

CHAPTER 4

Ara's shoulder and arm muscles flexed as he strained to pull the recently secured beam out of position. Shifting his stance, he grunted as he pushed against the wood. Finally giving up, he sat down on the deck and looked at his son-in-law. "These new brackets from Tubal-Cain are much better. The joints are as strong as a superglider's bite."

Noah nodded, eyebrows raised. "Didn't I tell you that?"

Ara stretched his fingers before curling his arm up to show off his bicep. "You did, but they needed to be tested by a strong man."

Noah snorted. "Hmm. When Tubal-Cain gets back, I'll ask him to check. You're getting too old for this."

"Too old? I'm not even 300. Just reaching my prime."

"That's good timing then. If these new joints hold up in the water, I think business will really take off."

After guzzling his drink, Ara set the jar down and stared across the beach toward town. "We might be able to double, even triple the size of our boats."

"And what about crossing the sea?"

"I think it might be possible for our next model." Ara turned to Noah. "But I'm not sure anyone here is anxious to do that anymore."

The image of the massive serpent idol on the platform in Havil flashed through his mind, followed by a memory of Naamah in her room. Noah shook his head to banish the recollections. In spite of the inauspicious trip to Havil, he still craved adventure. He wanted to take

Emzara on a long voyage to explore the world's unknown wonders. "Perhaps not anywhere near Havil," he said, "but I think the world might be a bigger place than we've imagined. I want to see it."

Noah stood and jumped from the boat onto the sand. He thumped the partially constructed hull with his palm. "So how big do you want to make the next one?"

Ara joined Noah and they walked toward his office. "We'll need to do a lot of planning, but we'll probably start with something about 50 percent larger, and if that works, we'll gradually increase the size. We have to work with the ratios still to make sure it's as sturdy as possible. You aren't the only one who'll want to cross the sea. We're going to have trouble filling all the orders once word gets out that the ships are strong enough." Ara stopped and looked back at the water, saying nothing for a long moment as he stared off across the waves.

"Is something wrong?" Noah asked.

"Maybe. Speaking of stronger boats, Zain told me that Bayt is back in town."

"Bayt? Is he the man who wouldn't listen to you and nearly drowned?"

Ara nodded. "Then he came back here and tried to destroy my business. Hopefully, time has calmed his anger."

"That would be . . ." Noah broke off as he spotted something out in the bay, far beyond Ara's ship anchored in the shallows. "A boat is heading this way." He pointed to the vessel. "Who do you suppose it is? Not Farna — he would come from the river."

"And he's not due for another week at least." Ara held up a hand to block the glare. "Could be from one of the coastal towns I've worked with in the past."

The men continued watching as the ship steadily came nearer. At last Noah could make out a yellow banner above the sail. A sinking feeling hit his stomach. "That's the boat we made for King Lamech." Noah sighed. "And just when I hoped we were finished with that wicked place."

Ara narrowed his gaze at the boat. "Should we be worried?"

Attempting to count the number of people on board, Noah squinted. The light from the morning sun reflected spectacularly off the water, making it impossible to discern individuals yet. "I'm sure there's no threat of attack. But I'd definitely be concerned about the

influence they might have here. And if Naamah's there, I'd rather not stick around."

"Emz told me about that." Ara put a hand on Noah's shoulder. "I'm proud of you. Thank you for honoring my daughter and the Creator."

Noah nodded. "I believe the Most High protected me that night." He shuddered and looked Ara in the eye. "Thank you for raising Em to follow the Creator."

Ara tightened his grip. "If our trust in the Most High is to be tested by the Havilites, I'm glad to have you by my side." He looked up and down the empty beach trail. "I think we're going to have to be the welcoming party. Stay with me?"

Nodding, Noah walked toward the point on the shore where the boat would likely land. Using a hand to shade his eyes, he strained to make out the figures on board. "I see the king, and it looks like he has about four guards with him, as well as some women. But I don't recognize them." He let out a deep breath. "That's good."

As the ship neared, about a dozen curious townsfolk arrived on the beach. Noah motioned for them to come over and then spotted Emzara leaving her office. He waved to get her attention.

Emzara hurried to join him. "What's everyone doing?"

"Looks like King Lamech decided to pay us a visit."

"If Naamah is here . . ." Emzara balled her hands into fists.

Noah stepped close to her and rubbed her shoulder tenderly, lowering his voice. "I don't see her. But no matter what happens, we need to stay calm and treat our visitors with respect."

"With the same respect she showed us?" Emzara mumbled under her breath before slowly turning to Ara. "Baba, you're on the council now. Can't you just tell them to leave?"

He shook his head. "Not without consulting the rest of the elders. And I don't think it would be wise to make enemies. We'll greet them and be respectful. Let's take this opportunity to show them how followers of the Most High live." He put an arm around his daughter. "Imagine what could happen if their king started following the Creator."

Relaxing her shoulders, Emzara nodded.

Noah and Ara approached the water as the craft reached the shallows. Noah raised his voice and held up a hand. "Morning peace, King Lamech. I'm surprised to see you."

Dressed in a blue-trimmed golden wrap, the king smiled broadly from his place at the bow. “Ah, young Noah. Morning peace to you. How good to see you again.”

Noah stepped into the water and caught the rope a guard threw down as the vessel slid to a halt. He looked up at the king and pointed to his left. “Our pier is over there on the river. But this should be fine here until the tide rises late in the day.” He held a hand out to the king. “Let me help you.”

Ignoring the proffered hand, Lamech leapt down with a splash that sent water halfway to Noah’s chest. He stretched his arms out and yawned, making the scar on his right cheek bunch into a knotty red line. “It feels good to be on land again. Took me three days to get used to all the motion.”

“I know what you mean.” Noah chuckled.

Lamech glanced back at the Havilites on the boat. “Do you mind if they come ashore as well?”

“Of course not.” Spotting Garun among the group, Noah gave him a quick nod. It settled his heart a bit to know at least one person on board followed the Creator. He hoped for an opportunity to talk to him soon.

A half-dozen splashes sounded as several men jumped into the shallows, each holding a bundle above his head. When Garun and another guard had debarked, they turned to help a slight, middle-aged man and the three young women hop from the deck. Even wading through the shallow water, the girls moved with a grace that reminded Noah of the dancers who had performed with Naamah in the king’s dining hall during his first visit to Havil.

One of the remaining guards stepped to the bow. “Sir, do you want me stay here with the boat?”

Lamech pointed to the river. “You and Bachamel take it to the pier and tie it up.” He turned to Noah. “If that’s alright with you.”

Noah nodded. “It’ll be more secure there. So what brings you to Iri Geshem?”

“Oh, I got tired of sitting in Havil all the time. I needed to get out and see some of the world. What good is a ship if you never sail it? So I thought I’d tackle a few tasks in one trip. Put the new ship through its paces, travel the world a bit, and stop in here to see how my son is doing.”

He glanced at his surroundings and patted the ship's hull. "And this must be the place where you built my boat."

Noah gestured to Ara. "Actually, this is the man who designs and makes the boats. I work for him. This is my father-in-law, Ara. Ara, this is King Lamech of Havil."

The king grinned. "You invented these incredible vessels?"

"I did. I trust yours is sturdy."

"Indeed, it is. I'd like to talk to you about ordering several more."

Without warning, a bitter laugh sounded from somewhere in the small crowd. "Why would you want to do that? You're lucky to be alive, riding in one of Ara's boats."

Noah spun to locate the source of the angry voice, and it did not take long to recognize the speaker. A short man with a long, scraggly beard pushed his way to the front of the group of villagers. A ragged wrap wound about his wiry frame, and a long dagger hung from his belt. His wild eyes, full of hatred, shot Noah a glance before locking onto Ara. He looked very much as Noah imagined he would. Apparently, time had not cooled Bayt's anger.

Noah pointed at the man and stepped forward. "If you had followed Ara's directions, then. . . ."

Ara put his hand on Noah's chest to stop him. "Don't worry about him. My work speaks for itself."

Noah took a deep breath, nodded, and then moved back to stand by Em.

Lamech measured Bayt for a moment before shaking his head. He faced Ara. "As I was saying, I'd like to talk to you about ordering several more ships."

Ara raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like a discussion for later." His words came out slowly, and when Noah caught his eye, he could clearly read the reluctance there.

Lamech, too, seemed to sense Ara's hesitation. His gaze shifted from the older man to Noah, and then to Emzara. "And you must be Noah's lovely wife he spoke so highly of. I remember seeing you sitting by my wife, Adah, during the ceremony."

Emzara smiled, but Noah could tell it was forced. "Yes sir. I'm Emzara."

"A beautiful name for an even more beautiful woman."

Some of the coolness left Emzara's smile as Lamech took her hand. "Thank you."

"You and your husband are always welcome back in Havil." Releasing Emzara, he turned to Noah and gestured to Tubal-Cain's workplace. "Is my son around? That looks like a forge over there."

"You have a keen eye. That's his shop, but he isn't here today." Noah bit his lip and looked down. He knew Tubal-Cain wanted to share the news, but this unforeseen situation changed things.

"I suppose he's out looking for ores around here," Lamech said.

Noah chuckled. "He'd better not be — at least not right now. He wanted to be the one to tell you this, but he just got married. He and his wife, Adira, planned to be away for a few weeks to celebrate. They should be back within a week."

Lamech's eyes narrowed, and for the briefest instant, Noah thought he glimpsed anger in the flinty eyes. "Married? Tubal-Cain? Without sending word to me?"

"Adira's perfect for him." Emzara took a step forward, and Lamech's mask slipped back into place as he turned to meet her sparkling eyes. "She's smart, funny, beautiful, and is completely devoted to your son. You should see them together. And she follows the Creator. . . ." Emzara flinched and broke eye contact with the king. "And she, uh, she's my best friend. Everyone loves her."

Lamech arched an eyebrow and smiled. "Well, if she's anything like you, then I'm sure my son will be very happy."

"That he is." Noah tilted his head toward the boat he and Ara had been working on earlier. "Would you like me to show you around the shipyard?"

"Maybe later. I wonder if you might show us a place where we could lodge while we're here. Perhaps that friend of yours has space? I'd like to rest in a bed that isn't rocking on the waves."

Noah looked questioningly at Ara.

"Sir, allow me to take you to Ashur's," Ara said. "Noah has an errand to run, and then he can catch up with us in town."

"Thank you." He held out an arm and smiled at the gathered townsfolk. "Please, lead the way."

"Certainly. Come with me." Ara took several steps before stopping. "Ah, just a moment. I've forgotten. . . ." He hurried back to Noah.

“An errand?” Noah kept his voice low.

“Yes. We’ll take a longer route. Run and inform the council members about this.” He turned to leave and raised his voice so the king could hear him. “Meet us at Ashur’s when you’re finished.”

“I’ll see you there.”

Ara hustled to catch up to the unexpected guests, and most of the bystanders followed the entourage toward Sarie’s Bakery on the road that Noah and Aterre had taken to the shipyard during their first visit to Iri Geshem.

Emzara sidled up to Noah. “I’m coming with you.”

Noah squeezed her hand. “I hoped you would.” He led her to the road to Ara’s house, which would allow them to take a shortcut into town. “As soon as we’re out of view, we’ll need to move quickly.”

“I don’t like this,” she said. “Lamech — coming here. I don’t like it at all. Did you see his face when you told him of Tubal-Cain’s marriage?”

“I did, and I don’t like him coming here, either. I don’t want anything to do with Havil anymore — especially their serpent god.” Noah picked up the pace a little. “I hate what he stands for, but I must admit, he’s never been anything but kind to me. He can be quite convincing, can’t he?”

“He’s very cunning. I can see why people follow him.” Concern spread across her face. “You don’t think Baba will fall for his lies, do you?”

“Never. He’s the last person that would. He’s not happy about this surprise visit either.”

They turned off the road and ran past Ara’s house. The trail led through the grove of milknut trees and next to their own home before ending at the beach where Aterre had embarrassed Noah in front of Emzara years earlier. As the sand penetrated his sandals, Noah smiled inwardly, recalling the awkward moments that led to his first sunset with Emzara.

The sun had nearly reached its zenith, and the morning’s coolness had given way to warmer air. Sea birds squawked as they flew overhead, while others trotted along the shore, pecking at the moist ground after every wave. Noah and Emzara ran west along the shoreline until they reached the path that led straight to the middle of town. They turned at the second crossroad, and from there a short jaunt took them to Zain’s residence.

A well-groomed trail wound through a wide array of colorful flowers that gradually gave way to rows of large niti trees. Tucked away in the shade, Zain’s two-story, mud-brick home was one of the oldest in town.

A narrow path to the left led to a well that always reminded Noah of the one on his father's farm.

Noah knocked on the door. "Zain, are you here?"

Moments later, Zain stood in the entryway. "Ah, Noah and Emzara, morning peace. What a pleasant surprise. Please come in." He stepped aside and gestured for them to enter.

Piles of folded garments separated by color rested on shelves along the back wall. Seated in the middle of the room, Zain's wife, Kmani, skillfully slid a shuttle through the strands on a large loom. She stopped and stood, motioning for them to enter. "Welcome." She started to step over a pile of garments, but seemed to have second thoughts about her ability to clear the pile with her short legs. After zigzagging around piles of fabric, Kmani met Noah and Emzara just as they stepped inside, giving Emzara a warm hug.

After shutting the door, Noah put a hand up. "We'd love to stay and visit, but there's no time. I have troubling news. King Lamech and nearly a dozen Havalites just arrived."

Zain's eyes opened wide. "What? Here?"

Kmani looked up at Noah. "What does he want?"

"He said he wanted to try out his ship and visit Tubal-Cain, but he may have other motives. We weren't sure how to handle the situation. It was such a shock."

Emzara pulled her hair back and tied it up as she spoke. "Baba thought it'd be best to be on our guard while extending hospitality to them."

Zain pursed his lips. "That's probably wise. No need to start a feud with Haval. Where are they now?"

"They're taking the long way to Ashur's," Noah said. "Ara wanted me to inform the council members immediately and meet him there. You're the first one on the way."

Zain's eyes shifted to Kmani, and he took a long breath before turning back to Noah. "You two go and warn Ashur. That should give him a little time to get ready for visitors. Let him know that I'll be there soon with the other council members."

Noah nodded.

Zain turned and kissed Kmani's forehead. "I'll be back as soon as possible."