I’ve borne nothing but sons, you are truly my daughter. If there is any way I can save you from the evil that threatens you every day, then I’ll do it. With the help of my God, I will.

Chapter 3 - Behemoth

That Kenian. Thinks he knows everything. Just because I repeat what father says doesn’t mean it’s not true. If he puts limits on me it’s because he really does love me, that’s all.

Shem hefted the tar back along the trail. He was approaching the poplars where Kenian had stripped away a handful of foliage. Hanging his pot from a sturdy, low-hanging limb, he knelt and picked up a leaf to examine its broken spine.

Why does he have to tear at everything he touches?

No, that wasn’t fair. Shem had known Kenian for years and he did notice that, though his friend played havoc with all else, he was extremely careful of one thing—his twin sister. Where she was concerned, Shem was sure Kenian would lay down his very life.

He remembered how the two of them would come over to his house to play when they were younger. Beth still came of course, to help mother and, Shem suspected, to get away from a houseful of men. Kenian on the other hand, though he still kept a somewhat strained friendship with Shem, hadn't set foot in their home in over two summers.

"I've got to talk to him tomorrow. Apologize for my words, true or not," Shem spoke aloud. He grimaced and shook his head as if to toss off the habit. He recalled his mother laughing the first time she'd heard him do it. "Just like your father," she'd said. "You two are just alike."

Then why does he like Japheth so much better? Oh yes, eldest son.

He considered Japheth, their father, and then Kenian. Because of the lifestyle thrust upon his family, they were the only males with whom Shem had contact. He held the broken leaf, rubbing it between his fingers. Was it always going to be this way? Nothing but tension between himself and every other male around him?

It was maddening. Shem loved both his father and brother. And though he knew they both loved him, they certainly had peculiar ways of showing it. Father always doting on Japheth, yet reluctant to give Shem even a shred of responsibility. And Japheth, well who could tell anything about Japheth? One moment trying to show Shem how to do something, and the next, upset he hadn't mastered it already.

Then of course there was Kenian, constantly instigating any kind of rivalry.

"Kenian's wrong. I don't care about who's eldest and birthrights and all that. I just want them to—" Shem felt a tear run down his face. He hadn't even realized he'd been crying. And when had it turned so dark? Father would be upset if he didn't return soon.

Shem set the leaf aside and was standing back up when he heard it. A low rumbling, like a roar building in the back of a throat. The earth began to tremble. That's when he realized that the darkness wasn't dusk, but a shadow. He looked up.



Kenian was hardly out of the poplars when the situation began nagging at him. Shem was so smug, so self-righteous. Yet every time Kenian tried to hate his friend he came up empty. If only it were as easy as with his brothers. Onath—even though Kalia had slain him two weeks ago—and Irad. He had only to reach into his heart to summon the vilest hatred for either of them. Yet he could not transfer those feelings to Shem no matter how he tried.

Kenian sighed and shifted his basket from one hand to the other. From atop the next hill he would be able to see the city wall and probably even the widow's home. But now the nagging feeling insisted that he turn back and make things right with Shem.

But that was ridiculous. Shem was heading home by now. Kenian stopped walking and fought single-mindedly against the feeling.

I'd have to run to catch up with him. What would I even say?

No. He would continue. He would see Shem later again in the week and could make peace then. He resumed walking.

Go back.

Kenian gasped and stopped again. It was like an invisible enemy blocked his path and held an oppressive finger in his face.

Go back!

Kenian swallowed and fidgeted. Never had his emotions disturbed him so. He searched his heart—what was he to do? Apologize? That was so absurd it was laughable.

Don't worry about what to say, just go back.

Kenian blinked. He was facing the poplars he'd just walked out of. *Did I turn around?* He didn't remember doing so, but apparently had.

Go.

Kenian swatted the air in frustration. The compulsion was like an irritating insect buzzing about. *Okay*, he relented, *I'm going back—but I'm not apologizing. I'll just offer to forget about it if he will.* He waited a moment for the nagging to somehow respond. When it did not, he walked back the way he had come. Apparently the offer of truce would be good enough.



Japheth wiped the sweat from his face and surveyed the day's labor. The great ship was decades from being finished, but a good start had been made. The keel was in place and several tons of lumber had been cut into rough boards and stacked. They had just finished clearing away the debris and were putting their tools in the nearby shed, built alongside the ark for storage. Shem should be along any moment, but Japheth expected they'd have to wait.

"So tell me. Have you considered what we spoke of the other day? If God's people are to live on, my sons will need wives—and you're the eldest. Already there is hair upon your face." Noah set his hammer in its place, then dipped his hands into a large metal basin. He shook the water and grime from his hands and wiped them on a cloth.

"I think of it constantly, Father." Japheth fingered the fine dark hairs above his lips "Even before you asked me. But who?" He moved to the basin and dipped his hands. "Would you have me take a bride from Dorshan?"

Noah frowned. "None your age, that's certain. It seems they all set their hearts to wickedness by the time they are of age. But there is one from the

nearby village.” He passed the cloth to Japheth and winked.

“Beth?” Japheth frowned.

“Jenah assures me she is good-hearted. And has even begun questioning about our Lord. Of course your mother has already been speaking to her about Him.” Noah perused a shelf and took three horse-hair brushes.

“Father, she’s nothing but a child. Shem’s age. Let him take her for a wife when they’re old enough.”

Noah opened the shed door, shaking his head. He stepped outside and Japheth followed. “I know. The difference to you seems significant—*now*. But believe me, three years is nothing. I am a full ninety years older than your mother, and were it not for this bit of premature gray, you would never guess it. Besides, it is you Beth dotes on, not Shem.”

Japheth was taken aback. “She does not!”

Noah frowned in mock seriousness. “Are you saying it’s a lie?”

“Father, of course not! I would never call you a liar. But to think that little Beth *dotes* on me…”

Noah laughed heartily and slapped his son on the back, a gesture that sent the boy reeling. “It’s true what your mother says; we men are so slow in such matters. You may be oblivious, but trust me, the girl watches you every chance she has. Though her eyes turn downward shyly, they are on you every moment you are around.” Noah handed a brush to Japheth and winked again. “*Little* Beth, as you call her, has already set it in her heart to win yours.”

Japheth turned the tarring brush in his hands, fidgeting, his dark brown face blushing red. “I don’t know. I’ve never thought of her that way.”

“Well try thinking of her that way. Take time to watch her as she watches you and perhaps you will find the idea appeals to you.”

“But she’s so…*young*.”

Noah laughed again. “And you are ancient? Okay, no more talk of this today. You are floundering like a hooked fish and, though I’d love to torture you further, I’ll let you off for now.”

Japheth swallowed. “Thank you, Father.”

“Besides, we’re taking a trip in a few weeks. Perhaps you will meet a girl there.”

“A trip?”

“You’ve never met him, but I think it’s about time. I want my sons to know him and hear his wisdom firsthand.”

“Who?”

“Your grandfather, Lamech. Now where is Shem? He should be back by now.”



As she made her way back home Beth felt the guilt of her deception, but could see no other way. If Jenah knew the truth, that the bruises were given in the act of Tarn’s raping her, there was no telling what she might do. *Let her think it was because of the dates. It’s easier for everyone that way.*

Beth made her way past the berry bush, saw the poplars ahead.



“Behemoth!”

Shem was face to face with the creature, its head bigger than his entire body and its neck an enormous snake of flesh. Armored in scales as large as silver coins, the creature pulled its head back to better survey him. Pitch black eyes narrowed as glistening ropes of saliva hung from its lips. Its mouth opened in a guttural snarl.

Shem froze, transfixed, as the Behemoth stood up among the reeds. For a moment the lake seemed to rise into the air and then run in sheets off shimmering iridescent scales. Disturbed waterfowl—heron, gull, and tern—fled in a shrieking burst of feathers. Shem came to his senses and hastily backed away.

The Behemoth plodded forward. Impossibly long legs ended in rounded feet, each the diameter of a warrior’s shield. Behind the creature, a tail as large as the oldest cypress swayed with every step. The ground trembled beneath its weight.

Shem kept backing up. His father had warned him to watch out, but Behemoths weren’t normally this aggressive. They weren’t even territorial that Shem knew of, unless…

The creature lunged. With teeth about to close about his skull, Shem stumbled and began to fall. Time seemed to slow as rows of molars snapped where his face had been. He caught the pungent scent of chewed grass and leaves.

Falling to his back, Shem sensed his right heel twisting. A crack and he felt something snap. Pain shot through his ankle, screwed his face into a grimace.

It's broken! It's broken and I'm dead.

The Behemoth raised its head and took another step. Its foot came to rest only inches from where Shem lay. Sweat popped out upon his brow. The creature lifted its other forelimb, shifted its weight.

Then came down fast, as Shem drew his arms to his chest and rolled. A bolt of pain. Then an impact that shook the earth and sent dirt everywhere.

Shem spat out sand and shook it from his face. The creature had momentarily lost sight of him and was snaking its head about, black eyes glistening.

My God, please...please Yahweh save me.

The reptile snapped its head in Shem's direction. It shifted its back end around and slapped the lake with its tail. A flood of water rained down as Shem pulled himself up on his elbows. The leg was screaming now, despite the adrenaline rushing through Shem's veins.

The Behemoth snarled and shook, its fury evident in a swiftly changing prism of scales. Shem had never seen one so enraged, but had heard the stories. This was clearly a female. Her egg nest had to be near.

All the while, Shem was inching away on his elbows. Still on his back, he kept his eyes fixed on the creature. He was weak and dizzy, but if he had to could roll one more time. He only hoped the creature didn't bite again. He would never be fast or lucky enough to escape another lunge.

The creature finished maneuvering and raised its forelimb. Shem spun his body as the foot came down. This time it was mud that went everywhere. Shem couldn't see. He wiped at his eyes, which did little good. His leg spasmed. The earth quaked as the Behemoth maneuvered.

Can't roll anymore. Unconsciousness started to claim him. Yes Lord, just let me pass out before—

"Yah! Over here!"

Who? Had Kenian come back?

"I'm over here you stupid lizard!"

No, the voice wasn't quite right. Too high.

Shem heard the creature roar. Another splash and cold lake-water fell, washing the mud from Shem's face. He winced, but forced himself up on his elbows. The creature had turned from him and was facing down a girl. Shem heard the name even as he thought it.

"Beth!" This time it was Kenian. Running full tilt back up the trail. His twin sister stood before the creature, taunting it. Was she crazy? She wore her cooking mitts and held a bronze pot in both hands.

The tar.

"Want some of this? Come on, see if you can bite me!" Beth stood there shaking the pot, swirling hot tar around and around.

"Beth!" Kenian had reached her side. "Hand me that and get to safety."

She shook her head. "You'll burn your hands. Go, help Shem."

The creature lunged as Beth shouldered her brother aside. She swung the pot in a wide arc. Kenian stumbled away but regained his footing in time to turn and see the creature, mouth open as tar went everywhere. Beth dodged its teeth, dropped the pot, and ran over to Kenian. She grabbed his arm. "Come on!"

Behind them, the Behemoth shook its head violently, hot pitch searing its flesh and covering its eyes. Its scales flashed red, yellow, green—a spectrum of pain and anger. Tar oozed into the creature's nostrils even as it gummed up its gaping mouth. It raged, pounding earth beneath its feet while slapping the lake with its tail.

Kenian reached out to Shem.

Shem gasped. "Can't. Leg's broken." The ground shook as the Behemoth thrashed about. "Why did you come back?"

"Gut instinct, I guess." Kenian crouched. "Then I heard the behemoth and started running." He put his shoulder under Shem's right arm. Eased him into a sitting position, then said to Beth, "Take him under the left arm. I'll support most of his weight."

In a moment they had him standing. As they got him moving they heard the creature hit the water with its whole body. They hobbled Shem along, water splashing around them, soaking all three.

"Let's get to your father's boat, huh?" Kenian joked.

Shem groaned with each step. "Someday you may want to."

"Always so serious." Kenian moved them quickly, leaving the lake behind a stand of cypress.

Shem grunted. "Just when my legs are broken. I'm strange that way."

"It's only the one, Shem."

He turned his head. Who was that again? Sweat was pouring into his eyes making it difficult to see. Long blonde hair. “Beth?”

“Yes? Are you okay, Shem? Looks like you’re fading.”

Now he remembered. *But...* “How did you lift—”

“The tar? Easy. I poured some out before I took it from the limb.”

Shem stumbled. Pain arced through his leg. He grimaced as his friends steadied him. “Poured out? Father’s not going to like that.”

Kenian spoke up, “I think he’ll forget about the tar soon enough.” They had reached the berry bush.

But...didn’t Father say not to stop at the berry bush? Shem reeled.

“Whoa. Hold him, Beth. You got him? Okay. Shem! Shem?”

“I don’t think he hears you.”

But he did. He just couldn’t respond.

“Let’s ease him to the ground,” Kenian said. “We’re far enough, a Behemoth won’t stray this far from water.” They eased him to his back. “Stay with him, I’ll get Noah.”

“Hurry.”

Shem felt everything falling away. He looked up.

“Kenian’s gone to get your father.”

Her eyes were a vibrant blue. Why had he never noticed that before? And her hair was like sunlight. What would it be like to touch that hair, to feel it between his fingers? He reached for her, barely able to lift his arm. He felt her take his hand.

“Everything’s going to be all right.” Beth wiped his brow with her cloak.

He tried to smile. Really wanted to. With her holding his hand and touching his face, how could anything ever be wrong again?

“I ... love you?”

Wait. Had he actually said that? Or had it just been a thought? What was he thinking anyway? Love was for grownups like mother and father. What did he know about it? But then he noticed the expression on Beth’s face and felt his heart turn in his chest. What was wrong? Did she not love him back?

“Hold on, Shem.” She closed her eyes. “Dear Lord, God of Jenah, please let him live. Please.” It was all she knew to pray.

He remembered then that something was wrong with him. He remembered falling to his back, the earth trembling. The pungent scent of chewed leaves. Iridescent-scales. Roaring. The darkness closed around him one last time. Losing consciousness, he saw it all again: a Behemoth, mud going everywhere, and water.

Water falling from the sky.

Chapter 4 - Fathers

Noah rent another swath from the hem of his cloak. “A clean break. He’s feverish, but he’ll live.” *He’s got to.* With remnants from planks that shored up the great vessel, he braced Shem’s legs. He tied the splint fast with the strips from his garment then turned to Japheth. “Run ahead and tell your mother. By now she’s worried.”

“Should she prepare anything?”

“Just tell her what’s happened. She’ll know what to do.”

“Yes, Father.”

He took Japheth’s shoulders in his hands, then kissed his forehead. “God keep you and speed you safely home.”

Still stripped down from working on the great ship, Japheth had the sleeves of his undergarments tied around his waist. He bowed. “And you as well, Father.”

Beth only dared look when Japheth turned to go. As always, he’d carried himself with a confidence she found both intriguing and unsettling. He seemed mature and responsible for his age, more so than either of her half-brothers. He was also leaner and more defined than they were. Watching as Japheth turned from sight, Beth marveled that heavy labor could shape the male body so effectively. She blushed at her own thoughts.

“The two of you will come with me.” Noah bent down and carefully lifted Shem.

"I'd like to get moving, if it's all the same." Kenian picked up his basket of berries and fingered the empty moneybag sequestered within his vest. "Business in the city."

Noah looked hard at the boy. "No, you will come with me. That behemoth was tame compared to what happens in the city at night."

Kenian started to protest. He'd been in the city often enough, and besides, he had a blade sheathed away in case of trouble. But Noah's gaze stilled him. The man was clearly not accustomed nor open to the idea of being questioned.

It was Beth who broke the silence. "Noah? Father is surely near home by now. If I'm not there..."

Noah's countenance softened. "Little One, you sleep in my home tonight. And don't worry about Tarn, I promise to deal with any wrath he may have. Come now. Shem will live, but his wound must be tended." He turned and started for home.

Beth quietly fell into step, conflicting emotions aroused at Noah's words. Chances were Jenah had told her husband of the abuse, but what did he mean by such a promise? While she couldn't imagine Noah harming any man, if someone were to abuse one of Noah's own, that might be enough to move him to violence. She remembered her own words to Jenah: *You're like a mother to me*. Likewise, she knew Jenah regarded her as a daughter; every kindness bespoke it. She wondered if Noah might feel the same way. *Little One*, isn't that what he always called her? Something a loving father might call his little girl.

She wondered exactly when Jenah would have told. Most likely the same night she'd seen the mark. If that was so, then Noah might already have confronted Tarn. She considered her father's behavior of late. He'd raped her twice since Kalia's escape, but not since Jenah had noticed her bruise. And what was it she saw in his countenance lately? She had thought it the same perverse desire always so evident in the eyes of her half-brothers. But maybe it was something else. Was it the struggle of rage contained—for fear at what Noah might do?

She noticed then Noah's footprints before her and, though it took uneven strides to accomplish, made sure that with every other step one of her feet fell directly inside a print. She looked up at his broad back, watched as he carried his son's wounded body in his arms. Walking there in his lengthening shadow she felt absolutely safe, completely secure. She imagined a night in his home to be very different from the shouting and cursing matches that took place in her own. Oh why couldn't her own family be more like Noah's?

"Kenian, I insist you come with us," Noah called back, without turning or even slowing down.

Beth looked to see her twin brother, standing where they had left him, staring at Noah with an unreadable expression. She caught his eye and jerked her head to indicate he should come on and, for once, not make trouble. Kenian shook his head at Beth, but started after nonetheless.



"They should have been home by now." Jenah stood at the open door. A hawk fluttered across the darkening sky, as the sun slowly set. She strained her eyes but still no sign of them. While the stew pot grew cold on the table, she felt a pang and the words fell like stones into her heart.

Shem's hurt.

Immediately Jenah moved to a back room where she kept her medicinal herbs. She started rummaging through its shelves, taking out a jar here, a pouch there. "Lord, I ask You to be with Shem now. Heal him, comfort him." She paused. It wasn't enough. There was something more specific she was supposed to pray.

She went on, gathering her wits and her courage; "Lord, let him know that You are more than just someone Noah and I talk about." She wondered if she should be so bold and then decided. "Yahweh, give him a glimpse of You."

There was no direct reply. Only a peace that settled in her heart, and then:

You will need to make a cast.

She nodded and brought a large earthen pot from the bottom shelf.

Jenah assembled her medicines and took them to the bedroom her sons shared. She spread a blanket of soft, gray-furred mammoth-hide across Shem's cot and placed everything she would need upon Japheth's.



Kenian watched his sister walk obediently behind Noah. He'd sensed when Noah almost snapped at Japheth. Had heard the harshness in Noah's voice when he'd commanded them to follow. So why was Beth so devoted to this family?

Probably just her nature, Kenian decided. She never spoke ill of anyone, even those that did nothing but heap abuse on her.

Kenian suddenly wondered if Noah might have his own reasons for wanting to shield Beth from their father. If that were the case then he would have to keep a sharp eye on the man. *I'd thought she was better off with Jenah than at home with our cur-dog brothers. Besides, Noah spends all day hammering away at that ship...*

Kenian shook his head. Strange that a man could hold a delusion of such singular weight. While Jenah tended the gardens alone, Noah and his sons slaved over a monstrosity that probably would never even float. He imagined them, somehow getting the vessel to sea and then shoving off to have it sink with all of them inside. Kenian laughed silently. Wouldn't that be ironic.

He looked at Noah then, and noticed the way he held Shem in his arms. Then heard, softly but clearly:

“Father, keep watch over Japheth, heal Shem’s broken leg and ease his fever. Give us safe passage and comfort Jenah as she prepares the medicines.”

Praying! The man was actually *praying*.

Kenian remembered the visits to Noah’s home, when he and Shem had been younger. How Jenah would feed them and Noah would pray over the meals. Kenian felt his heart stir with a longing he couldn’t name. His chest tightened. He thought again of the huge vessel, taking them off to a watery grave, and suddenly realized—he truly didn’t want that. He remembered what Shem had said.

“Just because your father doesn’t care if you spend all night in the city...”

Kenian trembled. *What if Shem’s right? What if...?* He considered how Noah held his son, close to his heart, and wondered what it would be like to have someone care like that. Someone who would worry about where he was and what he was doing. He thought of his own father, and about the mother he had never known. If only...

No! He fought the tears even as one escaped and streamed quickly down his cheek. Fortunately he was in the rear and no one saw. He wiped it fiercely. *No, he determined. I won’t be deceived! Beth might care about these fools, but I won’t.* Kenian clenched his fists.

Noah was a bully. Forcing Shem to hurry off on a task that had nearly gotten him killed. Driving Japheth on with his curt orders *of Run ahead! Just tell her what’s happened.* And then he’d had the nerve to start in on those who weren’t even his children. *The two of you—come with me!*

And what about that threat to deal with Tarn’s wrath? Of course Tarn would be angry if his daughter came in late. Only harlots and loose women were about after dark. Kenian furrowed his brow. What had he been thinking? Noah was no better than anyone else, plotting against Tarn while practically kidnapping his children.

Kenian toyed with the idea of outright defiance, but thought better of it. *I’ll go along for now. But later, once they’re all asleep...* He clutched his basket tighter and touched his moneybag. The widow didn’t retire until well past midnight. She’d told him so himself.

“Anytime you’ve goods to sell come find me,” she’d said. *“I’ll be sure to pay you well.”*



Tarn frowned. Where were the candles? Beth always put candles in the windowsill, to make it easier to find the house in the darkness. Something to focus on when he’d been drinking.

He staggered up the hill and jerked the door open, half falling as he walked inside. He stumbled past the oldest of his living offspring, passed out on the floor as usual. Tarn grunted as he caught the tell-tale odor. The sluggard had soiled himself again.

“Beth! Get out here! Where’s my supper? Answer or I’ll...” he hesitated, remembering that crazy Noah, accosting him at his own booth a week ago.

“Another mark on her, Tarn—or the boy for that matter—and we’ll see how well *you* like it.”

Tarn staggered to each hallway entrance and yelled for her. It was no use. He returned and poked Irad with his boot. “Wake up, fool! Where’s your sister?”

Irad looked up from the dirt floor. “Haven’t seen her.” He sat up and overturned a half filled mug. Its contents immediately soaked his undergarment. He belched, then muttered, “She’s been gone since morning.”

The overturned mug rolled to a stop at Tarn’s feet. He looked with disdain from the pottery to his miscreant son. “While you’ve doubtlessly lain here since midday, half-dressed and drunk in your own excrement. Where’s Kenian?”

Irad stood unsteadily. “Gods man! Am I keeper of all your spawn?” He belched lazily and wiped a forearm across generous lips.

Tarn swung. The sound of his meaty fist striking Irad’s face resounded through the halls. Irad sprawled across the floor. He propped up on an unsteady elbow, cursing. “One of these days, old man...”

“And you’ll what!” Tarn stepped over and kicked his son in the ribs, so hard there was an audible crack. Irad wailed in agony. “Don’t threaten me, boy! You know what happens to those who threaten me.”

Irad wheezed. “Yes, you’ll kill me in my sleep like you did Onath. What a brave father we all have.”

Tarn tensed. He’d thought those particular tracks covered but apparently it was known, or maybe only suspected. No matter. Maybe it was better this way. Put some real fear in the whole disobedient lot of them. He knelt and rasped in his son’s ear, “He wasn’t asleep. And I had to kill him. He’d lain with Kalia.”

Irad grunted his understanding. Though Kalia was merely a slave, she was Tarn’s slave. Onath should have known better than to get caught. “She ran away because she knew she was next. I thought it was something like that.” He winced and held his side. “Old man, next time you want to blame someone for your crime, make sure they’re capable. She couldn’t swing that battle-ax once, much less three times.”

In answer Tarn kicked him again. Irad wailed his pain anew.

“No more chatter. I’ll find them myself and drag them back by their heels if I have to.” Tarn staggered back out the front door, leaving Irad cursing and clutching at cracked ribs.

And I know just where to look.

Though he'd never been there, Tarn was sure he could find it. After all, Beth made the trek every day. He'd allowed it up until now, just as long as her chores were done. But that was about to change. A *lot* was about to change. Noah may have drawn the battle lines out in the open, where brute strength gave him advantage. But Tarn would be the first to cross them. In the darkness, where stealth and cunning would prevail.

Chapter 5 - Son of man

Japheth came in just as his mother finished mixing the paste. He slipped into a new set of clothing as they exchanged information. There were several items upon his cot; a sharpened knife, the bowl of wet plaster, a jar of salve, a batten of wool, a small basin of cold spring-water, a washcloth, and a large cotton sheet. Everything Jenah said she'd need to mend a break, though she had no idea if it were an arm or leg Shem had broken, or even how it had happened. It was somehow reassuring to Japheth, during episodes of his mother's strange knowledge, to find she wasn't altogether omniscient.

"Take the sheet and tear it into strips about this size." Jenah tore one to show him. "Keep tearing until the entire sheet is done. I've got to check the willow bark."

Japheth set about the task as she went to take her cauldron from the fire. It was so strange how she always seemed to know things. His father would attribute it to intuition, while Jenah insisted it was 'just a mother's heart'. But Japheth knew it was more than either of these. He decided as he sat there, monotonously tearing at cloth, to ask her again. Maybe this time he'd get more of an answer.

She came back from the kitchen as he finished tearing the last strip.

"Mother, there's something I need to ask you."

"Of course. Take the strips, dip them in the paste, and lay them along this shelf."

"That isn't what I—"

"And make sure it's really thick so it doesn't dry too soon."

He sighed heavily and grabbed a handful of strips.

"Not all at once, Japheth!"

He set the handful down. "Mother, how did you know Shem was hurt?"

Jenah paused. She sat next to Japheth and took one of his hands in hers. "I'll be brief. They'll be here soon and Shem needs immediate attention. But once all of this is over, ask me again and I'll tell you everything."

It was enough to quiet his frustration. "All right."

She sighed. "Look. Your hands are already so much larger than mine."

He looked down as she turned his hand over in her own, massaging the callused palm with her thumbs. Her own hands were just as callused, but from tearing weeds and thorns and hoeing the gardens. And while her nails weren't darkened by bruises, they were still stained and uneven.

"You'll be a sizable man someday, just like your father. So much responsibility has been placed on his shoulders, so please understand if he sometimes tries to set too much—and too soon—onto yours. Now, about your question. The Lord Himself speaks to me, Japheth. Your Father is a Prophet, though he doesn't like to hear anyone say so. He thinks himself unworthy of that calling, I think. As for me, I'm not sure if there's a word for it. The Lord tells me of things as they happen, but the knowledge He gives me seems to be restricted to family. How each of you are doing and that sort of thing."

Japheth was confused. She'd said before that the Lord told her things, but he'd never really believed it. Especially when she'd admitted that it was never an audible voice she heard, just a quiet one in her heart. How could anyone hear with their heart?

Still, it was more of an explanation than she'd ever given, so he pressed further. "So you don't know anything about the future?" *About what's in store for me? Or Shem?*

"I told you, ask me again when all this is over. For now we must finish our preparations. They'll be here any moment."

They soaked the strips of cloth in and laid them out carefully. Then Jenah moved her son to the kitchen, where she had him hold a wine-flask steady as she poured her medicinal brew into it. Japheth capped it and set it aside just as the door opened.

Beth entered and held the door open. Noah came in with Shem in his arms. Kenian followed, sullen and at a distance.

"Back here. I already have the room and medicines ready." Jenah took the flask from Japheth and led them all to the bedroom.

Noah set his son down on the mammoth-hide, careful not to disturb the injured leg. He gave Jenah room to do her work. But stayed nearby in case she needed him.

"That's a good splint," she said, running her hands along his shin and calf bones. "And there are no signs of bone penetrating the skin. Thank you, husband."

Noah nodded, allowing himself a brief smile. He thanked God again for giving him such a kind, competent wife. A lesser woman would have been full

of questions and accusations.

“...berries. Eating right after...” Shem said in a feverish outburst. His eyes opened halfway, staring at nothing.

Jenah dipped the washcloth in the water basin and then wiped his forehead. She tilted the flask against his lips. He stirred as liquid entered his mouth.

“That’s the first time he’s talked since he passed out,” Beth offered. She stood against the wall, out of the way, between Kenian and Japheth.

“He’s feverish,” Jenah said, watching as her son managed a few swallows. “He’ll probably find plenty to say before he truly awakens.”

As if to prove it, Shem spoke again; “...city ...eldest son...”

Japheth stirred uneasily. Was Shem talking about him? Or, more to the point, *had* he been talking about him with someone else?”

Noah turned to face them. “Japheth, will you take our guests into the kitchen? If I’m not mistaken, I smelled food and the three of you are surely famished.”

“Shouldn’t I be here with Shem?” Besides, it was obviously just an attempt to get him from the room.

“I’m not hungry,” Kenian said.

Noah began again, “Beth, thank you for helping Jenah today. Since I’m sure you helped in its preparation, I was wondering if you would mind setting the table for dinner?”

The girl quickly replied, “Of course.” She started for the door.

Noah turned his gaze upon his eldest. “And I’m sure Japheth and your brother won’t mind helping you.”

Japheth opened his mouth and then quickly shut it, recognizing the look in his father’s eyes. He started after Beth. Once again Kenian followed grudgingly behind.

“...love you?” Shem was babbling again.

The children turned around to look, but were pushed out the door by Noah, his patience wearing thin. “You can begin without us, as this may take a while, but please remain at the table until Jenah and I come out or call for you.”

“I love you too, dearest.” Jenah kissed Shem’s fevered brow and wiped it again. “Here, husband, help me remove these planks. The bone is already well set, I think.”

When they had done so, Jenah cut away the legging of Shem’s breeches and applied a cold compress to ease the swelling. Then she slathered his leg with a salve and wrapped it with the batten of wool. “This will help prevent swelling and keep the cast from sticking.” She took the paste-saturated strips and firmly wrapped them all around, from just below the knee all the way past the ankle.



In the kitchen, Beth took out dishes and utensils and set the table. Japheth then motioned for them to sit, making sure he sat down last and directly across from them. They passed the food around in awkward silence. Then, as Kenian took the apple that would complete the ritual, it dawned on Japheth: *I’m going to have to say the blessing*. He closed his eyes and bowed his head. “Lord—”

“Mmmmm. Good stew.”

Japheth opened his eyes.

Beth gently elbowed her brother and coughed quietly.

Kenian gazed at each of them. “What,” he said, through a mouthful.

“Noah’s family prays before they eat, brother,” Beth said.

“Go ahead. Who’s stopping you?” He started chewing again.

Japheth felt his body tense. But he controlled himself and only said, “You don’t have to pray if you don’t want to. But please keep quiet while I pray.”

Kenian swallowed and stabbed another carrot with his fork. “Sure.”

Beth grabbed his right hand with her left, forcing the carrot back to Kenian’s plate. She leaned in to whisper fiercely in his ear, “Brother, if you love me, you won’t start with this family. They’re my friends and don’t deserve your disrespect.”

Kenian replied aloud, “Beth, that’s the only reason I’ve put up with any of this. Because I do love you.” He let go his fork and looked at Japheth. “Go ahead.” He spoke the word with disgust, “*Pray*.”

Japheth bowed his head again and forced out the words. “Lord, we ask for your blessings on this food and thank you for it. We ask that you be with

Shem and my parents as they tend to him. Heal his broken leg and keep him well. For Your glory. Amen.”

“Amen,” Beth echoed.

Kenian picked up his fork and started shoveling the food in.

“I thought you weren’t hungry,” Japheth said, taking his own fork and spearing a potato.

Kenian stopped and pointed his fork in Japheth’s direction. “According to your father it was Beth that slaved over this meal. I figure that entitles her *real* family to eat of it.”

“I only helped,” Beth said. “Jenah does most of the work, teaching me how to prepare the meals that you and our brothers so enjoy.” She fetched up a spoonful of broth. “And I didn’t have to slave over it, Kenian. *They* don’t treat me that way.”

“All right, Beth.” Kenian backed down. “But don’t you ever group me with our brothers again. You know I’m not like them.”

Beth swallowed her soup and closed her eyes to keep from crying. “I know. I’m sorry.” *But Kenian, you have changed. You used to stay in my room at night, just to keep them away. You used to protect me.*

This was all more than Japheth was prepared for. Still he managed a feeble apology of his own. “I’m sorry too, Kenian. For expecting you to know our ways. Forgive me.”

Kenian stared at him with open contempt. “Men don’t apologize! Besides, I’m not put out by your *expectations*. As for your ways, hopefully tonight is the last time I’ll have to tolerate them.”

Under the table, Japheth’s fist clenched tight. *No, not in Father’s house.* He turned from Kenian and spoke to Beth instead. “The food is very good, Beth. Thank you for helping my mother.”

The girl had turned her face down, as if studying her plate. She gave a barely perceptible nod and replied in a tremulous voice, “You’re welcome, Japheth.”

He found himself studying her down-turned face. His father’s word’s returned:

“*Well try thinking of her that way.*”

Japheth grimaced. He caught a glimpse of her blue eyes and wondered suddenly if she were examining him from their corners. He looked away, to break any contact that may have occurred, only to have his gaze lock with Kenian’s.

Japheth grunted his disdain. *You may be able to lead my little brother around by the nose, but you don’t worry me one bit.*

Unnoticed by either of them, Beth was turning a bright shade of red. Her heart was in her throat. *Did he catch me looking? And what was that grunting noise he made? Oh, what made me think Japheth would ever notice me?*

Kenian was likewise engaged with his own thoughts, his jaw muscles tensing reflexively. Japheth might think he was something, lean and muscled as he was, but Kenian wasn’t scared. He’d had years of protecting Beth from their older brothers. Beneath the table, he was fingering the dagger sheathed against his left thigh. He’d kill any man that touched her.

“Good, you’ve started already,” Noah’s booming voice broke the tension as he entered the room. He sat himself at the table’s head and started reaching for food. “Japheth, once you finish eating go relieve your mother. One of us will stay with Shem throughout the night. You can take the first watch, I’ll relieve you, and since your mother is getting up so early these days, she’ll take over at dawn. Tomorrow is the Lord’s day, so we won’t be working anyway and can tend to your brother’s needs.”

Without waiting for reply, the big man bowed his head and said a silent prayer.

“Amen!” He punctuated when he finished. “Beth, I want to tell you how much I appreciate your help around here. The meal looks and smells wonderful and will be more than enough to feed us all through tomorrow. When the morning comes, I’ll be happy to take you and Kenian back home. Or, if you want, you can stay here and observe the Lord’s day with us.”

“We can find our way home,” Kenian interjected. “You don’t have to bother with us.”

Noah picked up a roll. “I don’t doubt that. But as your sister pointed out, your father will be angry—probably only with her, as he seems to have given you leave to come and go at will. I’ll escort her home if she wants to go, and explain this night’s circumstances to your father. It’s not safe for the two of you to be out after dark. And I won’t leave Shem in his condition.” He started eating.

“You could have Japheth escort us—tonight or tomorrow,” Kenian suggested.

Noah swallowed before answering. “What makes you think I send him out after dark? He’s only fifteen himself. Besides, I don’t want Tarn beating him the way he does you and your sister. One injured son is already too many.”

Kenian snorted. “Father doesn’t beat us.”

Noah’s eyebrows raised. “Are you protecting him, or is Beth the only one?”

“What? Who’s the liar that told you that?”

“Little One?” The bear of a man reached out and took her hand. Her fingers were tiny in his callused but tender grip. “Do you have something you need to tell your brother?”

She looked up, tears welling in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Kenian, I just *couldn’t* tell you. You would confront Father and ...and he would...” The dam burst and Beth started sobbing. “He’d kill you.”

“He beats you?” Kenian cursed his father. “You should have told me!” He stood up. “I’ll find him tonight, Beth, and make him pay! He may beat on little girls but he won’t find me so easy to knock around.” Kenian strode to the door and swung it open. “*I’ll* be the one to kill *him!*”

By this time Noah was up and moving. But it was too late to intercept the boy as he lunged out the door.

Beth stood to follow, but was halted by Noah, who took her and held her close. “Let him go, Little One. It’s too dangerous.”

Japheth stood. “I’m not very hungry. I think I’ll go ahead and relieve mother.”

Noah nodded. His son was barely to the hallway when he almost ran into Jenah.

She came out with worry etched upon her features. “Husband, you’d better hurry after that boy. He isn’t going to make it home at all if you don’t.”

“What has our Lord told you?”

“It’s Tarn.” She put a hand on Japheth’s shoulder. “He’s on his way here.”

“I’ll be with Shem,” Japheth said, kissing his mother and departing down the hall.

“It’s going to happen again,” Beth cried. She let go of Noah and ran to Jenah.

Jenah wrapped her arms around Beth. “What’s going to happen, daughter?”

“He’s going to kill Kenian just like he killed Onath.”

“Wife,” Noah grabbed a short club from a nearby wall and shoved it into his sash. He strode to the door. “Pray.”

Stepping into the night, he closed the door behind him.



All was darkness. Cold, painful darkness.

Then a swirling in the darkness, a faint whisper of wind.

Shhhh...shhhh...shhhh...

And then a light in the distance, and the whisper took form.

Shhhh...hhhe...emmmm.

The light grew ever brighter until it had completely banished the darkness, the cold likewise fled before a radiating warmth, and the whisper became crystal clear.

Shhhhem...Shem...

“Here I am.” He answered, though where ‘here’ was Shem couldn’t actually tell. He felt suspended in air, as if disembodied and floating, and noticed the pain in his leg gradually subsiding.

The light took form until at last there stood before him—the phrase came unbidden to his mind—*One like a son of man*, surrounded by a brilliance surpassing even that of the sun. Though somehow Shem could bear to look into it. No, it was more like he *had* to look, was drawn to it and didn’t want to escape its pull. He looked closer and in the brilliance saw hair white as wool and eyes like blazing fire, but could make no other details.

Shem. The tone was warm and loving. **You know my voice. You recognize me, don’t you?**

“Yes, Lord!” Immediately Shem was on his knees, no longer floating in nothingness, but anchored there, as if kneeling on solid rock. He felt a hand upon his shoulder.

Then listen.

Shem was suffused with an awesome fear as tears welled up in his eyes. He listened intently, determined to hold each word forever in his heart:

Heed your mother’s counsel and honor your father even while all others revile him, for he has found grace in my sight. Your family is my remnant. Work while it is still day, for the night is coming. The wrath of which Noah was warned will surely come to pass.

Shem still knelt, but looked up. “Lord, why can’t I see your face? And when I wake up will I still be able to hear You like I do now?”

The Lord laughed, and as He did Shem’s entire being filled with joy.

My bold, precious child, you will see my face someday, but not while you still live. As for my voice, listen to your forefathers, I will speak to you through them. Through the stories Noah has told you so many times. Listen, and keep the words in your heart. As it is with your mother, I will be the still small voice that speaks in the quiet of your soul.

Then the Lord did the unthinkable. He reached and took a narrow shoulder in each shining hand, gently moving Shem into a sitting position. Then He knelt and took Shem's foot in his hands. The motion was like a massage, starting from the toes and moving up past the ankle, until those strong, luminous fingers kneaded right where the bone had broken.

At first Shem started to protest but the words caught in his throat. He felt confusion, followed by a tremendous sense of shame and unworthiness, then all was swept away by joy, love, and gratitude.

Rest now, Shem. And heal.

With that, the light of the Lord disappeared. Shem fell away again into darkness. But it was a sweet darkness this time, the peace of restful slumber.

Chapter 6 - Daggers

Kenian passed the stand of poplars at a dead run. He'd known Tarn was a belligerent fool, but hadn't realized Beth needed protection from even her own father. *I should have known!* Gleaming with moonlight, his unsheathed dagger was gripped in a clenched fist. *What if he's done more than beat her?*

Kenian's heart leapt to his throat as he skidded to a halt. There, staggering past the lake was his father. Obviously drunk.

Good. It'll make him easier to kill.

He heard Tarn cursing and thrashing around. Stealthily now, the boy crept closer and realized his father wasn't as intoxicated as he'd first appeared. Something was wrong with his leg.

"What idiot leaves urns lying around on the ground?" Tarn's foot was lodged in a bronze, tar-encrusted container.

This is too easy.

Kenian held his knife before him and stepped from the shadows.

"Who's there?" Tarn squinted in the darkness. "Kenian?"

"Yes, Father. It's me."

"Well get over here, good-for-nothing dog! Help me get my foot from this cursed pot."

"Of course." Kenian smiled.

That's when Tarn noticed. "What're you doing boy? I won't let you *cut* my leg free."

"It's not for your leg, Tarn. It's for your heart!"

Kenian closed the distance. He may be young, and small yet, but he was fast. Too fast to be seen in the dim light of evening.

Almost.

Tarn shifted on his good leg, grabbing Kenian's wrist as the boy slashed at air. He tightened his grip and picked his son off the ground. Squeezed until the dagger dropped free.

"Upstart! Do I have to contend with all my offspring tonight?"

The boy kicked and thrashed, but Tarn just held him at arm's length. Though helpless, Kenian could still rant. "You worthless dog! She's just a little girl and your own daughter at that. Let me go and I'll kill you!"

"Had your chance, boy. And look how you fared. Pathetic!"

There was a stirring in the lotus, but neither one heard. Tarn reached into his tunic and fetched a blade from the scabbard tucked by his ribs. "Just be thankful I'm not without mercy." He put the point to his son's throat, which got the boy to stop struggling. "See, I'll slice open the big vein, so you'll die quickly. Like Onath did."

Kenian's eyes bulged. "*You* killed Onath?"

"He was disrespectful—like you. Now then..."

A whistling of air and something struck Tarn's forehead. He watched as the weapon kicked into the sand beside Kenian's knife. A small club. Tarn's vision blurred, even as blood ran from his forehead into his eyes. His fingers loosened, releasing his son and his own blade simultaneously. He staggered sideways as Kenian reached into the sand for the knives.

“Kenian, over here!” Noah stepped from the shadows and motioned with outstretched arms. “Hand me the weapons and get behind me.”

The boy obeyed at once.

Tarn, still reeling from the blow, stumbled and fell to his back. His foot remained wedged in the tar-pot and his whole skull throbbed. He touched his forehead to find the skin split open and a knot rising swiftly. His fingers came away bloody so he put them in his mouth. He turned his head. By his side, the wooden club lay where it had fallen.

“You’ve been drinking, Tarn.” Noah slipped the daggers into his sash, regarding the man with brooding eyes. “Go home.”

Tarn propped on his elbows and gazed, stupefied, at Noah. “*You*. Always you, meddling in my business.” He reached out and grabbed the club that had struck him. “Just let me get up and I’ll—”

He never finished the threat. Another rustling of the lotus and, for the second time that day, the whole lake seemed to rise into the air.

The great reptile roared its fury and stepped onto the bank, scales glistening and changing colors. Panic-stricken, Tarn kicked with his lodged foot, trying to free himself.

“Father!” Kenian came from behind Noah, but was brought up short by an arm around his waist.

Noah spoke directly into his ear. “Kenian, let me. You get back to your sister. She needs to know you’re all right.”

The boy struggled, but stopped as he realized the creature was still moving shoreward and toward his father. “Just promise you’ll help him.”

Noah turned the boy around and stared into his eyes. “I promise.” He released Kenian. The boy ran back the way they’d come, but stopped a short distance to watch.

Already Noah had the knives drawn and was moving towards the creature. “Yah! Over here beast!”

But it was no use. The creature was intent on Tarn and would not turn. Across its scales, hardened splotches of tar testified to what distraction would bring. And the Behemoth’s memory was not so short as that. It closed the distance and lunged.

Noah put on a burst of speed. But he was too far away. The creature’s jaws came down and snapped shut.

Around bronze, as chance would have it.

At the last moment, Tarn had raised his foot in defense. The creature lifted its head, bringing him up by his leg. Noah vaulted toward the reptile, arms outstretched, an iron dagger in each fist.

Even as it raised its quarry into the air, the Behemoth’s neck was knocked sideways by Noah’s impact. The big man drove both blades into its flesh and hung his full weight from their handles. Iridescent scales flashed a prism of agony.

Tarn fell to the bank, free again. He dropped the club, which tumbled into the lake. Kenian was at his side, tugging at the bronze pot, newly dented with teeth-marks. The pot came away. “There.” Kenian helped his father to unsteady feet and led him out of harm’s way.

Behind them, the Behemoth roared in pain. Its entire body thrashed, trying to shake loose the bear of a man clinging to its hide. But Noah held on, legs locked around the creature’s neck, as he alternately plunged the knives in and yanked them out, stabbing repeatedly.

“Gods, if that isn’t the craziest man I’ve ever seen.” Tarn was sobered by fear.

“No, just the bravest.”

Both father and son were too entranced to care that, moments before, each had been trying to kill the other.

With all his stabbing, Noah finally struck an artery, unleashing a sudden torrent of blood. The Behemoth shrieked. Noah held on as the creature thrashed, its heart pumping life from its body. Finally, the massive reptile fell sideways. The earth trembled as tons of flesh tumbled to the ground. Noah jerked the blades free as the lacerated neck fell in a serpentine avalanche of flesh. At the last moment flung himself away. He hit the ground with knees bent and rolled to absorb the impact.

Tarn held back, but not his son. Kenian ran up to Noah while the man was gathering himself and shaking sand from his bloodied clothes. His arms were soaked and red droplets clung to beard, hair, eyebrows, even the thick mat covering his chest.

“Noah, are you all right? That was...that was...”

“Horrible, yes.” He stuck the knives into his sash. “I’m all right. Is Tarn?”

“Yes. Thanks to you.”

“Thanks to him?” Tarn staggered over beside them, favoring the foot the Behemoth had clamped down on. “I could’ve done that. Would’ve too, had he not interfered.”

“If not for Noah, you’d be dead!”

“Shut up and come with me.” Tarn grabbed the boy by the arm.

Noah reached out and took Tarn's wrist in hand. He squeezed.

"Oww!" Tarn's hand went limp under Noah's grip. Kenian stepped away from both of them.

"Only if he wants to come with you, Tarn."

"I don't and I won't."

Noah let go.

"Fine! Don't." Tarn winced, rubbing his wrist. "What good are you anyway? It's Beth I came for. Where is she? I demand you hand her over!"

"She won't be going back under your roof. She and Kenian are under my protection from now on." Noah's eyes narrowed. "I'll say it again, Tarn, just so you understand me. Make sure you *never* hurt either of them again, or any of my family for that matter."

Tarn chewed his lip furiously. "Just give me my knife then."

"No. Consider it payment for saving your life."

Tarn's brow furrowed as he tried to come up with a response. Finally he just spat and turned to go. He stumbled away, his foot slightly askew, and put a palm to his forehead to stop the bleeding.

Noah placed a hand on Kenian's shoulder. "You've got a home with me for as long as you want."

Kenian watched his father wander away into darkness. Finally, he looked to Noah. "I'm grateful for all you've done. Here tonight, and what you're doing for Beth. But I'd never belong under your roof."

"Won't you even try?"

Kenian's eyes reflected moonlight wetly. "Don't worry. I've got someplace to go. You just take care of Beth. Promise me that."

"I promise." Noah held out a bloodied dagger, returning it to its owner. "And, son, I keep my promises."

The boy nodded and took the blade. "So I have seen."

Turning then, before Noah could see the first tears stream from his eyes, Kenian sheathed his dagger and made for the city.



Noah took a small boulder from the water's edge and approached the corpse. He had to move quickly. Scavengers would soon beset the entire area. Grasping the stone firmly, he brought it down with all his might. A loud crack and blood flowed thinly from the behemoth's skull. One more blow and he reached out to secure a large tooth, a token of remembrance.

Having assured that the creature would rise no more, Noah left the great reptile and washed quickly in the lake. He happened to step upon something hard and smooth. It didn't feel like a rock. He reached into the water and came back with his own club. He tossed it ashore, then rinsed his tunic and breeches in water that was already pink with blood. *Enough*. Tossing his garments over his shoulder, he turned to go. No sooner had he stepped back onto shore than a crocodile swam into view.

Noah wrung his clothing as dry as he could. Then, once he'd donned his garments, he gathered his things to himself. He noticed then the reason for the Behemoth's aggression. A nest shaped mound of mud, leaves, and detritus. The eggs incubating within would be food for others, now that the mother was no longer around to protect them.

Under the light of a pale moon Noah started for home. He hoped Kenian would be all right. Tarn's blade hung in his sash. He frowned as he considered the man. Alcohol probably numbed Tarn's pain for now, but tomorrow he would feel his injuries. And if he didn't have that foot seen about, it might never be right again. Most people seemed to be just like Tarn—full of hate, wrath, and fear. Would not even *one* turn to Yahweh?

True the world was wicked. Full of the ungodly, not to mention the Nephilim. Propagating at an alarming rate, these hybrid giants were sired by demons intent on corrupting mankind completely. Noah saw more and more of them each time he ventured out. Indeed the city was even named after one and governed by her. But would all the world really have to be washed away? Wasn't there some other way?

He shook his head. The questions were the same since the first time the Lord audibly spoke and upset his life. As always, the situation was beyond comprehension and answers seemed forever out of reach. Besides, who was he, a mere man, to question the Almighty?

Noah turned his thoughts to more immediate concerns. What would he tell Beth about tonight? Would she even *want* to stay with his family? What if she chose to go back to Tarn, unlikely as that seemed? And how would his own sons react if she chose to stay? Noah sighed and gathered his resolve. He'd meant what he said; he would watch over Beth from now on as if she were his own daughter. And he would pray for Kenian. It was all he could do for the boy, for now at least.

Following the moonlit path that stretched toward home he began:

Father...

Chapter 7 - Prepare to hear what the Lord has told me

Shem drifted into consciousness, his vision in and out of focus as he squinted at the cedar beams which spanned the ceiling. He made out the familiar thatched roof above the beams. Turning his head he found a wood-planked wall, and then became aware of the thick mammoth fur he lay upon and the thin sheet draped over him. Sensing a presence at his side, he looked over.

“There, now.” Jenah smiled. “I think you might live after all. No, don’t try to sit up. Be still.”

“My leg. What’s...?” Shem reached and felt the hard edge of the cast.

“To help it mend. You’ll keep it on six weeks or so.”

He gasped. “A month in bed? But—”

“I didn’t say you’d be bedridden. You’ll be up and moving soon. See, your father made these while he sat with you last night.” She presented two staffs, each with shorter sections lashed perpendicular across the top. She held them by wooden grips placed halfway down their length. “Crutches. You’ll use them like this.” She demonstrated the way he would keep his injured leg off the ground while moving. It was funny to watch, the staffs being a bit too short for her.

Shem chuckled, then grimaced. “Mother, please. It hurts to laugh.”

Noah poked his head in the room. “How are things in here? Feeling better?”

“Father. I’m sorry this happened. I...” Shem tried to sit up, but a bolt of pain etched itself across his face.

Noah moved to Shem’s side and put a hand on his shoulder. “Easy, son. I’m just glad you’re alive. Tell me about it later.”

Settling back down, Shem relaxed and remembered what his mother had said. “You stood watch over me last night?”

“As did Japheth and your mother. She took the morning shift, which is why you woke to beauty.” He winked. “Japheth or I might have traumatized you further.”

“Now husband,” Jenah scolded. “Our sons are the most handsome young men on Earth.”

“Notice she didn’t include me in that.”

Shem smiled.

“And notice I was talking about *young* men. Though I’ll admit your father is handsome... for a man his age.”

They looked at each other then and smiled. Noah bent to kiss his wife.

“I’ll take over, Jen, you go rest. Beth sleeps in the great room, finally cried herself to sleep I think. When I didn’t come back with Kenian I knew she’d take it hard. Japheth is in our room. When I left he was waking, slowly of course.”

She nodded, then bent to whisper in Shem’s ear, “Handsome he may be, but don’t let him kiss you. His morning breath is worse than a behemoth’s—you may pass out again.”

Shem tried not to laugh.

“Why do I get the feeling that was at my expense?”

“Handsome *and* intelligent.”

Wincing, Shem waved his mother from the room.



Jenah walked to the back of the house to her bedroom. Japheth was there, stretched out on the floor atop a blanket cut from the same mammoth hide Shem rested upon. He stirred as she stepped over him, opened his eyes and smiled. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Japheth. Getting up?”

He nodded. “Are you lying back down?”

“For a little while.”

“Before you do, can I ask you?”

“Ask me?”

“You said to ask you later. Is this later?”

Jenah sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

Japheth moved to a sitting position at her feet. “I’m sorry. You’re really tired. I can wait.”

She smiled sleepily. “No, now is fine.” She reached to briefly touch Japheth’s matted black hair. He was so much like his father in appearance; tall, large hands and feet, already broadening through the shoulders. His eyes were also Noah’s same dark brown, not the hazel that Jenah shared with her younger son. Japheth’s temperament, however, was an even mix of both Noah’s resolve and her composure. Too serious for a boy his age, Jenah often thought. But then he had reason—a lot depended on him. On both her sons. Jenah sighed again. She was having trouble getting started.

“This is hard for me, Japheth.”

He nodded.

“I suppose I should start with the first time God spoke into my heart. It was when I saw your father for the first time. The Lord dropped four words into my heart: **This is your husband**. And though I was sure I’d heard correctly, it was several years before your father married me. You see, the first time I saw Noah I was eleven. He was a hundred and one.

“I was handmaiden to Ahara, Lamech’s wife. As Beth now helps me, I helped your grandmother. She also taught me things like arithmetic, reading and writing—that was the main reason I was sent to her. My own mother was limited in those areas and wanted me to learn as much as I could.

“Noah was already out of Lamech’s home by then. Vineyards and carpentry were the works of his hands, the former his passion while the latter earned his living. A man of wood and vine. He often came to his parents to visit. At least twice a week. He gave no thought of me at all and was even courting another for a few years. That came to nothing, as the woman would never turn from her idols and embrace Noah’s God.

“But I was a close relative, a daughter of Malaen, Methuselah’s third son after Lamech. And so I already believed in our Lord. Still, it was fifteen years before Noah even noticed that I had become a woman. Another ten before he finally realized that I was the one. We were wed by your great grandfather Methuselah, in Lamech’s home. Our marriage has always been good. Not without conflict, of course, there is always some of that. What I’m getting at is, even though it took several years and hasn’t always been perfect, I knew that God brought the two of us together for a specific reason. God was going to use our marriage for His purposes. When Noah turned five hundred, we learned more of what those purposes were.

“I’ve told you the Lord speaks to me with a still small voice, in my heart. I’ve never heard his audible voice. But, Japheth, that doesn’t mean He never speaks that way. On your Father’s five hundredth birthday, the Lord spoke to him. *Spoke* to him! Noah heard the audible voice of God, telling him that the world would be flooded and that Noah should begin building the ship.

“I wasn’t there when it happened. But I know it did. Your father came in from tending the gardens. Yes, he would tend the vineyards and gardens himself, it wasn’t always my job alone. He came in that day and his face was literally glowing. Like a shimmering veil of sunlight draped over his head. And when he told me what had happened, I knew that your father had been in the presence of God. Had all but seen His face!

“Our lives changed dramatically after that. We moved away from home, not a great distance but far enough that we wouldn’t be distracted or discouraged by extended family. Our purposes became very singular, everything centered on building the ship and preparing for the flood. God settled us here, close to the cypress stands and tar pits. And then the city grew up to the south of us.

“Someday your father might take you along when he preaches. Oh I know you’ve been before, but only when Noah trades for new garments or purchases supplies. Not when he preaches. Up to now the only reasons he’s had you along is so that you could get a glimpse of what Dorshan is like, to see the people be moved by their plight. While we aren’t exactly eager for our sons to be exposed to wickedness, we do want you to be aware that evil exists...and seeks to drag a whole world of people to their graves. That is why your father goes in once a month and strives to get whoever will listen, anyone, to turn from wickedness and to our Lord. So far not even one has made that choice.

“And so it is that he has been working on the Lord’s ship since before you were born. It has fallen to me to tend the gardens and vineyards. The latter of which I’ve had less and less time for. Still, Yahweh tells us what we need to know. Your father infrequently, but aloud, while I’m always having the Lord’s pebbles drop quietly into my heart. This doesn’t mean I’m closer to the Lord than your father is, or that he’s closer than I. Noah gets a word and works for decades until that command is fulfilled, while I receive regular instructions on the small details of our lives.

“God speaks differently to each of us because the tasks He has set before us are different. And it’s important to realize, neither of our roles is more important than the other, but each is dependent on the other for its fulfillment. Which brings me to the unspoken question that you are really asking me. What has the Lord told me about my two sons?”

Japheth wrinkled his forehead at hearing his question spoken. Was the Lord telling her things she couldn’t possibly know otherwise? Or was it only intuition? Either way she had hit the matter squarely. She knew the question of his heart. And though he knew the very wording of the question more than hinted at the self-serving motivation behind it, he would not lie by denial. He nodded and said simply, “Yes.”

“I don’t have all your answers, Japheth. Though he’s not as open with his heart as I am, your father may have insights as well. While he has said very little to me regarding you and Shem, I feel the Lord has indeed told him something. But be careful if you question Noah, if you choose the wrong time he may close up those secrets forever. You will want to know without a doubt that your timing is right, and so you may have to be patient. I advise you to even wait a few years, so that maturity will make you more sensitive in such matters.”

Japheth took all this in. He decided that he could wait, depending on what his mother told him now. “I’m sorry if this makes me seem...”

“Ambitious?”

“I was thinking ‘selfish’.”

Jenah shrugged. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to know what life holds for you. There’s not even anything wrong with ambition when its motivations are pure. For now, let’s just say that you want to know where you fit into God’s plans. Just remember, Japheth, *knowing* your place is not the same as occupying it. Being content with where you are along the journey is crucial, and accepting God’s will when it ends up looking different than what

you envisioned is often very hard. Occupying your place in God's plans depends largely upon how quickly you obey and how faithfully you pursue God's will as it is revealed. I only pray that you have the good sense of your father, that you've learned something of character while working at his side and growing up in this home."

All this talk was making Japheth edgy. "Mother, you're stalling."

Jenah paused, studying her son's face. "No, I am preparing you. And you must also know that I won't tell you what the Lord has given me for Shem. Just like I won't share anything that I'm going to tell you with him."

"But I thought you were going to tell me everything!" The outburst was unfortunate. Jenah was a patient woman, but had very definite limits. Japheth half expected her to refuse now and send him out with nothing.

But she only took a breath and continued, "As it pertains to you. Now then, as I said, I don't have all your answers, but I do know this: The Lord has a very important plan that He's going to work out, using you and your brother. God's plan depends on the two of you working *together*. He is starting over with mankind. In only ten generations the world has moved so completely into wickedness that God must destroy all, except for this family. And that is because of your father. He found grace in the Lord's sight and so we will be saved. Noah and I will likely pass away before the world is once again populated, but you and Shem will live to see your descendants as they begin to fill the earth. You must remember our Lord; through you and Shem the world will learn His ways. Through Noah's bloodline the Lord will show His salvation to a whole new world of people. Now then, prepare to hear what the Lord has told me about you specifically."

She placed her hands on his head, as if bestowing a blessing. "You are a leader and protector, Japheth. Already your hands fell the trees that will carry us all safely through. God wants you to go before Him—you prepare His way. Once God's judgment of water is complete, you will become a patriarch of nations, guiding, instructing, and leading them in the knowledge of our Lord. You will teach your sons to build ships and in so doing enable them to spread out and repopulate the whole earth. God will extend your territory. His blessings are on you and will ever be."

So I am first, even in the Lord's eyes! "Mother, it's better than I could have dreamed. How could I not find contentment with such a destiny as this?"

She only smiled. *I hope it really will be as easy as you think. Especially when you realize Shem has a destiny too.*

Chapter 8 - Accuser

The morning was spent quietly. Noah and Japheth shared a breakfast of apples and bread. Shem was thirsty and drank a whole flask of goat's milk. He wouldn't eat anything yet, but was steadily improving. Noah sat with Shem telling him stories and silently praying. Japheth stretched out on the cot beside his brother, being lazy. Shem was glad to have him there.

Jenah and Beth slept until midmorning. Then rose and ate together outside. They were behind the house, sitting at a table Noah had crafted for Jenah's flower garden. Beth had her back to Jenah, who sat beside her on the wooden bench, humming and braiding the girl's hair.

"What song is that? It's really pretty."

"It's a song that my mother used to sing to me. We would sit like this and she would braid my hair and sing."

"There are words then?"

Jenah smiled and began singing softly:

"Through depths of grace He sustains me.
By His love he lifts me up.
When darkness surrounds me, He will carry me through.
His spirit goes forth like a dove and guides me.
Upon mountains I am safely set down.
By His loving mercy my heart has been rescued.
I look for the wicked, but they are no more.
His peace settles on me. He tells me He loves me.
Through the depths of His grace I am ever sustained."

When Jenah had finished, Beth clapped and said, "It's beautiful!"

"I think so too."

"What is she like?"

"My mother? She was a lovely woman. She feared the Lord and was a good and faithful wife to my father and a wonderful mother to all six of her children."

"Oh, she's passed on then. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Jenah said graciously. "She died ten years ago, so I had her as part of my life for a very long time. We were already here, building the ship, when we got word that she was sick. But she was buried before I could make it to her side."

"That's so sad."

"I was able to see all my brothers and sisters again. I hadn't seen them since my father had died seven years before that. We regretted, of course, that our reunions only seemed to be for funerals anymore. But sometimes that's the way life is—family becomes scattered by time and circumstances. More than anything we were glad just to be with each other. And Mother would have been pleased that her death could serve to do that. We mourned, but as for me, I knew I would see her again. I spent a month there with my family and then we returned here. I haven't seen any of them since."

"Don't you miss them?"

"Yes. But I mourn for them more than I miss them. The grief I felt at my mother's death pales when compared to the grief I still feel for my three sisters and two brothers."

Beth inclined her head, frowning her brow. "I don't understand."

"The whole time I was with them, I tried to convince them to return to our Lord, to come back here with me and Noah. To live."

"Then they don't believe in your God?"

"No. They were told of Him, of course, when they were children. But the girls married warriors from the East and worship the pagan god Thul. My brothers follow Agveh. They have all turned their backs on their true Creator, preferring the enticing lies of demons." Jenah sniffed and wiped her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Oh Beth, you did nothing wrong. I just got to remembering that's all."

The girl paused, staring down intently at the grain of the wooden bench. Tracing a line with nervous fingers she said, "Jenah, I prayed to your God, when Shem was injured. I prayed and He answered, didn't he? Shem is going to be all right?"

Jenah tied the ends of the braid with a short, rawhide cord. She got up and walked around to sit down facing Beth. "He's going to be fine. But let's back up a moment. You said you prayed to my God?"

The girl nodded.

"You know, He could be *your* God if you want."

Beth's eyes grew large and curious. "How?"

"Just believe, precious daughter. Believe and give your heart and life to Yahweh."

The girl pursed her lips and furrowed her brow. Finally she said, "Then that's what I'm doing. I give my heart and life to the God of Jenah."

Jenah embraced her. "Oh, daughter, my soul rejoices. You know what this means don't you?"

"What?"

Jenah laughed, releasing the embrace. "Well, a lot of things actually. But one thing it means is that there will be one more on our ship when God's judgment falls. I wanted you saved so badly and now God has taken you into His hand right in front of me!" Jenah kissed Beth's cheek and allowed herself the thought: *And one of my sons just might have himself a bride someday.*

But Beth was frowning. Soon there were tears in her eyes.

"Daughter, no! Why are you crying? This is a time to celebrate."

"I was thinking about last night. What Noah told us. Tarn is still angry, and we don't even know where Kenian has gone."

Jenah's lips parted in sorrow. The most important moment of Beth's life and the child couldn't rejoice in it for fear of her father and concern for her brother. She wiped a tear from the girl's cheek. "Oh Beth, it's going to be all right." *Please Lord let it be.*

Beth just shook her head. "This isn't over with Tarn. It was only a day before he killed Onath for... for what he did. He isn't very patient and never forgives. Oh, Jenah, I'm so afraid of what I may have done. I should get back to Tarn today. Maybe that way he'll leave your family alone. Or maybe I should look for Kenian." Beth trembled. "I don't know what to do."

"Precious daughter." Jenah embraced her again. "Let's talk to Noah."



"So you stopped at the berry bush." Noah was shaking his head.

"I didn't stop exactly. I just..." Shem faltered. "I knew you'd be mad."

"Bet you don't dawdle around next time," Japheth offered from the other cot.

Noah raised a hand to quiet him. "I'm not mad. You're just so easily distracted and this time it got you hurt. You slow down to talk to Kenian, you pause on the way back to look at a fallen leaf—I'm not even going to ask how that grabbed your attention—and the next thing you know a behemoth, which I warned you about, sneaks up and almost kills you. Son, how does something the size of a behemoth sneak up on anyone?"

"Found something with even less brains than it." Japheth laughed.

Shem's teeth were clenched and a knot was forming in his stomach. *I'm not going to cry.* Composing himself he said, "I'll take whatever punishment you think is fair."

"Could have him shovel the goat pens for a year."

Noah ignored his older son and sighed. "I'm not going to punish you, Shem. Your recovery should be punishment enough. I really am just glad you're alive."

Japheth couldn't believe his ears. How did Shem do it? He drew a deep breath and closed his eyes. *I talk back to mother once and shovel goat dung for a year. Sure let him mend, but don't let him get away with it.*

"No father," Shem said. "I disobeyed. I deserve to be punished."

What? Japheth sat upright.

Noah stared at his younger son. "Are you feverish again? Japheth, go get your mother."

"No. I'm fine. But I deserve to be punished." *You can't keep babying me.*

"What then?" The big man shrugged, palms upward. "You're getting too old for swats to the rear. Besides, there's not much punishment I can give while you're in this condition."

"Then do what Japheth said."

"*What?*" Noah and Japheth spoke in unison.

"A year shoveling the goat pens—by myself." *Or do you think I can't even do that?* Shem remembered that Japheth had been about twelve when Noah meted that judgment.

"So be it." Noah shook his head. What was it with this youngest son of his? If he lived to be a thousand he would never understand the boy.

Japheth plopped back down on his cot in disbelief. Completely in the clear and then insisting on punishment? It didn't make sense. Maybe his brother really was dumber than a behemoth.

"Noah, we need to talk." It was Jenah. She stood at the door, her arms around Beth.

The big man stood to go. "Japheth, stay with your brother."

"Of course, Father."

"And be civil to one another."

This time Shem answered. "Yes, sir."



Once they got to the flower garden, Noah asked, "What is it, Jen?" He sat across from his wife and her handmaiden.

Jenah looked at the girl with concern. "Do you want me to tell him, or would you rather speak to Noah yourself. I can leave the two of you alone if you want."

"No." Beth looked up with tears shimmering in her eyes. "I mean, I want you here. And I can try to tell Noah myself."

"Little One, what's troubling you?"

Beth struggled through a retelling of the worries she'd expressed to Jenah. When she was finished Noah reached over and took her hand.

"If you really want to return to your father's house we won't stop you," he said. Jenah started to protest, but Noah raised his eyebrows and continued; "But it's not safe, and would be no solution anyway. Having you to beat on won't satisfy Tarn's hatred of me. So forget about sacrificing yourself for our sakes. Here is what I propose: Stay here with us, become *our* child. I gave Kenian the same invitation, but he wouldn't. He did say he had someplace to go to, though he didn't tell me where. I promise to look for him once things are settled here. Right now the best we can do is pray for him daily, which I will make sure that we do."

"But what will you do about Tarn? I know him. I know he'll be back—and soon."

Noah released the girl's hand and reached into his robe. He pulled forth what looked like a polished off-white stone. It was wide, flat, and square.

"I made it from the tooth I took from the Behemoth." He held it up. "Last night while I was watching Shem I made one for each of my family members. Even carved my symbol into it." He showed them the crudely etched grapevine, an image he put on all his woodwork. "Japheth used his to adorn his new quiver. I think Shem intends to set his into a knife handle."

Jenah mumbled, "You didn't tell me you'd killed the beast."

Noah's dark eyes sparkled. "The creature would have killed Tarn, had the Lord not delivered it into my hands. Little One, this is proof that Yahweh will

watch over us. He always has.” He handed Beth the polished square and closed her tiny fingers around it. “Here’s one for you, Jenah.” He handed his wife a charm. “And I’ve got mine right here, over my heart.” He showed them his own, made into a necklace on a simple leather cord.

“She chose Him as her Lord today, husband,” Jenah offered.

“You did!”

Beth nodded shyly.

“Then you must begin to trust Him.” Noah pointed to the charm in her hand. “Keep this to remind you that our Lord watches over us. See, I’ve also drilled a hole in one corner, so you can make it into a necklace like mine if you like.” He smiled and patted her cheek. “You still haven’t answered me. Will you stay with us?”

The grin was like a sunrise. “I would love to live here and be part of your family. Yours and Jenah’s!”

The big man stood, reached across the table and swept her up in his arms. “From now on, you can call me *Father*. That is, if you want to.”

Jenah smiled and caught her husbands’ eye. “There’s one more bit of news you might be interested in.”

Still in his arms, Beth started giggling. Noah raised his eyebrows.

“Beth’s not the only new addition to our family,” Jenah said, placing her hand on her stomach.

Noah’s jaw dropped. He sat Beth down. “Little One, you knew?” He turned back to his wife. “Jen, are you whispering secrets to everyone but me these days?”

“She only guessed, husband. She’s seen me slip into the woods ill. I wasn’t sure myself until Beth mentioned it and the Lord confirmed her words.”

Noah smiled and moved around to his wife to embrace her. “What else has He told you? Anything?”

Jenah sighed. “Another son.”

The big man whooped so loudly it echoed. He lifted his wife off her feet and swung her around and around.

“Easy, husband, easy.” But Noah just ignored her protests until she murmured, “I think I’m going to be sick ...again.”

Noah abruptly set her down and said, “Let’s go tell our boys.”

Following them inside, Beth studied the outside wall. Though already familiar with the house, she tried to acquaint herself with the idea that this was now her home. Unlike most of the sun-baked dwellings she’d seen, the outside was fashioned from flat, roughly hewn stones, sealed close together with mortar. Running her finger along a grooved line, she smiled, then looked up at the roof, a thatch of multi-layered, pitch-coated palmetto set atop rugged cypress beams. She touched the doorframe as they entered, cypress again. Across the threshold, her shoes trod softly upon huge, level slabs of marble, the seams between which were almost indiscernible. She imagined it would feel cool and clean under her bare feet.

“Your home now, daughter.” Noah smiled, one arm securely around his wife. He took Beth’s hand and the three of them went to share the news.

Once inside his sons’ room, Noah gathered his family around Shem’s cot. He put a hand on Beth’s shoulder and announced, “Japheth, Shem, I have good news. Your mother is expecting. She will give birth to another son. I have also asked Beth to live with us and become part of our family. My and Jenah’s daughter, and your sister.”

Neither son said a word, their faces frozen in astonishment.

Jenah laughed. “Speechless at the same time, mark this day husband.”

Noah sensed Beth growing nervous. He glared at his sons.

Japheth was first to heed the warning. “That’s wonderful. Both things are wonderful, I mean.” Inside he was terrified. *He’s determined to make her my wife, whether I want her or not!*

“I’ve always wanted another brother...and a sister,” Shem said. His stomach turned as a scrap of memory washed up in his mind. *Did I tell her what I think I did?*

“Thank you.” The girl blushed and fidgeted. *They don’t want you here, neither one of them. The joy they should have felt was doused because of you! What were you thinking?*

If no one else noticed the sudden chill, Noah did. “Daughter,” the big man spoke softly. “They were only surprised. Though I don’t know everything that goes on in my sons’ heads, I believe that I do know their hearts. They really are glad to have you here and will be proud to call you sister. Don’t let the enemy tell you otherwise.”

Beth frowned and furrowed her brow. “The enemy?”

“The deceiver.” Shem joined the conversation in an effort to prove Noah’s assurances. “Or Satan ... *adversary*.”

“The accuser,” Japheth said. “The one that fed sin to the world.”

“Remember the fallen ones I spoke of,” Jenah said. “Their master. He led a rebellion in the heavens and was cast down.”

Beth was shaken. “And he is speaking to me?”

“He lies to all of us, Little One.” Noah smiled to put her at ease. “But our Lord speaks too. Let me tell you of the first man and woman, ancestors to us all, and of their encounter with the serpent. The story was related to me by my father, Lamech, who heard it first-hand from Adam himself.”

Shem pulled the wool sheet tighter about him. He listened as his father recounted the history of mankind’s fall. Somewhere in the telling Shem started to drift off, his father’s words lulling:

“...so the Lord said to the serpent, ‘You are cursed above all the wild animals. You’ll crawl on your belly and eat dust all your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.’”

Chapter 9 - Recovery

Weeks passed. Noah and Japheth tended the gardens while Jenah and Beth stayed close to Shem. In the meantime, the work of building had stopped, to allow carrion eaters to dispose of the Behemoth and clear the way once again to the pits. Shem was moving around on the crutches Noah had made for him but was growing weary of his limitations. Still, the cast was a good one and kept the leg immobile while the bone knitted.

The most important benefit, however, went largely unnoticed. Shem was forced to slow down, to take his time, which meant that he became more careful and fumbled less. And though injured, he made an effort to be useful, mending and washing garments, helping with the meals, anything he could do while seated. He was in the great room, slicing vegetables, when his mother told him:

“It’s time. Right after supper we’ll remove the cast.”

Reaching out he took his mother’s hand and pulled her to him. She bent to his embrace. “Thank you for everything.” Shem kissed her cheek.

“I wasn’t alone. The Lord has his hand on you, Shem. On all my children.” Jenah stroked her son’s hair and stood, smiling. She took his plate of tomatoes. “Let me get back to the kitchen. Poor Beth will work herself to death if I let her.”

Once in the kitchen she set the tomatoes atop a wooden counter, alongside other foods in various stages of preparation, then said to Beth, “Daughter, why don’t you keep Shem company while I finish up.”

Beth was wiping her hands on her apron. “But don’t you need me to—”

“You work entirely too hard. Go now.” She pushed the girl from the kitchen.

Beth sighed in submission and wandered from the kitchen half-heartedly.

Keep Shem company. It sounded so easy, and had been at one time. He had always been her friend, though mostly because of Kenian. Maybe that was why she was avoiding him now, because he made her think of her brother, which only caused her sadness. But it wasn’t the only reason, she knew. Something had changed between them since the accident. Shem was quiet around her, nervous somehow. His apprehension, in turn, made her uneasy.

Beth decided it wouldn’t go on. She’d break the ice that had somehow formed between them, even if Shem was reluctant to do so. She entered the room where he sat and took the chair next to him.

“So,” she began. “Hello, Shem.”

He nodded. “Beth.”

“How’s your leg?”

He cleared his throat then mumbled, “Mother says it’s healed.” He rapped the plaster with his knuckles. “And we’ll take this off tonight.”

“I’m sure you’re glad of that.” She grinned.

Shem relaxed. “Yes. And I know a few goats that will be even more pleased.” He returned her smile. For the moment they were at ease again. Maybe all that had been needed was for one to reach out to the other.

“You know, Noah doesn’t really expect you to follow through with that.” Beth still couldn’t bring herself to call Noah ‘Father’ around his sons, or to call Jenah ‘Mother’. If they held any resentment due to her moving in, she was determined not to make it worse.

“I know,” Shem said. “I think it’s all a joke to him and Japheth. But not to me. I intend to submit to the punishment, even if Father won’t hold me to it.”

Beth furrowed her brow. The expression was so cute it made Shem’s heart hurt. He looked away as she said, “I still don’t get it. Why do you *want* to be punished?”

“It’s not that I want to be punished.” Shem swallowed, fighting to keep his voice from trembling. *I’ve been around her all my life, so why am I so nervous with her now?* “I’m just tired of being treated like a child.”

Her blue eyes sparkled. “But Shem, to Noah everyone in this house is a child. Probably even Jenah. He was almost a hundred when she was born, right?”

“Yes. But even if I am young, that doesn’t mean he has to...” Shem started fidgeting with his cast, his fingers picking absently at a piece of cloth enmeshed in plaster. “Never mind, you wouldn’t understand.”

“I understand perfectly. You think he babies you and favors Japheth. But you’re wrong, Shem. That’s not what he’s doing.”

“So what is he doing?”

“I don’t know the reasons behind it, but I do recognize it. He’s—”

“Beth! Shem!” Jenah called from the kitchen. “Come. Noah and Japheth have returned and supper is ready.”

“You were saying?” Shem took his crutches and clambered to his feet.

“He’s protecting you.” Beth led the way toward the kitchen.

“From what?”

She shrugged as they passed into the kitchen.

Noah and Japheth had brought in fresh fruit and vegetables and were piling them high in deep wooden bowls upon a stool huddled in one corner, snacks for the coming week. Jenah and Beth moved bowls of yams and steamed vegetables to the dining table. The side plates were next, loaded with sliced tomatoes, roasted nuts, and goat cheese. Beth set a basket of freshly baked bread in the center of it all, and the family gathered to eat.

Noah gave thanks and said a prayer for Kenian, as he had every evening since the boy had left. He took an ear of corn and passed the rest to Beth.

“Husband.” Jenah spooned out a helping of peas. “It’s time. Shem’s leg is healed.”

Noah smiled. “Good. As soon as you think you’re able Shem, you can start helping Jenah and Beth around the house.”

Shem frowned, tearing off a hunk of bread and passing the basket to Japheth.

His father kept talking. “Then later you can come back to work with me and Japheth. Once we’re sure that—”

“I’ll help you in the morning,” Shem blurted. “Right after I shovel the goat pens.”

Japheth gasped, amazed that Shem had actually interrupted their father. Jenah coughed, then reached for her water cup.

Noah said nothing, but chewed slowly and regarded his younger son.

Shem chided himself; *Think before you speak!* “I’m sorry, Father. But I’ve already been helping around the house and I think it’s time we all got back to our work. I only want you to...that is...I...” Seated at the end of the bench, it was no problem for Shem to take up his crutches and rise. “Excuse me.”

He quickly turned to leave, tears glistening in his eyes.

Noah sighed and looked from Jenah to Japheth. “Does anyone know what that was about?”

“I do,” Beth murmured.

Noah and Japheth turned to stare. But not Jenah. A smile was playing at the edge of her lips. “It’s good to hear you speak up, daughter.” *She’s becoming part of the family.* “Japheth, go see about your brother.”

“Me? I don’t know why he gets in these moods of his. He won’t talk to me anyway.”

“You heard your mother. Your brother needs you.” Noah motioned with a huge, hairy arm.

Japheth rose in a huff. “He just wants to be treated like he’s something special, that’s all.”

“Hush, Japheth. Go now.” The big man looked worried. *He is special.*

Once Japheth had gone, Beth said, “Actually, it’s just the opposite of what Japheth thinks. Favored treatment is the last thing Shem wants.” She was thankful for Jenah’s wisdom in maneuvering Japheth from the room.

“Go on,” Noah said, his dark eyes penetrating.

The girl bent her head, shaken by a gaze which surely implied anger. “I’m sorry. I’m only a girl. Surely I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“Nonsense,” Jenah said. “A woman’s intuition, no matter her age, holds more insight than a man may ever hope to attain.”

Noah smiled at that. “Perhaps.” He took Beth’s hand gently, made a conscious effort to soften his countenance. “Truly, daughter, you bring a fresh perspective to this family, and not just because you are female. Though that does, as Jenah has pointed out, give you certain advantages. Now tell me, what exactly do you mean?”

Beth searched Noah’s eyes. He seemed to mean it. Had the question come from Tarn’s mouth, she would rightly suspect a trap. But this man seemed to truly believe that her words held value.

So she considered for a moment, then said, "I know what it's like to be treated differently, being the only female in a houseful of men. Noah, sir, you mean well, but sometimes you do seem to treat your sons very differently, and they both resent it. You're trying to protect Shem for some reason, but that's not how it seems to them. Shem thinks you baby him and favor Japheth, while Japheth thinks you're hard on him and prefer Shem. And all this while, Shem only wants what any man wants, to be respected."

"But I do respect both my sons," Noah said. "And if I treat them differently, it's only because they *are* different. You can't treat all children the same way in all circumstances."

Beth shook her head. "That's not what I mean. Has Japheth ever had to shovel the goat pens?"

"Yes, but not for getting hurt."

Jenah spoke up. "He doesn't want punishment for being hurt. He disobeyed, remember? Straight to the pits and straight back. No stopping at the berry bush."

Beth seized on that new knowledge. "What would you do if Japheth had disobeyed you in such a way?"

At that, Noah leaned back and scratched at a graying temple. "I suppose I would have to do something," he admitted. "Perhaps the goat pens. Perhaps something else. But, yes, something."

"And that's why Shem is upset. What would bring Japheth chastisement earns him only pity and cautioning words."

"Beth," Jenah said. "I can't imagine Tarn treated you that way. Not punishing you when you deserved it?"

The girl frowned and studied her plate. "Oh no. He punished me, when I *didn't* deserve it. He thought that by doing so he was protecting me. While his sons ran wild and did as they pleased." She paused. "Until Onath, of course."

Jenah placed her hand on Beth's tenderly.

Noah sighed. "I'll do what I can to make Shem feel respected. But there is much truth in what you have said, daughter. I am protecting him. If that means treating him a bit different then that's the way it must be. He'll have to learn to live with it, as will Japheth."

"Can I ask, sir, from what do you protect him?"

"I don't know. *Everything*," Noah said, shaking his head. "The Lord has revealed to me that Shem is special, but that's about all I really know. Jenah will tell you I'm crazy for what I'm about to say but—"

"It's all just coincidence, husband. Don't fill the girl's head with conjectures that can't be proven."

"The enemy is trying to kill Shem," Noah insisted. "He seeks to lead all to ruin, true. But he has targeted Shem specifically. The boy is *not* just accident prone."

"Near misses, that's all they are," Jenah said. "And this is the first time he's ever had a broken limb, for all his mishaps."

"Near misses is what Japheth has," Noah continued. "For Shem they are far too frequent to be called that. He almost drowned when he was three, picked up an adder when he was four, and was nearly crushed under a falling tree just last summer. There are a lot more besides those. Too many to count."

Jenah shook her head. "And what happened with that adder bite? It should have killed him, but he was up and out of bed only three days later."

"Yes, it was an answer to prayer that he lived. But he still bears scars from the fang marks, and his grip in that hand has never been what it should be." Noah looked at Beth. "Remember this, Little One; of all humanity only this family will survive the wrath to come. And Shem's bloodline must be preserved." He got to his feet. "I'm going to have a talk with our sons. And then we'll come back and eat supper together. As a family."



"We saw a mammoth up the mountains today," Japheth said. "A young one, brown-furred and strong. We were tearing thistles from the garden when Father pointed it out. I'm going to see if we can tame it."

Shem picked absently at his cast. "I don't doubt you will. Since you can do anything."

Japheth shook his head, his dark eyes brooding. "Why do you do that? I said *we* if you'll notice. What's gotten into you?"

"You and Father, that's what's gotten into me. Now go away and leave me alone."

"They sent me to see about you. The point of which is for us to return to the table—*together*."

"I'm not hungry, Japheth. And we've talked, so you've done your duty." *Like you always do.* "You can go now."

"Shem, if you weren't wearing that cast I'd put you in one."

"Would you?" The voice came like a low peal of thunder and both young men jumped.

"Father, I—"

Noah waved his elder son to silence. "Never mind, I know enough to recognize the idle threats of siblings." *At least that's all it had better be.* He walked

over to a storage shelf and picked through an assortment of bronze, iron, and stone tools. He smiled when he got to the last of these. Most of the flint tools were Shem's handiwork. Though he may not be very good at carpentry, the boy had an uncanny ability to work stone.

I haven't given him enough credit. All these skills will be needed. Indeed, I wonder if Japheth realizes his favorite ax has a head that Shem fashioned. Settling for a serrated flint knife, Noah took the piece in hand and moved to Shem's bedside. "This has served its purpose, I think," he said, tapping at the plaster encasing. "Japheth, you help Shem keep his leg still while I work at getting it free."

Kneeling then, Noah started sawing away at the cast. "Don't worry, I'll stop before I cut into flesh." He grinned briefly at his younger son, then turned again to the work. Within moments a trench was carved halfway down the cast. Shem concentrated on keeping his leg very still, while Japheth held his ankles.

Shem noticed how large his brother's hands were becoming. *He'll be as big as Father once he's grown.* He also realized how his own skin had paled since the accident, the past several weeks spent mostly indoors. And maybe he was imagining it, but the injured leg seemed thinner than the other. He grimaced as another thought crept into his mind. Once again, here he was, sitting idly by, watching while Noah and Japheth silently worked side by side, as if it were as natural to them as breathing. Shem swallowed, bitter tears running down the back of his throat. Better than down his face, he figured. Maybe he should just give up and accept that his older brother would always be closer to their father. Always bigger, always better. The one Noah would always be proud to call son.

So be it, Shem decided, tired of trying to swim against that particular tide.



Noah finished the last few inches in silence, glancing every now and then at his sons, who were both intent on keeping the leg immobile. He felt a sudden swell of joy. It was good to see them pulling together for a change. They would need to start making a habit of it too. Though the flood was still decades away, the entire world would afterwards consist of those now living under his roof and maybe a few others. The future of that world depended upon how well they learned to work together and help one another.

Reaching the bottom edge, Noah motioned Japheth aside and finished carving. "There," he said, setting the stone tool aside and wiping his brow. "Now just let me get a good grip." He slipped his fingertips under the top edge of the cast, one hand on either side of the furrow, and pulled.

The cast came apart with a sudden snap. Shem watched as a tiny cloud of dust was thrown into the air and then dissipated. He slowly lifted his leg, carefully extricating it from the broken halves of plaster. He bent the knee, tested his ankle against his cot, and then cautiously sat up and put both feet on the floor.

"Go ahead. Stand up," Japheth said.

"I will, just give me a moment."

"Don't rush him, Japheth." The big man put his hand on Shem's shoulder. "And don't rush yourself." He bent until he was eye to eye with his younger son. "Shem, I want you to continue to take it easy, until you've fully recovered. Come out tomorrow to help me and Japheth. You'll be fetching supplies, doing many of the things you've always done, actually. But I won't allow you to push yourself until I'm sure you're completely well again. That means no goat pens tomorrow." He put up a hand to ward off the protest. "Son, you will shovel the goat pens, but at my command, when I say you're ready. You'll also learn to swing the ax and nail the boards together. Not tomorrow, mind you, but soon. Soon."

Japheth offered a hand to his brother. "Here, let me help you."

"I can do it." Shem put his hands on the side of the bed and eased to his feet.

"All right," Japheth conceded. "But I'm right at your side if you feel weak or need help." He remembered the talk he'd had with his mother. It was up to him to see that they all made it safely through, which for the moment meant watching out for Shem and helping him along. Maybe he could even teach his little brother how to chop down Cypress, or drive a nail. He frowned. Perhaps that was pushing it a bit, but he would try. For all their sakes.

"Come, let's go have dinner together, shall we?" Noah walked through the door, his sons close behind.

Chapter 10 - Revenge

Tarn was sure enough time had passed, seven months since he'd lost Beth and Kenian. Surely that fool Noah thought the matter forgotten by now. This should be easy. Tarn crept by torchlight along the path. He had to be careful, though they were all probably asleep by now. If he got too close with the flame its light might find its way through a window to play along ceilings or walls and rouse any light sleepers.

A bend in the road ahead and the path forked. Which way? Tarn knelt and examined each path in turn. Both showed equal signs of wear. Had one belied more use, that would have been enough to mark it as a passage to the main dwelling. Since he could discern no difference, Tarn chose the path to his right and resumed his pace.

He passed a vineyard, overgrown with brambles, but the stakes and layout made the plot unmistakable. Why would anyone let a vineyard go like this? Maybe when he was through he would take this land as his own. The path forked again.

Now which way? He chose at random, irritated that this was becoming more complicated than he'd expected. Before he'd gone a mile the road became three and he had to guess again.

Tarn gnashed his teeth, his stomach writhing like a speared serpent. Though he'd taken every spare moment to fume over his treatment at Noah's hands,

Tarn had not devised a singular plan of attack. As always he would trust his 'gut' to lead him to action. After all, that was how he'd managed to prosper for as long and as well as he had. With the first two sons he'd managed to forge a cache of wealth to rival that of any of those deplorable city dwellers. Put his offspring to work as soon as they were able, that's what his gut had told him—each one according to their ability.

Thus had he guided Onath's skill at weapon crafting into a lucrative trade. Onath also possessed a hunter's stamina and cunning, which made him a formidable assassin. Irad was perhaps even more profitable, however, with his slender build and attractive features. From a very young age he'd been groomed for use by certain powerful men in the city. And though Tarn felt a certain disdain for their twisted lusts, he wasn't about to let that stop him from accruing what was probably the easiest money he'd ever made.

And now, now when he was just about to profit from those pitiful twins, to have them snatched from under him! It was too much for any man to take. Beth was beautiful. She'd have fetched a hefty price whether prostituted or sold outright. Kenian too—though he'd probably have to be marketed to women, since his features were too obviously masculine for most of Irad's patrons.

Tarn cursed. He should've started with them earlier, he knew. But his promise to their mother had stayed him thus far. What a fool he'd been to honor it for so long. Sera was dead and all his promises should have died with her. He cursed Agveh, the god of his childhood. When he'd refused to profit from his wife the way he'd profited from his sons, the god had apparently seen it as a betrayal of some sort. But when it came to Sera, Tarn would share her with no one. He loved her that much. More than he'd ever loved Tesha, whore-mother of his two eldest sons.

A breeze picked up and howled in the distance. *Agveh*, thought Tarn, *do you taunt me even now?* He hadn't followed the deity since Sera's death. If the god would deny him just one thing for himself then he wasn't worth serving anymore. While Tarn still profited from his sons, he kept his gold far from Agveh's coffers and invoked his name only as a curse now.

He walked along the path, chewing on the gristle of the promise he'd made to Sera. "*Protect the twins,*" she'd begged him. "*Protect Kenian and Beth.*" Thus naming her offspring, she'd died.

And so Tarn *had* protected them—keeping Beth from the city, busy and safe with housework. He also allowed her to serve in Noah's household. While he hated the man, he was content to let his daughter learn from Noah's wife. He'd also used her to gain knowledge. Unwittingly, Beth had told him what the house looked like and gave him the general layout. If only he'd questioned her more closely concerning how to actually get there. But that might have raised suspicion. Besides, he hadn't thought it would be so hard to find.

As for Kenian, Tarn allowed the boy more freedom of course. A male needed far less protection. He let Kenian harvest the wild orchards and bushes that grew in the wilderness of the surrounding hills. And though he never let on, Tarn knew the boy went into the city's outskirts to sell a good half of his produce. Let the boy think he slipped away unseen at night; it kept Kenian on edge, and Tarn actually enjoyed the tension and fear he sensed from his youngest son. He had no idea really what Kenian did with the trifling of copper coins he earned each week, and hadn't much cared so long as the boy stayed, for the most part, safe and out of any serious trouble.

All of that had been about to change though. It had started with Onath's betrayal. That any of his sons would do such a thing did not surprise him. But Onath! Onath was his eldest, heir to his fortune and closest to his heart. If a man could love a son, then Tarn had truly loved Onath. So when the betrayal came it was much worse for having come through the son he loved, instead of those from whom he would expect such dishonor.

Drunk though he'd been, Tarn decided that very night that if that was how his love was repaid then it wasn't worth giving in the first place. He put a quick end to Onath and in killing his son killed also any favor or protection he'd promised for the twins. Of course, once he'd sobered up he realized that he'd lost an important source of profit, which further cemented his decision to utilize the twins. Kenian and Beth, he'd determined, would start earning their keep. Beth began that very night. Kenian he had yet to harness. But the day *had* been coming—until that meddling fool, Noah, ruined it all.

Tarn stopped, his thoughts interrupted by the sight of a structure just ahead. Noah's home? He planted his torch in the soft ground and crept closer, keeping to the shadows. As he drew closer he realized that this was too small for a house. It was only a shed of some sort. He looked around, but in the darkness could make out no other buildings, only bushes and trees in all directions. Quickly he retrieved his torch and returned to the shed. He opened the door and stepped inside.

Carpentry tools lined the walls, hanging from pegs and sitting atop shelves to his left and right. Nails, hammers, claws, planers, axes, and saws, and many tools he could not name. Directly across from the door, along the back wall, stood a tall wooden table, upon it a huge basin filled with water. Rags and brushes hung from pegs above the basin. The floor, he noticed, was lined with bronze pots and wooden buckets. A work shed, Tarn realized. But for what? He stepped outside again.

He looked around, raised his torch in all directions but still saw nothing. Where was the house? Surely nearby, unless the shed had been built away from the main dwelling. But why would that be the case? Tarn grunted his frustration. All this way for nothing! And with no way of knowing if he had time enough to explore the other road before dawn. So he did what he could, setting fire to the shed. He stayed just long enough to be sure the flames would engulf the building and then hurried off, lest Noah's house was not so very far removed that the flames might draw Tarn's enemy to him.

A small victory, that was all it was. Next time, though, he'd strike at Noah's very heart. Concerned that his gut had failed him, Tarn decided to be prepared and think his next move through very carefully. Noah would surely discover the shed in the morning, if not sooner. Would the man expect a quick second strike? Beth was with them, maybe Kenian too. What advice might they give Noah? Tarn knew his children hated him now, might even advise Noah to strike back quickly before he could try again. Yes, that was probably what they would do. To protect and avenge themselves of course.

I'll have to act quickly then, Tarn decided. But not too quickly. Noah would be on his guard tomorrow night, and many nights thereafter. But maybe in another week...

Tarn clutched his torch, holding it before him like a weapon, and hurried back down the trail. Strike at Noah's heart—surely the fool had children of his own. Hadn't Kenian even mentioned one by name before? Tarn tried but couldn't remember. No matter. He'd have his revenge or die trying.

As he hurried from the scene, his mind consumed with vengeance, Tarn did not notice that the flames engulfing the shed threw out more and more light. He did not notice the huge unfinished structure stretching along the shallow valley to the east.



A charred heap of timbers was all that remained. Noah had seen the smoke at daybreak and charged Japheth to guard the household while he and Shem went to investigate. He would rather have stepped into this danger alone. He sighed. Why was it so hard for him to show Shem respect? To treat him like a man?

Because he's still so small. That boy is overdue for a growth spurt.

Noah carefully surveyed the area, then resolutely picked through the embers. Most of the metal containers had either completely melted down or deformed in the fire, while the stoneware was blackened and cracked. Only a handful of items were still useful. He would have to go into the city for supplies.

He surveyed the great ship and climbed upon it, looking for any sign of further sabotage. He pulled himself up to the highest point of the forward keel and from there traversed its length. His fears were relieved; the great ship stood untouched.

But why? Why torch the shed and leave the ship intact? There was only one explanation.

"Thank you, Lord," he said as he stepped off the keel.

"Did you say something, Father?"

Noah started. For someone so talkative the boy could almost disappear sometimes. "Voicing gratitude, Shem." He walked over and knelt by the cracked stone basin. He put a hand close, but didn't touch it. It was still hot enough to burn him.

The boy nodded. "Whoever did this overlooked the ship. The Lord must have hidden it from them."

Noah looked at his son pointedly, surprised Shem could focus long enough to draw what was albeit an obvious conclusion. Perhaps the boy would grow up after all. He stood up. "There is no *whoever*, Shem. Tarn did this. I know it in my bones. And I fear he'll attack our home next. He *will* be back."

"Perhaps he meant to attack our home this time, but chose the wrong path."

Noah was taken aback. He had not thought of that. *Thank you again, Lord.* "Probably so," he admitted. "Now help me load this sled."

Noah had brought along two oxen, harnessed and pulling a wheeled sled. He and Shem began loading it with timber, building supplies for the room he would add on for Beth. "So," Noah began again, "what do you *really* think about Beth moving in?"

Shem shrugged noncommittally. "It's the right thing to do."

Noah smiled and grabbed the next plank to help Shem heft it. He could have done the work alone, of course, but had wanted another man with him today. True, Japheth would have been more help, but as soon as Noah had ascertained the source of smoke was indeed upon his own territory, he'd sent his eldest back to protect the women and guard the home. And while Shem was just a boy, he was male.

"That's not exactly an answer to my question," Noah said, once they had transferred the board. "I know it's the right thing to do, but how do you *feel* about it?"

"I don't mind. I mean, I like Beth. She'll make a good...*sister*. Besides, you couldn't let Tarn take her back."

If he noticed Shem's hesitation Noah simply attributed it to physical exertion. "I think she makes your brother nervous," he said.

Shem reddened. "Why would she make Japheth nervous?" *Easy. Stay calm.*

"Oh, I don't know." The big man chuckled and pulled another board from the pile. "Perhaps because he knows that she'll grow up someday. And make someone a very good wife." Noah started to wink at his son but then noticed—"Are you all right, Shem? You look flushed. Should we rest a moment?"

Shem grabbed another board and replied tersely, "I'm not tired."

Noah took the other end of the board to help him. "Are you sure?"

Shem shoved the board onto the sled. "I may not be as strong as Japheth, but I have just as much endurance."

"I never said otherwise. I just thought you might need a break."

"Well I don't."

Noah shook his head. "Shem, what's bothering you?"

The boy would not meet his father's gaze. He went for another board.

"No. I want an answer." Noah put a palm to the board to keep it down.

Shem choked back his emotions. His father was asking him to voice reasons he didn't completely understand himself. Why was he so upset? True, Japheth was a large part of it, as was his father's over-protectiveness, but now Beth was thrown into the mix. Why had the mere insinuation of her marrying Japheth filled his stomach with dread and loss? Did he love her? If so, he couldn't say that to his father. He could hear Noah already—'*You're too young to be pondering such things.*' No matter that Noah had just been pondering that very thing for a girl Shem's own age.

"I'm sorry, Father," Shem finally said. "I don't know what got into me."

Noah looked at his son, who would still not meet his gaze. If just once he could put his finger on the pulse of Shem's problems. Why did the boy seem so defensive all the time? *Is it me? Am I doing something wrong?*

Noah thought back to his conversation with Beth so many months ago. Had he been sheltering the boy again? He didn't think so. The fact that Shem was here with him now was evidence to the contrary. Still he said, "Forgive me if I did or said something to upset you, son. All that I do for you, and for Japheth for that matter, is motivated by love. You know that don't you?"

Shem nodded. "I don't really know why I snapped like that. Maybe I am getting tired."

"Let's eat something, all right?"

"I'd rather finish loading the sled. We can eat on the way home."

Noah sighed. "That will be fine."

They continued loading the sled, but Noah could tell that Shem's thoughts were far away. He wanted to ask his son about those thoughts, but held his tongue. It was time to start giving the boy some room. Time to start treating him more like he treated Japheth, like a man.

"I'll have to go into the city," Noah said. "We've lost some valuable supplies. All of the brushes, most of the containers, and I would guess the handle to every tool we had. We were running short of nails anyway. I can make goat-hair brushes and carve out the handles myself, but the rest we'll have to buy."

They hefted another board. "Are you going today?" Shem asked.

"Not today. I can repair the hammers myself, and we have enough nails to last about a week. But then we'll run out and will need to go into the city."

"But what about Tarn? Do you really think it will be safe to leave mother and Beth?"

"Japheth is there now, isn't he? He can watch over everything until I have a chance to find Tarn and deal with him." Noah reached for another plank. "Not sure what I'm going to do yet, but somehow I'm going to get it through that thick head of his that I won't tolerate assaults on my family."

Shem pushed the board into place. "But Japheth always goes with you for supplies."

"Oh, I *would* like some good help—and company—so I thought I'd take you. That is, if you'd like to come."

Shem stopped in mid-reach for a plank and finally looked his father in the eyes. He nodded solemnly. "I'm not afraid, Father. Of course I'll come with you."

Noah gave a brief, serious nod. "So be it." But it was all he could do to suppress a peal of laughter. Shem being so dramatic, it was a bit funny. Noah bent to the work quickly so that his son would not see the smile playing at his lips. And as he did so, he realized; *I suppose these are his first steps toward manhood. And while it's just the markets, I dare not forget the dangers.*

He was beginning to feel as somber as his son was acting. *Am I risking Shem? Will I be putting him in harm's way?* He found himself doubting, even regretting his decision but dared not rescind the offer. *Lord, you will just have to watch over us. Protect Shem, he prayed. And keep my family safe.*

Chapter 11 - Widow

Mara watched the boy sleeping. She smiled, over seven months since he'd come, and it was time he met her friends.

She had known from the start that Kenian would be hers. She never failed to get what she wanted. From the silk sheets of her bedchambers to the gold coffers she kept hidden away. Only twelve years in Dorshan and she had managed to rise to her present position as governess of the city's Heart. She was second only to Jabal, the Chosen One, who was first among humans and reported to Dorshai herself.

But Mara was not in the Heart now. Her district was many miles yet to the south. She was at her dwelling in the Merchant square, where she could keep an eye on the coming and going of the traders who supplied the gold that eventually found its way into Dorshai's coffers. Here Mara donned black cotton robes and kept her face covered. Here she was known only as a mysterious witch and soothsayer, the Widow. And though the inside of this dwelling bespoke the profitability of such a trade, it paled in comparison to the opulence of her home in the city's Heart.

She touched the thin gold necklace that had been her wedding gift from her husband. He was not dead. Not yet. That was only part of her ruse. The name she used here was meant to be a prophetic one. And though most of her prophecies were merely well-imagined fantasies, she intended this one to become truth. She would kill her ex-husband with her own hands if need be.

She caressed the charm that hung from the necklace and invoked her god's name, "Agveh. Thank you for securing this treasure for me. I pledge half my profits to you." She released the necklace to tap her palm six times with the first two fingers of her other hand then made a motion extending those fingers away from her body, waving them back and forth before her. The gesture was a physical symbol of the pledge to share her wealth. She thought back to the first morning after Agveh had finally delivered Kenian to her:



She'd opened the door and smiled, pressing her fingers lightly to her breast, not to touch her charm, but to feel the quickening of her own pulse. The boy was so very handsome, that strange sun-colored hair, contrasting so beautifully with his tanned skin, the strong narrow nose and generous lips. It was if

several races had been combined in one body. Then Mara realized, it was probably so. There were many who thought the fair-skinned Tarenites of the north were especially beautiful, though she was not among them.

But the boy was likely the result of a union of one of the locals and a Northerner, and in him the mixture did indeed prove beautiful. Still, looking at him, Mara felt the pang of betrayal pierce her anew. She stubbornly shoved the past from her mind. So what if she'd lost her husband to a Tarenite. No one knew that but her. Besides, she'd found herself much better off without him, and the woman was dead now anyway. She'd seen to that herself. If she continued to bide her time, another opportunity would present itself. She would kill Tarn as well. Enough. There was business to attend to.

"Wake up, Kenian." She stepped into the bedchamber, put a hand to his shoulder and gently shook him. "I've prepared the morning meal and we have matters to discuss."

The boy roused and blinked at her sleepily. "Widow?" He pushed back the bed sheets and sat up. "Then it wasn't a dream."

"First rule of living under my roof." The Widow smiled. "My name is Mara. From now on we address one another by our names, like friends."

Kenian returned the smile and rose slowly to his feet. "Thank you... Mara." He looked about uncertainly. "I'll be right back. I need to..." The way he stood with his legs close together explained for him. "Is there a particular spot in the woods I should use?"

Mara laughed and took his hand gently. "Oh Kenian, you are primitive aren't you?"

He turned red. "If I'm primitive it's because my father is a savage."

"Oh, no. I didn't mean..." She leaned forward. She was only slightly taller than the boy and brushed a lock of his hair carefully aside. As she did so, she realized how much she liked that one feature of his. That errant lock falling just so across his left eye. She kissed his brow, feeling her pulse quicken again. *Keep it innocent for now*, she reminded herself. "I've a room inside the house for that very purpose."

When she showed him the room he was amazed. He'd probably expected stone chamber pots with peat in the bottom and heavy lids. Mara remembered what it was like to live like that. Now she had a polished granite bowl that emptied into the city sewer. She showed Kenian the pitcher of water in the windowsill and instructed him to pour it in afterwards to wash down the sides. Then she left to check the table one last time.

He joined her at her table and gaped at everything set before them. Exotic fruit on highly polished stone plates. Cheese and warm bread and two beverages—milk and a light colored juice.

"Mara," he said through a mouthful of bread. "The room I was just in, why were there bars in the windows? And are all the houses like yours?"

She realized he didn't know the word for the room he'd just used. "Not all have Cleansing rooms," she supplied for him. "But many do. You'll see for yourself, as I have an outing planned for us today. As for the bars, if you'll notice all my windows have them. The city can be a dangerous place, especially at night. I don't want anyone breaking in." Or *sneaking out*, she thought as she studied him. "Kenian, how much of the city have you actually seen?"

He swallowed and took a drink of milk to buy time. He finally answered, "I've seen the market, of course, the wine houses. The north district mostly."

"Hmmm." Mara smiled. "Then you've an adventure ahead of you."

After breakfast she cleared away the dishes and showed Kenian to the bath. He came out looking only a bit better than when he went in. Mara decided she'd have to work with him on that. Since he was newly acquired it would be okay for him to appear a bit rough around the edges on his first visit into the city's heart. It might even work to Mara's advantage; some women she knew liked the primitive types. But later excursions would introduce him to others who would not be so forgiving.



That had been their first morning together. On this morning, nearly eight months later, she presented him with clean woolen breeches and a tunic. The breeches were charcoal gray and the tunic a light brown. She'd had boots made to fit him and had thrown out his worn sandals. For herself Mara chose an indigo dress and the gold necklace bearing Agveh's symbol, a coiled serpent charm. Over the dress she wore a robe the same brown as Kenian's tunic. She carried a gnarled walking staff that was rough-hewn and unpolished and strapped a dagger to her hip, beneath the dress and robe. "It is dangerous for a woman to flaunt her wealth," she explained. "One look at my dress and a thief might target me."

"Then why the dress at all?" asked Kenian.

"We are visiting some special friends of mine. They expect a certain decorum. And we will be safe in their company." It was only half the truth. Kenian still did not know of her double life and was therefore unaware that, in her company, no one would dare look askance, much less threaten him.

As safe as a babe in a vipers' den—Mara smiled—*so long as he stays close to the head viper*. Still, she might let him in on that one secret. It all depended on how things went today, what Dorshai thought of him, and how trustworthy Mara found him to be. "Come," she said. "Today we journey deep into the Heart, so we must first attain steeds."



Kenian followed Mara out the door and watched as she locked it behind her. Before he came to her, Kenian had never actually ventured very far into the city. Warned by his father and having heard of Irad and Onath's conquests, he knew better. Alone in the city, a boy his age could be enslaved or sold to foreigners never to be heard from again. Even in the Market he had to be careful. Kenian always suspected that, should any ill fate befall him, there would be no avenging father to come to his rescue.

But now he had Mara. She had already shown him so much and was always at his side. He smiled. Strutting proudly in the new set of clothes she had supplied him, he followed her out to the market stables. They rented horses and started down the main street while it was still early.

He grew excited when they turned off the main road to take an entirely new route. Kenian watched eagerly, taking in everything. Early as it was, the merchants were only just beginning to set up their booths, but still there was plenty of activity. Games of both chance and skill played out on small wooden tables. Goats and sheep called out as they were led to the auction barns. Street urchins scurried about, grubby faced and begging for whatever they could get.

Mara called a particular girl over, “Shandai!”

The girl hurried across the street, alarm stamped on her face. “Have I done something wrong, Mistress?” She whispered hurriedly. She was trembling, whether from hunger or fear it was hard to tell.

Mara smiled her biggest smile. “By Agveh, no! I just want you to meet someone. Shandai this is Kenian.”

The girl eyed him warily. She did not smile. “Hello.”

Kenian looked her over. Small, maybe nine years old, threadbare clothes, limp black hair, sunken eyes, and thin brown limbs. On her right temple was a small black symbol that Kenian did not recognize. He nodded at her but said nothing.

“Kenian is my friend, Shandai. That makes him your friend too.” The words were spoken carefully as if Mara were making sure they both understood. “Sometimes Kenian may come into this neighborhood alone. If he does you’ve got to treat him as a friend.” She stooped, hands on her knees, to be eye to eye with the girl. “The same as you treat me.”

Shandai frowned but said, “Yes, Mistress.”

“Mara,” the Widow smiled. “How many times have I told you—call me Mara. We’ve been friends too long for this formality, though I still expect it from certain others.” She winked as if sharing a secret, then reached into her robe and pulled out a new copper coin. “Here. Buy some food for yourself.”

The girl took the coin hesitantly, never taking her eyes off Kenian. “Thank you... Mara.”

“You’re welcome. And we hope to see you again soon, Shandai.”

The girl took her cue and hurried down the street.

Mara took Kenian by the hand. “Poor child. She’s had such a hard life. It’s no wonder I can’t get her to trust me. Trusting people can cause you so much pain. Has that been your experience too, Kenian?”

“I suppose,” he replied. But he wasn’t really sure. He could never remember a time when he had trusted anyone besides Beth, and she *never* let him down. He thought of Noah and was surprised that he was doing so. He remembered the way Noah had invited him into his home, how the man had protected even Tarn from the Behemoth, and realized that Noah was a man worthy of trust. He wondered suddenly if Mara could be trusted.

Glancing over, he noticed her smiling at him. And in that smile he thought he could see...what? Desire? Interest? Something anyway. Of course she could be trusted, he decided, pushing down his annoying doubts. He returned the smile as they continued down the street.

Chapter 12 - Slave

As quickly as she could, Shandai traded the coin for a slice of bread and a large meaty fruit. She didn’t even know its name, only that it was red, firm, and sweet, and left her mouth wet and satisfied. For the first time in three days her belly was being sated. She ate as she ran and then hid, huddled in an alley, to keep her food from being stolen by one of the bigger street urchins.

She finished, leaving nothing of the core. Only a short, brown stem and five little seeds remained in her palm. After a moment’s consideration she swallowed these too. Carefully she wiped the juice from her chin and licked her fingers clean.

With her belly quieted, she could take time to ponder over the morning’s strange turn of events. *Mara*. Though she knew her mistress’s name, she had never been allowed to address her thusly. Shandai touched her temple, right where she knew the mark was placed. She wondered if any of the other slaves knew their mistress by name and that they bore her initial aside their brow. Probably not many. Most couldn’t read, for one thing, and wouldn’t recognize the letter even if they were privy to her name. Shandai had learned at an early age, taught by her mother before she died. How old had she been...five, six? She knew she had been young.

Quick witted and a fast learner, Mara had said. She also told Shandai it was part of the reason she was still alive today, that someday it might allow her to rise above her present station. Her mistress had even entrusted her with the knowledge of her true name, which normally only the city’s elite and Dorshai herself were made privy to.

So her mistress, *Mara*, must have special plans for this boy. And maybe it was more than just show that Mara had given Shandai permission to actually *use* her name. Shandai smiled. Perhaps she would be soon elevated from her position! As long as she remained loyal and trustworthy, she reminded herself. A true name was still something to be guarded. She would continue to keep Mara from her lips, except when in her actual company.

Shandai pondered the boy. Kenian, that was *his* name. Obviously in good with Mara somehow. Shandai thought for a moment. Or maybe Mara only wanted him to think he was in good with her. Though she expected honesty from all under her protection, Mara felt no compulsion to be likewise forthcoming, especially at the beginning. Although the woman was mostly fair, she did have her own agenda and left no doubt whose interests would be protected should conflicts arise. It was impossible to ever be sure of her intentions.

Shandai had learned that particular lesson two summers ago and would never forget it. She had only to run a hand along her lower spine to feel the scars incurred.

"I don't care if the man hurt you, Shandai. You're never to resist one of my clients."

"But I didn't mean to push away—it just hurt so bad."

"Hush girl. It will get easier, I promise. But for now you must be punished." Then came the lashes, across her buttocks and lower back. It had taken weeks for her to heal.

Shandai never pushed away after that, she never released even a whimper of pain—unless she was assigned a patron who enjoyed that sort of thing. Mara always briefed her concerning each client's preferences beforehand, but since such things weren't always common knowledge it was best to stifle her pain when she was unsure. And Mara had been right, as far as the physical aspect was concerned. It did get easier. But somehow, each time, she felt as if another small piece of her heart was being taken from her. As if she were being slowly chipped away, like a roughly handled piece of pottery.

Shandai forced down her thoughts and stepped out of the alley. It was time to earn the meal she'd just had, perhaps even pay down on the next.



His father was mounted on a stallion, while Shem rode a donkey. The animal was small, but well trained, and suited Shem better than any of the horses back in their stables. As they approached Dorshan, he looked at the enormous wall stretching from the forested hills in the east all the way to the mountain range on the west. Its redwood poles were sharpened at the top, reaching high above the landscape. Though the gate was flung open, to welcome traders from the surrounding villages and those who traveled from the more distant cities, there were human skulls attached all along the posts at varying heights, painted red, yellow, and stark white. A warning to any who might think of raising a hand against this city.

"Father," Shem said. "I understand the skulls are to warn enemies. But why such a large wall? One half this height would surely do."

"At one time there was no wall," Noah said. "But then the Nephilim came and erected this monstrosity. Everything they make is to remind humans that we are as insects in their sight. They ride the three-horned lizards instead of horses and drink from goblets formed of polished mammoth skulls. South of the city lies the ocean, so there are warships in the harbor to protect it on that end, the mountains protect the west, and beyond the eastern hills, the Dorshan army has a line that extends all along its border. The Nephilim are dangerous creatures, Shem. And deadly jealous of their power. The one who renamed this city is Dorshai, she claims that the demon Agveh is her father. She allows only female Nephilim in her ranks, and won't even suffer a male of her kind to live."

Shem remembered Noah's talk about reproduction. Since animal husbandry was an essential part in keeping their livestock healthy, Noah had told both his sons as soon as they were old enough to understand. "Then how do they reproduce?" he asked.

"A Nephilim is an unnatural creature. It is the product of the union of a human female with a fallen angel. God created his angels exclusively male. When He formed Eve from Adam and daughters began to be born to men, the fallen ones saw the daughters of men and found them beautiful. Since they were already vile creatures, full of blasphemy and actively seeking new ways to sin against their Creator, they began to reproduce with human females. The Nephilim are the result of such unions. But the Nephilim themselves are sterile, like the mules we breed from our horses and donkeys."

"So the Nephilim have no choice in whether to serve or reject God? They are born pure evil?"

"I don't know for sure," Noah admitted. "But I have never heard of a benevolent one. I think it must be as you say. Perhaps the union produces only an empty shell which other fallen angels occupy—not true procreation, only manipulation of a woman's egg followed by demon possession. Perhaps these demons even give up their spirit nature so that they can directly affect human affairs. I also think this is part of the reason God has decided to destroy mankind. There are more and more Nephilim these days. Humanity is in danger of becoming completely enslaved by these creatures. And completely tainted by the cultures these fallen ones are propagating."

"So if they are the union of mortals and fallen angels, does that mean their life spans are longer than ours?"

Noah shrugged. "Again, I don't know. But I have heard they are very hard to kill. To be sure a giant is dead, you must cut off its head. But enough talk about this. Hopefully we can avoid them. Most of them shun the sunlight and are sleeping this time of day."



"Look—good strong arms, fine exotic features. A versatile one this is. Serve any need you have."

The two men stood on a wooden platform at the edge of the street. One clothed in fine robes, bejeweled rings on his hands, the other stripped naked, his wrists bound behind his back with a short, narrow rope.

Kenian stared at the bound man. He was bronze and tall, but stood stoop-shouldered, his head bowed, gaze empty and downcast.

"From Demaria," said Mara. "Fine stock indeed." She wet her lips and stared wantonly at the slave as they passed. The slave took no notice, his eyes lifeless and unmoving. "Have you ever been to a slave auction before, Kenian?"

"No. I've heard of them though, from Father." Which was true. Tarn had threatened him with that prospect often. Mostly while drunk.

Mara smiled as she turned her steed. "Oh, did your father have slaves?"

Kenian pulled the reins to stay with her. He started to say 'only one', but then thought of the way Tarn hired or prostituted out his older sons. "He had a female slave but she ran away," he answered. "And two males. One still lives, but the other he killed for... for being disrespectful."

Mara's eyes widened. "To be so primitive and have such a wealthy father! I never suspected."

Kenian cursed inwardly. He was revealing too much, and it bothered him that she persisted in calling him primitive. "If he's wealthy, Mara, he keeps it for himself. All he ever begrudged me was a roof, food, and cast-off clothing."

Mara laughed. "I think you exaggerate your plight, Kenian." She reached over and tousled his hair. There might be more uses for this boy than she had suspected. "There it is." She pointed with her walking staff.

Kenian looked as they turned to face the building. It was an immense, white-marbled dome, surrounded by several smaller domes, each connected to the larger by an enclosed hallway. The structure looked vaguely familiar, but Kenian couldn't determine why.

The entrance was a series of steps leading to a raised dais with spiraled columns supporting a curved overhanging slab. Atop the slab a golden statue stood—a man with reptilian eyes and a forked tongue, arms outstretched with what looked like coins clutched in each fist. At his feet lounged a naked female, her gaze turned downward as if she kept watch of all who entered. Beneath this covering and to the rear of the dais stood a set of large double-doors, inlaid with gold and ivory and guarded on both sides by men dressed in crimson robes, their heads shaven and their faces hairless as a boy's. They looked larger and stronger than any man Kenian had ever seen.

Mara led Kenian to a gold hitching post where they dismounted and tied their steeds.

"A temple of Agveh," she said, starting toward the steps. "This one is apportioned to the demi-god Dorshai."

Kenian stepped onto the dais at Mara's leading. "And who is Dorshai?" he asked.

The widow grinned and pushed aside the errant lock from his forehead. "Surely you know the goddess of love, the one for whom our fine city is named?"

Kenian shook his head.

"Then you must become acquainted." She motioned to the doormen, and they opened the temple to her. Mara pushed Kenian in ahead. "After you."

Interlude:

The blazing sword had stopped the man in his tracks. Most such encounters were by chance and ended with the human backing away, terrified. But not this time. The mortal had actively sought the Tree, having heard the legend, and upon seeing had realized that all he heard was true.

Unseen, two sentinels posted guard behind the flaming sword. With arms crossed they stood mutely observing, but ready to move should the need arise. For they both could clearly see, clinging to the man's back, the demon that drove the poor soul onward. An ethereal arm burrowed through spine and flesh, as clawed fingers clutched an unsuspecting heart, holding it like fruit ripe for the picking.

"See," the demon whispered in the mortal's ear. "There, behind it, atop that hill. All you have to do is dodge that sword and take from the Tree. One bite. One. And you'll live forever, be all-powerful."

Though ignorant of the demon's existence, the man had been heeding its voice for centuries, and so, ignoring both reason and instinct, he gathered his courage and lunged headlong. Feinted left, dodged right.

And met with a fiery death.

The demon released its hold. But not in time. The sword parted space as it came arcing back, a black chasm in its wake. The flaming blade made contact with the demon, searing all along its body. The Cherubim swept into action then, grabbing the demon from behind and casting it into the waiting abyss.



Chairon looked around at the scattered piles of sun-bleached bones, remembering: blood, death, the smell of sulfur. He ran a broad hand through his dark brown shock of hair. There were more and more attempts at the Tree lately; something was stirring in the heavenlies. For centuries he and Ariel had stood post. Unlike mortals they were oblivious to the passage of time, but it was disconcerting to see so many humans rushing to their deaths. If only the Almighty would send word, or speak to them directly, tell them what was happening.

He sighed. If only man would listen to his Creator instead of the enemy's lies.

The sound of wings and Chairon looked up, grateful to be broken from his reverie. It was one of their kindred. Gabriel, God's messenger. It was as if Yahweh had read Chairon's mind. The Cherubim smiled. He probably *had*.

"Chairon, Ariel!" The blonde angel landed silently and strode forward quickly. He embraced each in turn.

"It's good to see you, Gabriel," Chairon said.

Ariel thoughtfully tugged at his scrap of red beard and regarded their friend with intense gray eyes. "I take it you have news?" They had to look up, Angels being much taller than Cherubim.

Gabriel was clad in a white robe and golden belt. An empty scabbard hung conspicuously at his hip. He nodded, his expression somber. "Old friends, sometimes our assignments are...*unpleasant*." He then noticed the corpse sprawled to one side. "But you know that as well as I do."

Chairon regarded the body with sadness. "Three days ago, that one. Fortunately there haven't been any since."

Gabriel readied himself. "I was sent to tell you. Our Lord's heart is filled with pain and grief." A pause. "He has decided to flood the world. Destroy everything."

The Cherubim immediately fired off questions. "Why?" "What of mankind?" "And the Tree?"

The Angel was to the point. "Mankind's wickedness has become so great, the thoughts of their hearts only evil all the time. While the fallen of our kind pollute the human bloodlines with their own, creating abominations that seek to undo all our Lord is trying to accomplish. This is the only way. As for the Tree, our Lord has taken it."

They turned to look and found it was so. Gabriel reached and took the fiery sword in hand. Its flames immediately extinguished to reveal a gleaming silver blade. He sheathed the sword in its scabbard. "And this goes back to Michael."

Chairon whispered, "But to destroy all of mankind?"

"No," Gabriel said. "Not all. There is one man who has found favor. His name is Noah. Our Lord spoke to him years ago, preparing him and instructing him on the way to survive. But there is trouble now. He has a wife and sons." He then gave them their new assignments.

Chapter 13 - City

Tarn spent all morning riding through the Market and found no trace of the boy. He was loathe to do so, but decided to move further southward, into the city's Heart—where that damnable Agveh had reign. Though Tarn had sworn to forever oppose his former god, Kenian might have been taken for a temple slave. If so, even now it might not be too late.

At first he'd thought that both Kenian and Beth were with Noah. He'd planned accordingly and intended to take them in the night. After that first blunder where he only managed to burn down a shed, Tarn started taking more care. He didn't go back home again, for one thing. For of course, his children might encourage Noah to attack and even give directions. So Tarn stayed in the city with Ardaen, a man who owed him a life-debt and could begin to repay it by sheltering him now. Tarn had waited three nights before he tried again to exact his revenge. But once again he failed.

Though he'd needed to strike fast, Tarn kept running into problems. Like finding Noah's home. The roads were all twisted and confusing, and he dared not take a horse for fear of giving himself away. So he'd searched on foot, while the path forked and forked again and fed back into itself so many times that often he found himself right back where he'd started with no way of knowing what he'd even done. Since he always went at night, there was no sunlight to keep his directions straight. And the firmament seemed thicker there somehow, blurring the stars. He knew his constellations, but could not track from what he could not distinguish. Once, he'd even tried to find the shed again, hoping that might bring him closer, but he couldn't even remember how he'd found it in the first place. Finally he just gave up.

Then a revelation came to him. Just this morning as he awoke in Ardaen's guest room. Tarn was furious with himself for not realizing it sooner. Kenian was Beth's twin, but was nothing like her in temperament. He would not have gone to live with that fool, but had probably left for the city on the very night Tarn had last seen him.

Reluctantly, Tarn abandoned his plans for Noah and decided instead to concentrate on Kenian. With the boy back in hand he could return later for Noah and his brood. Perhaps Kenian could even show him the way. Still, his need for revenge was eating at him. He decided that, if he couldn't find Kenian within the week, he would go back and try again to kill every person cowering under Noah's roof.

Tarn turned his steed off the main street and headed for the Heart. He prayed for Thul's protection. He had not ventured there since Sera's death, always circumventing the region. Though a respected, successful merchant of the Market streets to the north and the Gut's harbors in the south, in the Heart of it all—where Agveh held sole dominion—Tarn was sure to find nothing but enemies.

At the outskirts of the Market he stopped to check the slave auctions. Again, no sign of the boy. But he really hadn't expected to find him there. If put on the slave block, Kenian would be a quick sell. Tarn cursed himself for years of a missed opportunity. The sun was at its highest point and bearing down when he finished there and resumed his trek.

Just before entering the Heart, Tarn uncorked his wineskin and turned it up. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked for a shaded place to rest. He needed to sit a while and think. There, in that pavilion, one of those roadside shops that brought food and drink out to tired patrons. He rode over, dismounted and tied his steed to a hitching post. He limped over and took a seat beneath a canopy of stretched camel-hide. Removing his boot, he massaged his ankle. The whole foot still bothered him, ever since that Behemoth had clamped down on it. He knew he also bore a scar upon his forehead, where Noah's club had split the skin. One more trespass to be repaid.

A maid who looked twice Tarn's age came out to serve him. She wore a brown robe and bore a mark on her right temple, for the master she served.

Smiling, she waited to take his request. Though heavily lined, the woman's face still belied her former beauty. Tarn slipped his boot back on and grinned at her with pockmarked teeth. If he had more time he might indulge himself. "Have you mistress or master?" he asked. "Or both?"

She tapped the mark on her temple. "I answer to the one whose mark I bear. That person's identity is not your business. Now what would you like?"

He scowled. "Maybe I would like *you*. Served warm on the ground out back."

Her countenance darkened. "You are a stranger here. In fact, I'm sure I've never seen you. Don't try to make trouble for me—it will only fall back on your own head. Now, are you a paying customer? Or must I ask you to move on?"

Tarn had never seen a slave so brazen. Someone should do something about it; maybe he'd do something himself. Though galled by her nerve, he told her what he wanted.

“Good, now give me coin beforehand,” she insisted.

Tarn fetched up a handful of silver to pay her. He watched as she went into the back. He *would* do something, he decided.

He barely had time to take in his surroundings before she was back, emptying her tray and filling his table—a stone goblet of Demarian Mead, a cluster of grapes, bread with hunks of cheese cooked within, and a roasted rock lizard. It was this last Tarn relished most. Over five hundred years since he’d taken his first forbidden bite of animal flesh and it still tasted as sweet. It was an ancient command, passed down by the old God that Noah served, that flesh was not to be taken as food. Tarn snorted. The god was so old that he had probably dried up and died. Only that backwards Noah was still clinging to his corpse.

After a while he sat back, belly full and head floating comfortably from his third goblet of Mead. Now where could Kenian be?

Still somewhere in the city, he hoped. There was nothing but wilderness to the east, followed by weeks of desert. Only a long chain of mountains to the west. If Kenian had been kidnapped by foreign slavers then he was long gone, taken aboard one of the harbor ships down in the Gut. But Tarn felt in his own gut that this had not happened. Though he wondered sometimes if he could still trust those instincts.

All that aside, he knew his youngest son. The boy was enamored with the city and had always done a poor job hiding it. The first place Kenian would have come was to the Markets he was acquainted with. Probably someone he’d met there had taken him in, but who?

Then Tarn realized—someone *pretending* to be a friend. Kenian was too sly to be caught outright and sold into slavery. Otherwise it would have happened years ago. Someone had been befriending the boy, waiting to take him in, had probably even been poisoning the boy’s mind against his father. He’d seen evidence of that already, hadn’t he?

Tarn had to laugh. Turning his son against him had surely been no difficult task. But no matter. Whatever he’d done to make this usurper’s task easier could also work in his favor. For he knew Kenian’s mindset. He’d twisted it himself with years of alternating neglect and tyranny. The boy was distrustful of his father. Tarn knew that Kenian also hated his brothers.

Yes, the boy certainly had a problem relating to other males, would never trust one. The only person Kenian had ever been close to or loved had been his twin sister. It was obvious. Whoever the boy was with was *female*.

A woman with no man around. A woman who would’ve enticed him with sweet, kind words, generosity, hospitality. Tarn smiled. Now all he had to do was find such a woman.

He called the maid over and started asking.



Shandai had never seen the man before but instinctively knew he was trouble. She waited until he limped over to his horse and rode away before approaching the woman she knew only as *grandmother*. Though they were not truly related.

“Did he hint at all as to his business in the city?”

The old woman shook her head and laughed. “Hint? Oh no, little daughter. I don’t think he would even know how. Straight-forward that one is. Like a fox invading a hare’s den, absolutely fearless. Either he’s powerful enough to afford complete disregard for his enemies, or the biggest fool I’ve ever seen.”

“What did he say?” Shandai asked.

“Asked me if I knew of any single ladies about. Ones generous, possibly wealthy. At first I thought he wanted a brothel, though he struck me more as a proprietor himself than a patron. He just glared at me when I suggested Agveh’s temple, like he wanted to kill me outright for even mentioning our god’s name. Clarified he was looking for a particular woman—one of high standing perhaps. A freed woman who ran her own household, with no husband.”

“You didn’t name our mistress?”

“Little daughter, do you take me for a fool?”

Shandai bowed her head like a stricken pup. “No, grandmother. I’m sorry, I should’ve known better.”

The woman grunted, but gave an acquiescent nod. “No harm. I told him all unattached women around here were too poor to be generous with anything but their own flesh. And those were most likely in the brothels, busy making their masters rich, not themselves. I don’t think he believed me, but he left me alone after that. Said he’d be back though.”

Shandai took it all in and thanked her grandmother, promising to put in a good word with their mistress. The old woman kept Shandai, and thus Mara, informed. In return she was afforded the protection that Mara granted all her favored slaves. Though still mainly a figurehead, as governess of the Heart, Mara had audience with The Chosen and with Dorshai herself. It was wise to stay in her good graces. Shandai kissed the old woman’s cheeks and hurried away.

Back in her alley, Shandai worried her bottom lip. What would such a man want with a woman like her mistress? She would have to tell Mara, and soon. Was it possible that the man might actually be looking for Mara specifically? If so, why hadn’t he asked for her by name? No, he obviously didn’t know the name of the person he sought, which immediately made sense to Shandai. Until this very morning she had not been permitted to even utter her mistress’ name, and had been working for the woman for what...four, five years now?

Shandai wasn’t sure, since she could only vaguely recall a time when she hadn’t worked for Mara. The only memories of her former life were shadowed

images of her mother. She could only conjure one image clearly, her mother prostrate on a bed with her head twisted impossibly around and a hand outstretched. Shandai remembered the fingers were stiff and cold, for that was how Mara had found her, sitting at the bedside, crying and clinging to her mother's hand.

Shandai shook her head to clear it. Such thoughts were getting her nowhere. She considered the facts as she knew them: A strange man lurked at the northern edge of the city's Heart. He was looking for a powerful, unmarried woman, but did not know her name. Shandai's mistress was without a man, had been so for as long as Shandai had known her, and was very protective of her name. Thus, this man was looking for Mara.

But there was something else. Something nagging at the edge of Shandai's mind. And then she realized—the boy! The boy was also a stranger. Perhaps the man was really looking for the boy—what was his name again? *Kenian*. Mustn't forget that. Perhaps Kenian belonged to this man, his slave perhaps. Had Mara stolen him? It wasn't like the woman to steal outright. Shandai fidgeted with these new insights. She wasn't sure what to do, but it seemed that she knew something crucial, something that might even threaten her mistress's life. Until she knew more she would remain vigilant and gather all the information she could. And she would not, she decided, tell her mistress. Not just yet.

Chapter 14 - Merchants

With pulse still hammering in his chest and skull, Kenian fidgeted his clothing into place. In his wildest imaginings he'd never conjured anything so... so... He had no words to describe his experience. All he knew was that he'd been led into the temple and then escorted by two of the loveliest girls he'd ever seen. In the room where they'd taken him, he'd lost all his remaining innocence at once.

Eagerly threw it away, came the nagging inner voice. Kenian trembled. That same voice had encouraged him to join in the temple worship. To strip himself bare and revel in the arms of each of the six young priestesses, one after the other. He'd let himself be passed around until he could no longer discern one girl from another. Each body seemed to flow into the next until there was nothing but a tangle of arms and legs and sex. He'd stepped from the inner sanctum bathed in sweat and physically spent.

Filthy, unclean! You were like an animal, came the accusing voice again. *Wicked—worthless!*

Kenian ran his fingers through his sweat matted hair still trying to catch his breath and to ignore the words that snapped at his heart like a rabid dog. *Unclean! Animal!*

"So, did you enjoy the ceremony?" Mara stood in the hallway, her hands held almost demurely at her waist.

Kenian swallowed hard. "I... it was... unbelievable."

Mara laughed aloud. "Agveh is a generous god indeed. And Dorshai my favorite of his daughters." She approached him and Kenian then noticed the cloth in her hands. She reached up and wiped his forehead. The cloth was damp and cool. Kenian found himself pressing his head into her hands.

"This is just the beginning, Kenian. I have so much more planned for you." She wiped down his face, neck, and the exposed portion of his chest, then led him back onto the streets. "Let's have some food and return home. You've had a busy day and I want you rested for tomorrow."

He was almost afraid to ask, but did so anyway. "What happens tomorrow?"

Mara took his hand. *What indeed*. "I've a few more people I want you to meet and a task I think you'll find yourself perfectly suited to." *Oh Kenian, my beautiful golden child. The lords and ladies are just going to love you*. Mara smiled. Everything was going so perfectly. She could feel her shackles settling about the boy, tightening, though so subtle that he would never even know what he was becoming. First concubine, then prostitute, and ultimately slave. Just like Shandai.

She took her dagger, robe, and walking staff from the corner where she'd placed them. She strapped the dagger to her hip and donned the robe. Then, with staff firmly in hand, she said, "There's a small eatery just this side of the Market district. We'll stop there on our way home." They passed through the doors and headed northward, away from the city's Heart.



"Is this all you have?" The bearded man had picked through every scrap of metal-ware on Ardaen's counters, and though he had chosen a few decent pieces, was becoming increasingly hard to please.

"I can have more tomorrow if you'd like to come back. You said you wanted a thousand iron spikes, hand length?" Ardaen poised his scribe above a short lead tablet.

"I wanted to work tomorrow," the big man said. He turned to the servant boy at his side. "It's another tenth of sunlight from here to the iron forge. We can buy direct there for a fraction of this one's price, which will put us late getting home—still we *can* make it back before sundown. What do you think? Should we wait or attain all our supplies in one day?"

It was strange enough that the man had elicited a vote from his underling, but then the boy spoke right up, even daring to look the man in the eyes. "I think one trip is enough. We have work to do."

Ardaen was confused. The boy was obviously not a slave as he'd first thought. *Could it be?* "The child," he ventured. "He is your son?"

The bearded man nodded. "What of it?"

Ardaen licked his lips. Opportunities like this did not come every day. He made his best offer. "All I have here and two bars of gold for him."

Like a cobra's strike, a muscled arm shot out and fingers of stone gripped Ardaen's forehead. He was lifted completely off his feet.

"I do not sell my children." The man was seething.

Ardaen stammered. Not knowing what to say, he said the completely wrong thing. "One bar of gold then, for two hours with him."

One hand released him, while the other swung around and struck his face open-palmed. Just as his feet touched the ground, Ardaen was knocked back into one of his own tables. Metal basins and crockery clattered all about him.

"Come, Shem," the big man said. "I've no more patience with this one. And here are your wares. We won't be needing them." He took the metal pots from his son and tossed them to the ground at Ardaen's feet.

Ardaen regarded his assailant ruefully. It had been a reasonable request. A common one. While most folks weren't apt to sell a slave they had no doubt paid handsomely for, they were often more than willing to be rid of their own children. Or at least hire them out. The man's actions made no sense. He touched his face where he'd been struck, then glanced at his fingers. No blood, but the whole side of his face stung. He was sure there would be bruises.

The strange man mounted his steed and gave a parting shot, "Just be glad I didn't use my fist." The boy swung onto a donkey and the two rode away.

Ardaen got to his feet and righted the table. *I don't know who you are. Or who you think you are, but you will pay for this.* He began picking up his goods. Tarn would hear about this.



"I'm sorry you had to see that," Noah said.

Shem looked over from atop his donkey. "I'm not. It was exciting."

Noah grinned in spite of himself. "I just don't want you thinking I'm a violent man—or that it's right to resort to brute force."

"But I know that, Father. You haven't gotten physical with Tarn and he probably deserves it."

"Deserves it more than that fellow did, I suppose. But I also haven't *seen* Tarn. Truth is, I'm beginning to hope I don't. But Shem, I also want you to know that if it came to it, I would do whatever necessary to protect our family. I'm just sorry that my patience ran out with this merchant. I haven't been in the city for months so he probably didn't know me. I know I've never seen him before. Even so, I probably ruined any credibility I might have had with him." Noah sighed. "One thing though, anyone who saw that will know you are mine and will think twice before accosting you. That will hold you in good stead should we become separated."

Shem urged his donkey to keep up with his father's steed. "But if you've never seen him, where do you usually get your supplies?"

"From the forge at the city's heart," Noah said. "I just thought that today, since you were with me, I'd pay a little more and we wouldn't have to go into the Heart. In fact, I'm seriously considering a turn-about."

Why, so you can come back with Japheth tomorrow? Shem held those words and instead replied, "No. I told you I wasn't afraid. I want to see the forge. I want to go into the Heart with you."

"Shem, it really is dangerous. I think we should probably wait."

"When are you going to let me grow up? I'm twelve years old, Father—almost a man!"

Noah regarded his son carefully. *You are far from being a man.* Still he replied, "All right, but stay close to me and memorize our route. Should anything happen I want you to be able to find your way alone."

"Of course, Father. But nothing's going to happen. We'll just get the supplies and go."

The big man nodded. As they rode onward, he surveyed his surroundings. "There used to be several metal vendors in this district. I wonder what happened to them all."

Shem almost answered that he didn't know, but realized that his father was simply thinking aloud.

"It troubles me that there's no competition for metal wares. I wonder if it is true for other goods." Noah clucked at his horse, prodding it faster. Shem followed the lead, urging his donkey to keep up. "If there is such a trend it can mean only one thing. There is a grab for power going on."

Though Shem knew Noah was still only talking to himself, he was becoming increasingly curious. "What do you mean?"

"There are many ways to increase one's power. Or *their* power, I should say. We do not seek after such things. If a man wants power in this world—" Noah motioned about him as they passed various shops and booths, businesses of various types, "—then he must obtain money. One way to ensure the growth of one's wealth is to do away with competition. Let's say I sell tomatoes for three coppers each and the man down the street sells them for two, then I've got to lower my price to keep my customers. But if I can get rid of that man entirely and become the only one selling tomatoes, then I can set my own price and have all the business to myself. Do you understand?"

"I think so, but doesn't everyone have tomatoes anyway?"

"It's only an example, Shem. But to answer your question, no. Not everyone tills the soil and produces their own food as we do."

“Why not?”

“Because they don’t have the land—many don’t have anything. Or because they concern themselves with so many other things that they don’t have time for gardens.”

Thus they spent their time: Noah trying his best to educate and relate to his son, and Shem trying his best to understand while enjoying the undivided attention of his father. The sun had moved several degrees in the sky when Noah pointed ahead. “The forge is just over the next two hills.” He smiled at his son. “I’m getting hungry. How about you?”

Shem tried to sound casual. “I could eat.”

“I brought food for the road. Did you fill the flasks like I asked?”

Shem’s heart sank, he touched the saddlebag, knowing the empty flasks lay flat inside its pouches. “I was so eager to be on our way. I’m sorry, Father.” *I’m so stupid!*

Noah shook his head. “No, it’s all right. Water is cheap.” *Or was the last I remember.* “We’ll stop at the next eatery.”

A short time later they noticed, to one side, several tables beneath a leather canopy. “There.” Noah pointed. They reined their mounts over and tied them to a corner post. Noah pulled the food pouch from his saddlebag and sat them at a table near their animals. He was completely alert, watching for, even expecting danger. An elderly woman came over to attend them.



Kela watched as the street imp scurried off. No doubt on her way to divulge all she’d learned to her mistress. While most disregarded Shandai completely, oblivious to the fact that she was Mara’s eyes and ears, Kela had realized the fact early on and had made a point to befriend the girl. Even to the point of playing foster grandmother. Shandai had never bothered to hide the fact of what she was to her ‘grandmother’, and so obviously she trusted the old woman.

Kela laughed quietly. Maybe that was it. Maybe Shandai thought that because Kela was so old she could in no way be a threat or rival. And while that was indeed true in this case, Kela hoped the girl wasn’t so trusting of all who wore the wrinkled mask of age. She wiped down the polished wooden tables and then attended new patrons who were just sitting down.

There were two of them, a large man in worn, dusty clothing and a young boy, similarly dressed—a slave from the looks of him. Or prostitute. Or both.

“Water,” the man said, fetching a pittance from the moneybag secured within his jerkin. He put the coins in Kela’s palm.

“Nothing else?” she asked.

“Just water. One for me and one for the boy.”

She was in the back of her shop, at the well filling two wooden cups from a newly fetched bucket of water, when she felt something cold press against her neck.

“If you make a sound or move, I’ll kill you.” The cool sliver held to her skin was a blade, she realized. Her assailant reached and took a fist full of hair, the other hand keeping the knife in place. He forced her around, gripping her hair, the knife steady at her throat. Whatever warmth remained in Kela’s face drained away at the sight. It wasn’t the man and boy, as she’d thought. But instead was the one who came before them, the scarred man who’d hobbled away just before Shandai arrived.

He must have doubled back and slipped into the shop at some point. Fear gripped Kela’s heart. Had he been listening? Had he overheard her conversation with Shandai?

With the blade still pressed to her throat, the man answered her unspoken questions. “Your little crow mentioned a mistress. So this time you name the one you serve, or die right now.” He grinned. “I’m making it my business.”

Kela’s heart fell. “Mara. That’s how she’s called throughout the Heart.”

“You’re lying.” He pressed the blade and Kela felt a thin, nicking pain, followed by the sensation of warm fluid trickling down her neck.

“I swear. Ask around and you’ll find it so. You will be able to find her.”

His eyes glinted. “So maybe you can help me there too. Where might I find her?”

“She has a home just outside Agveh’s temple.”

Tarn pressed the blade. “You’ve lied to me before. Why should I believe you now?”

“Because now you’ve got a knife to my throat.”

He grunted, then said, “One more thing and I’ll leave you in peace. The girl, what’s her name?”

“She’s just a street orphan...no one important.” Kela’s eyes stung with tears and she was finding it harder to speak.

“I’ll decide who’s important to me! Her name, now!” He moved the blade sideways, widening the cut.

Tears were trembling down the old woman's face. *Granddaughter, forgive me.* She spoke in a hoarse whisper, "Shandai. But please don't—"

Tarn jerked her head back and slashed deeply. Kela clutched at her throat, her eyes opening wide as Tarn released his hold and let her drop. He smiled down as she lay on the ground gasping like a hooked fish. "Thank you, old woman." He knelt and wiped his blade with her robe. "Now if only Mara and Shandai will be as helpful, I'll have what I need by sundown."

Chapter 15 - Granddaughter

Noah and Shem waited. And waited.

"This is taking too long," Noah finally said, rising from his chair. "I'm going to stick my head in the back. You guard the animals, but don't intervene if anyone tries to steal them, just call for me."

"But why would—"

"Don't intervene. If someone approaches you, yell. If I'm not back very soon then mount the steed, he's faster, and get home. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father." Shem was visibly shaken. To realize that his father was actually worried disturbed him.

Noah sighed. "It's probably nothing. Don't be afraid." He put a reassuring hand atop Shem's head, then left.

As he pulled back the curtain Noah called out, "Hello? Maiden? Are you here?" He stepped into the back of the shop, found his way to the well. "Hello? Is anyone—" He saw her. "Shem! Come quickly!" He raced back, yelling for his son, who met him at the curtain.

"What is it, Father?"

"Fetch my saddlebag and be quick. Bring it to me inside."

Shem did as he was told while Noah returned to the old woman. He knelt and cradled her head in his hands. "Can you hear me? Who did this to you?"

The woman's eyes fluttered, she strained to speak. "Never seen him before. Scar on his forehead. Walked with a limp."

Noah's mouth became a hard line. *Could it be?*

Shem returned with the bags. Noah fished through its contents and brought out a roll of cloth. He worked quickly and managed to stop the bleeding.

The woman rasped, "Save Shandai...granddaughter. He's after her."

"Of course." Noah motioned for Shem to bring a cup of water. He took the cup from his son and gently lifted the woman's head to give her drink. "What does your granddaughter look like?"

"Thin and small. Black hair. A mark like mine on her temple."

Noah studied the tattoo. The mark of a slave, he realized. "I'll find her," he promised. "But we must tend you now."

"Too late." The woman's teeth chattered, her body growing cold from blood loss. "Dying."

Noah held her hand and told her the truth. "You will die," he said. "But it's not too late for you. Do you know of my Yahweh? The one true God?" And he told her as quickly and completely as he could.

When he finished she said, "You're that crazy man who preaches at the edge of the Heart."

"Then you've heard all this before?"

Tears were coursing from Kela's eyes. "I've listened to you on occasion. But a god such as yours is impossible. And even if he is true, I'm not worthy of a god like that."

"No one is worthy. You've lived your life as a slave on this side of eternity. My God can give you freedom on the other side—if you'll only accept Him. *Believe in Him.*"

"No. All I've done." Her eyes began to close. "Not worthy."

Noah held back tears. "We'll purchase animals from the livery—we can sacrifice them for atonement. We can—"

"No," Kela said. "No." Her jaw went slack as the life went out of her.

Noah bowed his head and wept silently. Shem just sat there unsure what to do. After a while Noah lifted his head and said, "Not even one?" But then he looked at his son. "We've done all we can for her." He placed her arms at her side and picked up his saddlebags to go.

"But Father," Shem said. "Shouldn't we at least tell someone."

“We should,” Noah agreed. “But we don’t have time. There’s a child out there with a killer after her. Tarn, I suspect. I’ve got to move quickly.”



It had been a long time since he let his own blood. Tarn knelt in the alley and held the knife to the inside of his forearm. He began the chant, invoking Thul. As he came to the end of his invocation, he slashed and spoke his desire simultaneously, “Take me to her.” The blood ran down his arms and pooled in his hand. He made a fist and held it over his open mouth. He caught six drops on his tongue speaking her name each time. “Mara...Mara...”

Tarn smiled. There was power in names, especially when spoken by a person for the first time. This same incantation would not work with him for Kenian. He waited.

Nothing. Apparently the old woman had lied. That or her mistress hid behind a false identity, which wasn’t unheard of. Those knowledgeable in the ways of the gods were wise to guard their true names. He would try the girl’s then. If that failed, the old woman surely lied.

He repeated the ritual, chanting then slashing his arm. “Take me to her.” Six drops. Six times he said, “Shandai.”

He felt an old familiar presence. *Ah, there you are.*

With the spell completed, he pressed his mouth to his palm and licked it clean. He likewise cleaned the blood from his forearm and held his mouth over the cut until he could get a bandage around it. When this was done he stood again and made his way back to the street.

Upon stepping from the alley his eyes were opened and he saw the god’s messenger, a shadowy creature that hovered before him, motioning him to follow with a long, taloned finger. It beat its ethereal wings and turned to fly slowly westward. Tarn went to where he’d tied his horse, unhitched it, mounted and followed.



With her hair finally braided, Shandai smeared blue chalk on her eyelids. The chalk was among the small cache of items the widow had given her. She tucked it back into a cleft along the wall of her secret place.

She’d found the hideaway during the past summer. Running for her life from one of the older boys, she’d entered the one place she knew he’d not follow—the cave at the edge of the city. It was said the diseased sometimes took refuge there, hence the name *Leper’s Cave*.

In the back there were several tunnels, all winding in a convoluted maze, so that, even had the boy pursued beyond the entrance, he would have been a fool to follow her down a tunnel. Indeed, Shandai had come across more than one dried heap of bones. Those that became lost, inevitably died trying to find their way out. She, however, had an exceptional sense of direction. Even in total darkness she never lost her bearings. So, as she hid from the boy, she also explored the tunnels, until she finally found a dimly lit chamber just comfortable enough for a small girl to live in, with crevices all along its walls.

She slept there now most nights, when she wasn’t working. And sometimes even during the day, which was harder since sunlight seeped in through the hole above. At first she’d tried to climb to the opening, but it was too high. She became afraid of falling or tumbling the rocks in around her. From where she slept the hole seemed big enough to climb through. It was at an angle from where she lay, so that when it rained the water sloughed away from her and trickled away down through another tunnel.

Eventually she sought the opening from the outside. The cave was right at the base of the mountains, so she took a whole week to climb over until she found the beginnings of the forest. Her sense of direction led her to an old, hollow stump. She peered down inside, and there it was, a large, dark opening. She drove a metal stake into the base of the stump and fastened a coil of rope. She dropped the line in and disguised its exposed length with vines and rubble. When she got back to her chamber, she found the line hanging there. It was a very clever thing to do, and she knew it. While others would have to spend a week scaling the ridge of mountains, she had access to a route that would take her beyond it in a mere fraction of a day.

She used the light of the opening now to inspect herself. Her skin was as clean as she could get it by bathing in the spring fed stream that trickled through a corner of the cave. The water was pure enough for drinking. Nothing lived in it but an occasional salamander. It also rinsed the dust from her clothes. Shandai smoothed down the fabric of her best dress, which hung loosely on her gaunt frame. She imagined herself to be as pretty as the temple girls, though she knew in her heart that it wasn’t so—or else that was exactly where she would be, working in the pristine chambers of Dorshai’s temple instead of trolling the city streets for any patron with gold enough to pay.

She touched her head where she knew Mara’s tattoo branded her. Though it marked her a slave, it also preserved her life. For any man who killed a slave would answer in blood to the owner. And although her customers were sometimes rough with her, all were careful not to inflict any serious or permanent damage. Only once had Shandai even heard of such a thing. It actually involved a girl belonging to Mara (still strange to think of the widow by name). Shandai had seen the girl around but hadn’t yet gotten to know her. A patron had strangled her to death for no other reason than the pleasure it apparently gave him. The next day found the fool in the city square, impaled on a wooden spike with his eyes put out. Shandai thought of the boy who had chased her to the cave. He’d likewise been punished and would chase no other as long as he lived. He spent his days now as a beggar in the Gut, so Shandai had heard, hobbling around, his left foot hacked from his leg.

Shandai finished her preparations, uncorking her jar of perfume and daubing a bit behind her ears and on the inside of each wrist. She then made her way back through the tunnel and into the main cavern. She was about to step out into the waning daylight when she saw a man making his way down the hillside, riding a horse resolutely toward her. Who could it be? No one came to Leper’s Cave, only the occasional stranger, ignorant of its name. Or else an actual leper. The rumors were true, and sometimes she had to share the cave with the diseased and dying. But never for very long. They were in the final stages when they came here and did not last long amid the coarse rocks that slowly hacked away at their unfeeling flesh. Besides, they always kept to themselves and left her alone. Shandai was not afraid of lepers. But they never rode horses. This man was something different.

She squinted, trying to study the approaching stranger, wondering if he might pose a threat. And then she realized; it was him, the one who was seeking Mara.

Shandai could not believe her luck. She’d been planning to seek him, perhaps find out what he wanted and, in so doing, maybe gain a little knowledge, a

little power, for herself. She would have to be careful, though. A stranger might not know the city's customs. Her mark might not protect her. Still it was worth the risk—a chance to get one step ahead of the widow. She took her braid in hand and stepped into the sunlight to meet him.

Chapter 16 - I'll not forget my place again

Tarn watched as the shadow flying lazily before him began a slow descent toward the mouth of the cave. She must live in there. Even as he thought it, the girl stepped from the darkness and onto the grass. He dismounted and strode purposefully toward her. *She doesn't know that I know her*, he realized. And while it was true he'd never seen her before, the shadowy guide settled softly on her shoulder and then disappeared.

"Hello," she said, smiling.

Tarn smiled back. The girl was trying to be seductive, the way she stood with her head to one side, fingers toying with her long, dark braid.

"I seem to have lost my way." Tarn held his horse's reins in one hand. He stepped closer. "I'm trying to find the merchant's district and was told it was west of the city's heart."

Shandai approached him, batting her heavily powdered eyelids. "You were misinformed. It's north. That way." She pointed. "I can take you there if you'd like. And if you're not in a hurry, if it's trade you want then perhaps I have something you'd be interested in." She bit her bottom lip and stared up at him.

Tarn grinned. Such flirtations from such a young little girl. He licked his lips, finding himself suddenly excited. He looked her over. About Beth's age, he surmised. "I'm sure you do," he said, reaching out to stroke her cheek.



Noah and Shem exited the shop and were untying their animals when Shem's ears pricked at a familiar voice. "I've never had meat before. But only because Father wouldn't waste it on us."

Shem turned to look. "Kenian?"

The boy was settling in a chair next to a woman. She wore a dusty robe and carried a gnarled walking stick. *The widow*, Shem instantly knew. Her eyes and lips were painted and she could have been as young as thirty or as old as three hundred.

Kenian's eyes lit up in surprise. "Shem!" He stood and met his friend halfway. "What are you doing here?"

Noah spoke up, "Kenian, I think your father has committed another murder and may well be on his way to do it again."

"Who are you?" The woman asked sullenly. Noah introduced himself and Shem, giving nothing but their names, then gave a quick recitation of events. The woman introduced herself as Mara and then went to verify for herself that her slave was dead.

When she returned she asked, "How do we know you didn't kill her?"

Noah rolled his eyes. "We don't have time for this. There's a young girl in danger." He mounted his steed.

"So you say, but perhaps that's just a lie so you can make your escape. This woman's granddaughter, did she happen to have a name?"

"Shandai," Shem said, climbing atop his donkey.

Mara gasped. "Are you sure?"

"You know her," Noah said.

Mara composed herself. "She works for me. Just as poor Kela did."

Noah didn't have to ask, but Shem in his innocence did. "Doing what?"

"She is a slave, Shem," Noah said, before Mara could reply. "And probably sells her body."

Mara glared at him. "She is not a slave, she works willingly."

"And keeps what she earns I suppose."

"I give her all she needs. I feed her, I clothe her."

"Does she sleep in your home as well?"

"This is getting us nowhere," Mara spat. "You said she is in danger. We need to get moving."

"So now you believe me?"

Mara shrugged. "You knew her name."

“All right,” Noah said. “Since you are her...keeper. Where would she be this time of day?”

“Evening approaches. She is beginning to work the streets. You can dismount, it’s walking distance from here.”

“No, we’ll stay mounted.”

“As you please.” Mara sighed and motioned them along. “Follow me.”

They had covered only a few main streets when Noah turned to his son. “It’s going to be dark soon. Shem I want you home before the sun sets.”

“But—”

“Go now. Don’t stop for anything. Tell your mother to bar the doors and tell Japheth to arm himself with the bow. I’ll be home as soon as I can. I’ll keep my hands raised so you’ll see they are empty. If anyone approaches otherwise, have Japheth aim to kill them. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Then hurry.” He placed his hands on his son’s head. “Keep him, Lord.” Then sent him off with a slap to the donkey’s flank.

“An invocation?” Mara asked as the donkey galloped away.

“A prayer,” Noah said.

“Agveh? Thul?”

“Neither.” Noah watched his son moving toward the northern horizon. “I serve Yahweh, the One True God.”

“Then perhaps you can enlighten me as we continue our search.” Mara eyed Noah appreciatively. He was so muscular, so very masculine.

Noah turned to look at her. What he saw in her eyes gave him pause. Though it was his heart to preach the Lord’s truth, he knew at once that this woman was not in the least concerned with truth, or apparently even with her servant girl.

Slave, Noah reminded himself. He suddenly noticed Kenian just standing there, an unmistakable look of jealousy on the boy’s face. *Best put a stop to this now.* “I was actually thinking that we should split up, cover ground more quickly that way.”

“But do you know the city?”

“Well enough. I’ll ask about Shandai by name if I have to. Kenian can come with me. He might not be safe alone.” This last was an afterthought. If he could wrest the boy from her, perhaps he could warn Kenian. His benefactress was a spider, and Kenian the fly in her web.

“I’ve been in the city alone! Many times,” Kenian said. “And I’ll stay with Mara.”

Noah frowned. *Kenian, it’s a mercy you’ve survived as long as you have. God’s extended His grace to you and you don’t even realize it.* “I’ve got an excellent idea,” Noah started again. “Why doesn’t Kenian tell you about my God while the two of you search together. He’s been around my son enough that he should have picked up on our beliefs by now.”

Kenian looked uncertain, but seemed placated. “I can do that,” he said. “But it’s really rather boring.”

Noah wanted to refute but held his tongue. There wasn’t time for such debates. “Then it’s settled,” he said before Mara could form another protest. “We’ll meet back here at sundown, with or without the girl and decide what to do from there.” Noah hated limiting himself with time constraints but didn’t want to leave his family alone at night—even to save the girl. He turned and started down the street.

Mara watched his back, cold anger building. She realized he’d intentionally wormed his way from her and hated him for it. She did not like having even the slightest advance rebuffed. “Come on,” she finally said to Kenian. “I’ll show you where the girl lives. It’s called Leper’s Cave, but don’t let the name scare you. There are no lepers really, just rats.” *Along with one other vermin*, Mara thought bitterly. *And if I find her, I’ll deal with her for causing me so much trouble.*



Shem rode hard, his face kept forward. Evening was falling fast, the streets filling with night denizen—prostitutes, male and female, and those that preyed upon them. More than once, voices called to him from street corners and darkened alleys. *Don’t look*, he warned himself, as if by ignoring them he might slip through and make himself less noticeable. Once, a tall garish man wrapped in purple satin stepped from the curb to intercept him. Shem kicked his donkey and flicked the reins, speeding the animal past as the man’s long, pale fingers fumbled across Shem’s forearm.

“Come back. I won’t hurt you, little man. Not too much, anyway.” The man’s laughter raised the hairs of Shem’s neck and stabbed needles of fear into his gut. *Not much further*, Shem assured himself. Just over the next two hills and he would be out of the heart and on his way to the markets.

And then he felt words tumble straight into his heart: **Look there. That man and girl. That’s Tarn.**



The man had been rough with her. Cruel even. Taking her repeatedly on the cold, stone floor of the cave. Shandai cursed herself for being such a fool.

She winced in pain with every footfall of the steed. The man rode seated at her back, his left arm around her to grip the reins. It would seem to any onlooker that he was protecting her. His cloak draped across her shoulders, concealing his other arm which was pressed to her back, his right hand holding a knife to her spine. Any cry from her, any whimper, and he had threatened to kill her. Shandai didn't doubt the threat and for the first time since being chased into Leper's Cave she feared for her life. So much that she was willing to do anything the man demanded.

Forgive me, widow, she thought as she directed them along the district. She cursed herself again. So foolish to have believed she might get one up on the widow. How had she even thought she could accomplish such a thing? No plan. Only the seed of betrayal in her heart. She really was only a girl—street-smart but still so naïve, as the bruises along her body now proved. Why had she ever decided to withhold information from her mistress? The woman had done so much for her—saved her very life! So what if Mara demanded payment for the protection. That was fair. Shandai was a slave and should never, not even for a moment, have forgotten that. She swore to herself never to forget it again. And to be grateful for whatever morsel or crumb the widow allowed her.

I'll not forget my place again, Mara. No, Widow, she corrected herself. She would never use the woman's given name again. Her first step toward redeeming herself.

"How much farther?" It was more growl than query.

Shandai winced at the hot, dank breath on her neck. "Around the next two bends. The widow's home is on the eastern side of the road" Shandai weighed a question and then dared to ask, "Why do you seek her? Are you looking for work?"

The man laughed aloud. "Gods no! I am my own man and would starve before working under a woman. Let's just say she has something of mine that I want back."

The boy, Shandai realized, but kept it to herself. If he became aware of how much she had guessed already, he may become enraged and do worse than bruise her body.

"My lord, I intend no disrespect, but the widow is a powerful woman. It will not be easy to just take this thing from her, if that's what you intend." Shandai felt the knife blade press against her flesh.

"Thanks for the warning, but I've already taken from her, haven't I? You've received no payment for what I took on that cavern floor and neither will your mistress. You are her slave after all, aren't you?"

Shandai paled. This man was not so brutishly dumb as she had thought. His assault on her had not been done in ignorance of city laws, but in defiance of them. She would have to be very careful from here on out. He was probably already planning her murder. She shifted in the saddle, uncomfortable and still very much in pain. As she did so, she noticed the thin stream of blood that ran from beneath her and down the side of the saddle. *He has injured me inside.*

"There," she said, trying to keep her voice from trembling. "The oil lamp's in the window." The man spurred his horse onward.

Chapter 17 - Sundown

The sun was marking the final degrees of its descent. Noah held tight to the horse's reins. He'd been all up and down the flesh streets and no sign of the girl. At least a hundred times he'd been propositioned, by women and men. Or boy and girls so young it made his eyes sting with tears. So many of them, so lost, so desperate. Maybe these very streets were where he'd start preaching next. With every young girl that approached him Noah had said, "Shandai?" Often they just smiled and said "No." or "What does it matter?" or even "Whoever you want me to be." Forcing him to ride on to seek out the next, but never finding the one he sought.

Time to meet back with Mara, he finally admitted. Turning his steed he made his way back to where they'd parted ways.



Shem reined his donkey around. In the flickering light of the torch lit streets, he could see that Tarn had his arm and cloak draped about the shoulders of the young girl as he rode along. Shem thought he saw the girl motion with her hand, and then Tarn steered his horse in that direction.

She's showing him where to go, Shem realized. Resetting the donkey's pace, Shem decided to follow. He kept to the opposite side of the street, at a discrete distance. *If it is them, then I'll find out where they're headed. Then go back and get Father.*

There were enough mounted travelers to mask Shem's presence, however his pace had slowed enough to endanger him. *Lord, protect me*, he prayed as he approached a half-dressed woman. She smiled with painted lips and exposed more flesh as he rode past. Shem tightened his grip on the reins, sweat dampening his palms, and prayed in earnest. *Yahweh set your angels about me. Guard my life.* He turned where they turned and marked each corner in his memory for the return trip. Finally, they stopped at a domed dwelling with oil lamps in the barred windows. Across the street was an immense, ornate building, covered in gold, silver, and ivory. The Temple Noah had warned his sons about. It had to be.

Tarn and the girl exchanged words that Shem couldn't make out. Then the girl fumbled with a charm about her neck. That's when he realized her hands were tied. Shem watched as she placed the charm against an indentation in a circular section of the door. She pressed against the circle with both hands and turned. The door opened. Tarn pushed the girl inside and closed the door behind him.

Shem dismounted and tied his donkey to a public hitching post. He made his way on foot from there. He noticed that the people still ambling through the streets seemed to stare right through him, ignoring him as if he were nothing.

Easing up to the dwelling from its western side, he approached a lamp lit window. Perhaps he'd catch some scrap of their conversation. Shem strained his ears. He could indeed hear the gruff voice of the man and the plaintive cry of the girl, but the words were lost as they mingled with the other sounds

assailing him from along the streets; cat-calls and raucous laughter and then the sudden din of a drum. Wiping the sweat from his hands, Shem reached up and took hold of the bars in the windowsill. If he was going to hear anything then he would have to get closer. He tensed his muscles, made himself as flat as he could, and then pulled himself upward.

“—until I found out what she’s done with Kenian!” He heard the man shout. That confirmed everything. Pulling his head even closer to the bars, Shem flexed the tiring fingers of his scarred left hand. And felt them brush clumsily along the oil lamp, tipping it.

No! He watched as the lamp tottered on the inside of the windowsill. Desperately he tried to steady it, but only managed to push it closer to the edge. It tumbled from sight and crashed to the floor.

Instantly flames shot up along a curtain, illuminating the house from within. Shem let go and dropped to the ground. He knew he should run, but for a moment worried that they might burn up inside. *No, they’ll have plenty of time to get out. Run, now!* Curses assailed him as someone hurried to the window.



“Shandai!” Mara called from just outside the cavern. Kenian stood cautiously behind her. Despite the widow’s reassurances, he was not eager to touch even one pebble. *Leper’s Cave*, the name conjured images of pale, twisted limbs ending in raw nubs, faces with decayed, sunken noses and blind eyes. The widow called a few more times and then turned to Kenian. “Let’s look inside.”

“But—”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid.” Mara smiled.

The boy straightened. “Of course I’m not.”

“Let’s go then. The sun is setting and this cave is already dark enough.”

Kenian followed, picking his way along in trepidation. Half expecting skulls and skeletons, he moved slowly across the rocky floor. Once a mouse skittered from beneath his foot and almost tripped him. The further into the cave they went, the darker it became until finally they could go no further. *Now we’ll have to turn back*, Kenian thought with relief.

“Agveh,” Mara began, lifting her walking stick.

Kenian recalled—her god.

“Dorshai,” Mara continued, her jaw set determinedly. “Agveh—Dorshai...” And then she released a flurry of words that Kenian had never heard. Suddenly a burst of bright yellow erupted from Mara’s staff.

Kenian started and almost lost his footing. By the sudden light of the walking staff he could see Mara’s face glistening with sweat, her eyes glassy and distant. With heart pounding in his chest, he looked closer at the staff wielded in Mara’s white-knuckled grasp. The flame did not engulf the end of the staff but soundlessly fluttered above it. Kenian thought he could smell sulfur, like the water in Tarn’s well, only much stronger. A sudden movement from the corner of his eye turned his gaze just in time for him to see a leather-winged creature disappear into the shadows. *A bat?* he wondered. No, it had been too big. Perhaps a flying lizard, a young one.

“Kenian.” The widow’s voice brought him back. “Follow.” She motioned with her staff. The glaze had left her eyes, but sweat still beaded and ran from her forehead.

They barely made a dozen steps when Mara stopped and knelt. “Here.” She pointed at a glistening pool. Kenian knelt, what could she tell from a handful of water? He watched as Mara stuck a finger in it and then held her hand to the light. The liquid was thick and red, not water at all. Mara licked her finger. “Blood,” she confirmed.

Kenian looked then and noticed the signs of a struggle, rocks marked with blood where they’d scuffed and abraded human flesh. Several wisps of hair clung to the coarse edge of a broken stalagmite.

Mara saw too and snatched it loose, held the fibers to her nose. “Shandai,” she said. “We may be too late.” Her pulse quickened. If that was so, then whoever was responsible would soon pay with blood of their own. “Come.” She stood and moved further into the cavern. “Let’s see if we can find her—” she’d almost said *‘body’*. Controlling her emotions, Mara resolved to adhere only to facts. The girl may yet be alive. She scanned the cavern floor, heard the boy laboring behind her, struggling to keep up with the sulfurous light.

At last they reached the cave’s end, rock jutted from above, below, and every angle imaginable. Mara held her torch out and saw several tunnels beyond the jagged rocks. No way would anyone have taken the girl this way.

Mara’s mind worked furiously. Whoever had done this had complete disregard of district law. Law that Dorshai herself had set in place. The man Noah had said was after Shandai must have found her. Mara then realized for the first time—Noah had never mentioned a name. Even more distressing was the fact that she’d never asked for one. And not once in conversation had she ever asked Kenian to name his father! *I’m getting careless*, she berated herself. *Stupid!* To slip so clumsily. She’d have to be more careful. Oversights like that might cost her little right now, but over time, every minor mistake would slowly but certainly erode her power and cause the district to fall from her grasp. *Or be wrenched from me.* She turned to Kenian. “The man who did this—Noah seemed to think it was your father.”

The boy noticed a drop of blood reflecting dimly on the ground and remembered what Tarn had done to Beth. “He is capable of this sort of thing.”

“What is his name?”

Suddenly Kenian was filled with an inexplicable reticence. What was it his father had once said? That knowing someone’s true name could give you power over that person—if you knew the right incantations.

“Kenian.” Mara was growing impatient. “Your father’s name.”

Though reluctant, the boy could conceive of no good excuse. “Tarn,” he finally said.

Through years of practice Mara had trained herself to control her emotions and use her countenance as a shield. Still it was hard not to flinch. *Tarn*. The name churned through her mind like an uprooted tree caught in sudden floodwaters. She touched the knife at her hip. Would this even work? She smiled. Either way it would tell her something. She drew her blade and held it across her forearm. Began the chant, invoking Thul.

Though she did not regard the deity as her own, she was still familiar enough with the war-teaching to work this particular spell. *Thanks to you, Tarn*. Holding her arm steady she slashed and spoke simultaneously. “Take me to him.” The blood coursed into her hand and pooled. She made a fist and held it above her opened mouth. The first drop fell. “Tarn.” Then another. “Tarn.” Six times she did this and then licked her arm clean. She pulled a cotton scarf from her clothing and bandaged the wound. Then waited. She searched the cavern expectantly. Nothing. It did not surprise her. “Come.” She turned toward the cave entrance and motioned Kenian to follow.

The boy was confused. Was that it? “So do you know where he is now?”

Mara’s reply was calm, devoid of emotion. “No. He must have protections against that spell.” It was a lie, of course. There was no counter-spell or protection that she knew of, but she meant to conceal as much as possible from Kenian. Besides, her wound had not been in vain. She might not know where Tarn was, but she knew something just as important, perhaps more so. Now she knew, without a doubt, *who* he was. *My beloved ex-husband*.

Mara grinned as she stepped out into the dim light of the setting sun. *And now I have your son*. She wondered if Kenian was born of Tarn’s union with Sera, her former house-slave. If so, then was Sera herself still alive? She’d been so sure the dose was lethal. What if it hadn’t been? What if for all these years, she was still unavenged? As they made their way back to rendezvous with Noah she asked Kenian, “Your mother, you’ve never mentioned her either. Is she alive, or was your father as rough on her as he seems to be on all women?”

“Her name was Sera and she’s dead,” Kenian confirmed for her.

Good, thought Mara.

“She died giving birth to me and my sister. Complications. Tarn blames us of course, only a deathbed vow to our mother spared our lives.”

Mara considered all of this. A sister? Twins! In that moment she realized her revenge was not complete. Could not be complete until Kenian and his sister were both dead. But first—*use the boy up*, came the familiar inner voice. *Take all you can before you dispose of him. And find out where the sister is*.

“Oh, Kenian, it sounds as if you’ve had a terrible childhood.” She hugged him tightly and kissed his head. “But that’s over now that you’re with me. This sister, is she still with your father? We can get her away. I’d be more than happy to adopt her too.”

Kenian felt his stomach sink. Adopt? Was that how Mara saw him? As a son? He’d hoped for something entirely different. Swallowing his wounded pride, Kenian answered, “Beth is safe. She lives with Noah.”

Mara’s hopes fell. If the girl was in Noah’s home it would not be easy to get to her. *I’ll need something to bargain with. How about that son of his? Shem*. Mara pursed her lips in thought. Would the boy ever come to the city alone? Probably not. But he was more likely to accompany his father than a young girl under Noah’s protection. Mara shrugged away the matter. For the moment there was no strategy she could employ to complete her revenge. But someday a time for action would come. Until then she would simply keep her eyes open and look for her opportunities.

They made their way down the hill, to rendezvous again with Noah. And though the subject of Noah’s God never came up, Kenian did talk with her, revealing as much by what he did not say as by what he did.

Chapter 18 - Rider

Shem raced to his donkey, heard a door flung open—rattling on its hinges. He fumbled with the reins as he heard curses from behind, coming closer. He’d tied the reins securely and the donkey had made them even tighter as it had strained to pull free and escape the din of its strange surroundings.

“Easy, girl.” Shem tried to calm the fretful animal as footsteps clattered up from behind. Just a little more and he’d have it free. There. He tossed off the rope and was about to climb aback the donkey when thick fingers closed around his throat. Pulled straight up into the air, Shem clawed at the vise closing about his windpipe. He kicked backwards. His feet struck nothing, just flailed in the air. He watched as his donkey made a quick series of confused steps and then hurried down the street.

“Mine now, boy,” a voice threatened. Shem clung to the man’s meaty wrists and felt his head spin as he was hefted over the man’s head and carried toward the door. At the doorway he was lowered through and then flung across the floor. He reached out to stop his fall, but sprawled, arms and legs askew, knees and elbows banging painfully as he rolled. The door slammed shut and he looked up into the face of his attacker.

“From now on you call me Master!”

It was Tarn. Shem had seen the man a handful of times and always from a distance, but it was him. “The girl,” Shem started. “Where—”

“Dead. She got me where I wanted to go, here. And then I killed her.”

Shem's heart sank. It couldn't be. Not after all this.

"I suppose you work for the widow. When is she due back? I plan to take back what she stole from me and then some."

"Kenian," Shem muttered.

"What did you say?" Tarn reached and took Shem by the neck of his tunic, jerked him to his feet.

"Nothing. I—"

"You said *Kenian*. What do you know of my son? Tell me or I kill you right now." Tarn's hand went to his belt and came back with a steel dagger.

Shem's pulse hammered in his throat and ears. Never had he felt such fear. Even with the Behemoth upon him he had not been so afraid. "Kenian is my friend," he finally managed.

Tarn's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"My name is Shem." He stopped there, reluctant to give information. Unsure what he should say.

Tarn frowned. The name was familiar. And then he remembered. "One of Noah's!" Tarn's eyes grew wide with elation. "This is perfect. Not only do I get Kenian back, but Thul has delivered *you* into my hands as well."

Shem trembled. Who was Thul?

The reason for your fear. A fallen one.

Shem gasped. *Twice now the Lord has spoken into my heart. As with Mother!*

Yes. Now be at peace. I am with you.

Overcome by a sudden calm, Shem raised his eyes to Tarn's. "Yes, Noah is my father. And you should know, he is on his way here."

Tarn set Shem down and released the boy's tunic. "I'm not ready to kill you just yet. Your father is a crazy man. Unpredictable. I need a plan. How far behind is he?"

Shem's hope rekindled. Tarn was believing him, and there was something else in the man's demeanor. Fear. Tarn was palpably afraid of Noah, which Shem could understand. "He's not far behind at all," Shem said, a plan forming. "If you release me now and go your way, he may actually forgive all you've done."

"Forgive!" Tarn wiped sweat from his brow. His gaze was frantic and unfocused. "I've done him no wrong. It's my daughter in his home. He's the one that's wronged me! No, I make it even here. Tonight. You will come with me." Tarn grabbed him again by the throat and forced him into an adjacent room.

There she was, bloodied and bruised. Her face had been beaten mercilessly. Her hands were tied with a leather cord, so tightly that her hands had turned white. An issue of blood ran along her leg and stained the tattered dress which only half covered her broken body. The curtains, which had somehow wrapped about her body, were charred and drenched with water. Shem wanted to close his eyes but could not. Instead he took in the rest of the room. A polished granite bowl occupied the corner of the room and on the floor beside the girl lay the oil lamp that had started the fire and the empty pitcher which had apparently been used to put it out. Though too late.

Tarn pointed with his knife. "Untie her."

Shem knelt and did as he was told. The rope was tight, but still he frantically worked it loose. As he did, he prayed silently. *Lord, do not let this deed go unpunished.* Even as he pulled at the knots and set about freeing the girl's cold, corded wrists, he felt the oppressive fear trying to grip him again. *No, he fought it back. The Lord will not abandon me. He has spoken peace into my very heart.* As he pulled the rope free and stood to return it to Tarn he added, *Lord, protect me.*

Tarn grabbed for the bloodied cord and turned Shem around. *Can't be too careful with this one,* he decided. "Hands behind your back."

Shem complied. In moments his hands were securely bound and his fingertips growing cold.



Noah greeted the two solemnly. His heart had sank when they'd returned alone. As they spoke it fell even further.

"He has Shandai," the widow said. She held up her hand and in her fingers Noah saw what appeared to be several strands of glossy, dark hair. "There was blood on the cavern floor, but no other sign of her."

Lord, why? Noah fought back a mixture of pain and rage. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'll come back tomorrow, do what I can to help you. Right now I must get back to my family."

The widow only nodded, her eyes expressionless, but her mouth a hard, thin line. She put a hand to Kenian's shoulder. "Come, let's go home." She noticed the big man's reaction to this. A sudden stiffening of the jaw. "One more thing," she said, staring defiantly into Noah's eyes. "This man we're after. You never told me his name. I won't forget that omission."

Noah ignored her. "We'll continue our search tomorrow then," he said. "Let's meet here at tenth of day."

“No,” Mara said. “Meet at my home.”

Noah frowned. “Any particular reason?” He did not want to get too close to her house. Didn’t want any reason to enter it.

“Because I say so,” the widow spat. “Shandai is my… friend. We’ll rescue her my way.”

“Very well.” Noah took directions, then mounted his steed to go. He was about to flick the reins when he spotted a rider coming their way. There was something familiar about the person, even in the dim light of a disappearing sun. Noah squinted, willing himself to see farther than he actually could. Was it? No, couldn’t be. Then the rider closed in and reined up before them. Noah spoke his recognition, “Jenah!” This was not good.

Chapter 19 - Nephilim

Shem was tied like cargo across the stallion’s rear, while Tarn rode in front. Shem’s face was pressed against the horse’s flank. He saw ground pass underneath, heard the lapping waves of the ocean, and could see the southern edge of the mountain range if he turned his head just so. They rode along the shoreline, heading east from the city.

Shem had never been this far from home; he wondered if he’d ever see it again. His arms were still tied behind his back. He flexed his fingers. Felt the cord cut into his wrists. But he had managed to loosen it a bit, evidenced by the feeling which had returned to his fingers.

He watched the ground pass beneath him. He had a vague idea of how much time had passed. The air was cool, the last bit of warmth fading from the land. Sunset seemed long ago. Shem guessed they were halfway through this night. If they turned around they might make it back by sunrise. *But he’s not going to turn around*, Shem realized. Wherever they were heading, Shem sensed it was permanent. *I might never see my family again*. Sadness welled up and spilled from his eyelids. Don’t sob. Cry if you have to but don’t let Tarn know. If Tarn heard him crying it would only lead to more violence. The man fed on fear and pain. Any sign of either would only entice him to elicit more.

Finally, fatigue overrode his adrenaline and Shem slept, albeit fitfully. At some point he sensed them turning and heading north. The sound of the ocean grew distant, then faded completely. Shem slept. Awoke. The land grew rocky, vegetation sparse. He slept and woke again. Eventually they came to a halt.

“Galith!” Tarn shouted.

Shem flinched at the clatter of metal in response. Then steel sliding against leather, as swords were drawn.

“Who approaches my camp unbidden? Speak or die,” came a chilling voice.

“It’s me—Tarn!” He raised a hand in greeting. “I’ve goods for you.”

There was a raucous laughter and the sound of swords returning to their scabbards. “Come show me. If it’s worth my time I may even let you live…*again*.”

Tarn urged his steed over. He had yet to dismount when Shem was plucked from the horse, lifted as easily as a kitten. Set upon his feet, Shem found himself before a man of immense proportions. A hand would span his own torso; the knees were level with his waist. He looked up to see the man’s face—a boulder of hairless gray flesh. Short fangs hinted at the corners of his mouth. The man’s eyes were his most unnatural aspect, however. Large black slits, like smears of tar. No iris, no whites, just shimmering darkness.

Just like Father’s tales. Shem had thought it all pretend. What was it Noah called them? Nephilim?

“Here, let’s look at you.” The giant knelt, examining Shem by the light of a torch so massive that its breadth was that of Shem’s thigh. “Turn around,” the giant commanded. For a moment Shem felt hands grappling with his bonds. Then a snap and the cord fell apart. His tunic was then pulled roughly over his head and yanked away. “No marks.” The giant seemed surprised.

“He’s lived a sheltered life,” Tarn explained. “Never known the rod of discipline nor the lash of correction.”

Shem felt his ears grow hot. That first part wasn’t true. Noah had never spared the rod when he deemed it necessary. *Easy*, Shem admonished himself. *Tarn means all out beatings*.

“So he’s not a slave?” the giant asked suspiciously.

“He’s my property, Galith,” Tarn maneuvered. “Isn’t that right, boy?”

Shem looked over at Tarn for the first time since the man had dismounted. He said nothing. Tarn closed the space between them in two strides. He struck Shem sharply across the face with the back of his hand. Shem faltered, almost fell, then turned back to face Tarn, tears welling up, his jaw stinging, and a trickle of blood issuing from a cracked bottom lip. He saw the knife at Tarn’s side and wondered if he’d be quick enough to grab it away. *No, just say it—I don’t have to mean it*. He lifted his eyes to meet Tarn’s, who drew back to hit him again.

“I said isn’t that right?”

Shem stepped back. “Yes,” he said. Then sarcastically added, “*Master*.”

Galith smiled at Tarn’s little display. The fool. Of course the boy would agree to anything Tarn said if resistance meant a blow to the face. Still, it was best to bargain with Tarn. Let him think theirs was a legitimate business relationship. When the time came he would easily snap back on Tarn’s leash. Bargain with the fool now, use him as a spy, then take the city.

Which *would* fall, Thul had assured him, face to face. When the time was right Galith could decimate the eastern border, sweep across the Gut, which was already ripe for the picking, then strike at the Heart. The markets were nothing but merchants and street urchins, no threat at all. But he'd have to plow through the Heart first. Which was where Tarn came in. If the information he continued to provide was good, then Galith could strike strategically, instead of relying solely on brute force.

"How much?" he finally asked, motioning to his attendant, who disappeared into a tent and returned with a small, ornate box.

Tarn licked his lips and watched Galith for any sign, any indication. He decided to gamble. "Since he's unmarried, I'd say that makes him more valuable. Twenty Bardra."

Galith laughed. "Or it could mean he's less valuable—undisciplined, as you've already demonstrated, a young stallion I'll have to break. I'll give you ten."

Tarn frowned. Galith was openly toying with him. A young stallion, ludicrous! As if the boy would even think of disobeying a demigod. "Eighteen. He's never been touched... in any way. Which definitely makes him worth more. I'll go no lower."

Galith raised his eyebrows at that last part. Tarn was getting overconfident. He had half a mind to just take the boy and kill Tarn where he stood. His hand even strayed closer to the dagger sheathed against his thigh. No, no, he decided. Maybe he'd just let Tarn grow even more confident. Ultimately that might better suit his purposes.

"Done," he said with a nod. His attendant unlatched the box and counted out eighteen oversized coins. Bardra, the currency of the Nephilim. Still Galith could not resist one final jab. Taking the coins from his attendant, he proffered them to Tarn and said, "Of course I must charge you one Bardra, for the damage you inflicted on these otherwise undamaged goods." He fed seventeen gold coins into the outstretched money pouch which Tarn held open with both hands. The last coin he placed back into the box, which his attendant promptly sealed.

Inside Tarn was fuming. The split lip had been completely warranted and would heal besides. Outwardly, though, he kept his composure and graciously accepted the deduction. "Of course, Galith." He drew the strings tight, tied the money bag around his neck, and stuffed it back into his tunic. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you." Tarn mounted his steed and took the reins.

"As always," Galith replied. He smiled as Tarn turned his steed westward and made off into the night. Once Tarn was gone, Galith looked to Shem and demanded, "Your name, human. And don't lie. I'll know if you lie."

Shem looked into the giant's black eyes. "Shem," he answered. "Son of Noah."

The giant seemed to consider for a moment and then turned his back to Shem and walked away. "Follow me," he said, not looking back. Shem stood his ground.

Sensing that he wasn't being followed, the giant shot a glance over his shoulder. Infuriated, he turned and took a single stride back. Then a taloned hand shot out and grabbed Shem about the throat and chest.

Shem struggled in vain, as the Nephilim stomped toward a tent as large as Noah's home. The giant flung aside the canvas entrance, then threw Shem to the ground.

"Sit," Galith barked the order as he bent to the floor where lush pillows cushioned a large open area. Shem sat opposite the giant, on the bare ground where he'd been thrown.

Galith reclined upon the pillows, reached to a nearby chest and opened it. He pulled out a bottle, then frowned at Shem. "You are a son of...who did you say?"

Shem swallowed nervously. "Noah."

Galith's eyes seemed to shimmer for a moment. "We don't know this name."

Shem said nothing.

The giant sniffed at him. "You don't bear Agveh's stench, so you don't live in the city, nor the village to the north." Galith grew excited. "Where did Tarn find you? Are you Demarian? You don't reek of Sigon. Tarenite?" He sniffed again. "No. Where did one as unmarked as you come from?"

Shem was resolved not to answer. He did not want these monsters striding into his parent's home during some future night.

"Answer me, where are you from?"

A still small voice spoke into his heart: **Fear not, I will preserve my remnant.**

The giant was pouring himself a goblet of wine. He stared at Shem for a long moment, his eyes shimmering again. "Now it makes sense." He sneered. "You belong to *Him*. That's why you bear no stench." Galith drank the goblet dry, tossed it aside, and restashed the wine bottle. He belched, then continued, "I thought your kind had been eradicated. No matter. You soon will be. I've maps of Dorshan and the nearby regions. You'll show me where you came from or endure a slow, painful death."

Rage arose in Shem's heart. "I won't. Kill me if you will, but I won't show you anything."

Once again a taloned hand lashed out and closed about Shem's neck and upper torso. "Fool. A pouchful of Bardra means nothing to me. For your insolence, I'll kill you right now!"

Shem felt the thumb and first two fingers tighten around his neck. The other two fingers bit into his side, beneath his armpit. His chest contracted, air

forced from his lungs.

“I’ll find your people anyway. Once I’ve taken Dorshan, I’ll spread from there and conquer all the surrounding villages.”

Shem gasped, struggling to take in air.

Galith stood and pulled Shem close, stared at the boy with eyes dark as the grave. “And when I find them, they all die. Just like you.”

End of Book One

Book Two, **Reprobate**, is normally \$3.99 online. But you can get it **FREE** when you join my readers group at: [Fiction Worth Reading](#).

Characters:

Noah: The ark-builder and grace-finder. A man who has heard the audible voice of God. Determined to see his family survive intact, Noah resolves to do all he can to ensure that the world to come is a God-fearing one, vastly different from the world that is passing away. He also struggles with a calling to convey God’s love to a people that refuse to hear. All this while teaching his sons how to help in building the great ship.

Jenah: Noah’s wife. Jenah tries to temper the rivalry that emerges between her sons and to extend her love to the other females that God brings into her path, in hopes of finding suitable daughters-in-law. By tending the animals and gardens, keeping house, and using her skills as a healer, she strives to be a good helpmate for her husband.

Japheth: The eldest son of Noah and Jenah who faithfully bears the burden of his responsibilities. Though he tries not to complain, Japheth wonders why he is given the dangerous task of chopping down Cypress, while his brother Shem is only required to fetch tar to cover the great ship. Having heard part of his destiny, as revealed by God through his mother, he is determined to do all that is required of the eldest, to help build the ship that will carry them all safely through.

Shem: The second son of Noah and Jenah, chosen of God for a special purpose. Shem longs to prove himself to his father, but is not as skilled or able as his elder brother, Japheth. To make matters worse, the first time Noah actually lets him do something he has a run in with a behemoth and nearly gets himself killed. After his recovery, he accompanies his father into the city for the first time, and encounters far more danger than either of them had bargained for.

Tarn: Father to Kenian and Beth. A deathbed promise to Beth’s mother is the only reason he continues to allow her to serve as Jenah’s handmaiden—it keeps her out of the house and away from her older brothers, while also giving her opportunity to develop housekeeping skills.

Kalia: A young woman on the run from her former master, Tarn.

Onath: Eldest son of Tarn. He is a bounty hunter for Izla, who commands the armies of Dorshan.

Irada: Second son of Tarn. He is a male prostitute for the city of Dorshan.

Beth: Only daughter of Tarn and twin sister to the youngest son, Kenian. Beth is also the faithful handmaiden to Noah’s wife, Jenah. She witnesses her father, Tarn, murder her oldest half-brother, Onath, and is then raped by him. She is taken out of this terrible household by Noah, who vows to protect her as long as she wishes to live in his home. She wants her twin brother Kenian to stay with them, but it seems he is determined to strike out for the city, where Beth is sure he will become as corrupt as their older half-brothers are.

Kenian: Youngest son of Tarn, and twin brother to Beth. He loves only one person, Beth, and would lay down his very life for her. When he realizes their father has abused her, he goes to confront him, but is nearly killed by him instead. Noah rescues him and gives him the choice to live with his family. He declines, but charges Noah with protecting Beth.

Dorshai: A female Nephilim, spawn of a human female and the demon Agveh, god of love. She rules in Dorshan, where women wield the power and prostitution is the highest calling. She keeps the Nephilim population in check, to prevent any serious threats to her position. She allows freedom of thought and expression, as long as she and Agveh are given their due and their coffers stay filled with gold. She is also generous with her leaders, but draws a line when their purposes fail to line up with her own.

Izla: A female Nephilim, spawn of a human female and the demon Agveh, god of love. She commands the Dorshan armies, under the rule of Dorshai, for whom the city is named.

Galith: A male Nephilim, spawn of a human female and the demon Thul, god of war. He rules a renegade band of Nephilim camped beyond the eastern border of Dorshan. He longs for the day that he can storm the city and take it for Thul. He tolerates the fool Tarn, as long as he keeps bringing him information on the city.

Mara: In the nearby city of Dorshan, Mara governs the district known as the city’s heart. She has told everyone that her name is Mara but is called “the widow”. She also dyes her hair and keeps her face covered when traveling in the market square, all a ruse to keep her true identity secret.

Shandaj: Mara’s slave. Her life has been one of working the city streets as an informant and prostitute. She lives in hiding in what is known as “Leper’s

Cave”, and has survived for as long as she has only because of her sharp wits. She does not love Mara, but Mara offers her a measure of protection and provision, and so she tries to remain faithful.

Lamech: Noah’s father. Boisterous, strong-willed, and stubborn, he has slain many great lizards with his own two hands. Called of God to testify in Demaria, a city across the sea and domain of the Nephilim ruler, Sigon, he persists there until his wife is slain and he is forced to flee.

Methuselah: Noah’s grandfather. The oldest man living, he can remember when the world was new. He walked alongside Adam himself and saw his own father, Enoch, spared death and taken away to be with the Lord. He has committed all the history between God and man to memory and shepherds a village in the far east, beyond the wastelands, where he has assembled a ragtag group, most of which he bought out of slavery. But freeing their spirits proves to be much more difficult. He tries everything he can to turn their hearts to the One True God, but has very limited success. He wonders if God will ever allow him to harvest even one soul from the decadent place the world has become.

Scripture:

Genesis 6: 1 - 8 (NKJV)

Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they *were* beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose.

And the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he *is* indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore *children* to them. Those *were* the mighty men who *were* of old, men of renown.

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

Jude 1: 14 - 15 (NKJV)

Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.”

Job 40:15 - 20 (NKJV)

Look now at the behemoth, which I made *along* with you; He eats grass like an ox. See now, his strength *is* in his hips, and his power *is* in his stomach muscles.

He moves his tail like a cedar; The sinews of his thighs are tightly knit. His bones *are like* beams of bronze, his ribs like bars of iron. He *is* the first of the ways of God; Only He who made him can bring near His sword. Surely the mountains yield food for him, and all the beasts of the field play there. He lies under the lotus trees, in a covert of reeds and marsh. The lotus trees cover him *with* their shade; The willows by the brook surround him. Indeed the river may rage, yet he is not disturbed; He is confident, though the Jordan gushes into his mouth, *though* he takes it in his eyes, *or* one pierces *his* nose with a snare.

About the Author:

Though John Stacy Worth may write from a Christian world view, as he once told his wife, “This ain’t your Mama’s Christian Fiction.” His books have no Amish folks (cool as they are), no 1800s Western setting with a focus on romance (and Western Romances do indeed rule). His fiction is more like, “Did you ever wonder what a Behemoth was or how you might kill one?” Or, more importantly, “What’s Leviathan taste like?”

And such crucial questions as, “Can a vampire get saved? What were the Nephilim really like? What happened to those Cherubim and that flaming sword guarding the entrance to Eden?” And, “If you could travel through time to witness the crucifixion and resurrection what would you tell the disciples?”

John Stacy Worth has been writing and illustrating stories like these since he was old enough to trace comic books. He grew up in rural Georgia, reading every Tarzan novel he could get his hands on, then moved on to Asimov, Tolkien, Orson Scott Card ... you get the picture.

Since those days (way back in the twentieth century) it’s rumored he served in the U.S. Navy (14 countries and, some say, about every island in the Caribbean), spent a year undercover as a High School Science Teacher, then a Chemist for Merck Pharmaceuticals, and (according to certain sources) he’s now at a Nuclear Power Plant.

What’s known for sure is that he’s happily married, somewhere back in Georgia, with two awesome sons. He still likes to draw and make up stories, loves God, and talks about Jesus if you give him half a chance.

His books are now beginning to show up online; He’s also rumored to promote his fiction through his readers group, which you can join at [Fiction Worth Reading](#). And hey, if your mama is that rare and precious type that occasionally wonders “What’s up with Nessie?” or “You know, I believe that Bigfoot critter might be real...”, send her his way. This might be your Mama’s Christian Fiction after all.

P.S. And if would be so kind, once you or your mama finish reading one of his strange and wondrous tales, would you consider leaving an honest review? It’s said that this makes him smile, raise his hands in thanks to Heaven, and opens his heart to receive fresh revelation for another tale.