

PROLOGUE

Yea, why do ye build up your secret abominations to get gain, and cause that widows should mourn before the Lord, and also orphans to mourn before the Lord, and also the blood of their fathers and their husbands to cry unto the Lord from the ground, for vengeance upon your heads? Behold, the sword of vengeance hangeth over you; and the time soon cometh that he avengeth the blood of the saints upon you, for he will not suffer their cries any longer.

MORMON 8:40-41

Confidence coursed through Kishkumen's veins as he thought about his disguise. With help from his sister, he had darkened his shoulder-length hair with a root-based pigment. He had used similar tinctures to apply exotic ceremonial markings on his face, hands, arms, and even feet. He had trimmed his beard short except at the very center, which was divided into two thin braids more than a handspan long. A small precious stone had been woven into the end of each braid. The stones were ostentatious, but necessary. Along with the tattoos, they drew eyes—eyes that wouldn't remember much about the features of his face or the nature of his build.

The fine fabric of his clothes, expensively dyed and expertly tailored, soothed his tan skin. He had borrowed them from a trader of exotic garments—without consent, but the owner's loyalties were uncertain. The attire represented a worthy offering to the cause, whether the trader agreed

with the cause or not. The comfortable leather sandals were borrowed, too, and they fit him perfectly. He was picky about his footwear, but especially today, when his feet would need to serve him well.

Altogether, Kishkumen felt proud. It wasn't his most elaborate disguise, but it might be his most effective.

He didn't dwell further on his appearance as he sat in the small anteroom with several other merchants and petitioners awaiting their turn to see the chief judge and his advisers in the great Hall of Judgment situated near the center of the mighty city of Zarahemla. He didn't review his plan of action or his several escape routes again, either. He knew it all perfectly, so he didn't have to worry about adrenaline or fear confusing his judgment when the time came. He was experienced in his role, and while he took precautions, he wasn't afraid of death.

Instead, he focused on his motivation, urging the bonfire in his soul to grow, the hungry flames fueled by his fierce desires. The man who should have been the chief judge—the noble Paanchi—had recently been executed for standing firmly and honorably against the coronation of his brother, Pahoran, while his weak-spined, sycophantic brother Pacumeni fawned over the new regime. The high-minded relics of Nephite society had unfairly influenced the election of Pahoran to the judgment seat; they washed out his flaws with endless streams of propaganda, claiming he would carry on the so-called 'righteous' traditions of his father.

There was nothing righteous about them.

Pahoran the Elder had revered and collaborated with the bloodthirsty Captain Moroni, whose arrogant, benighted son now commanded the fearsome but overconfident Nephite armies in his place. Together, Pahoran and Moroni had murdered thousands of innocent patriots who honestly strived to influence the government toward a more peaceful coexistence with the Lamanites and a more tolerant, less restrictive code of laws—untethered to the worship of irrationally vengeful gods. The savage and haughty Nephite leaders had hoisted the maddening and hypocritical 'Standard of Liberty' in every city and village in the land, while incessantly subjecting the people to fevered fancies buttressing their power. They had labeled their victims 'king-men,' executing them as traitors, both with and without sham trials. The

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Nephites would be far better off with a true and noble king than the rotten lot of judges and generals gorging themselves on their labors.

One of those martyrs was Kishkumen's father, another his older brother. But he wasn't as enraged by their deaths as he used to be. His father and brother had died heroes, setting a path for others, like him, to follow. What incensed him now was that the mealy-mouthed, self-righteous Pahoran the Younger occupied the judgment seat and continued to press the cause of the greedy, wealthy Christians on the good people who represented the long-suffering, fair-minded backbone of Nephite success.

Pahoran wouldn't survive the afternoon.

Kishkumen almost let a smile slip. He doubted his expression would look suspicious, but he maintained his character as a shrewd, serious merchant, a stranger to Nephite and Lamanite lands. He had practiced speaking the Nephite language haltingly, as if he hailed from the mountains and coasts far to the northeast. He sometimes considered how those people suffered, too. The Nephites were aggressive traders, their influence oversized. Foreign merchants now used the Nephite language as the lingua franca in most parts of the known world—north, south, east, and west, all the way to either of the unlimited waters.

Someone called his false name, nudging him out of his smoldering reverie. Normally, he felt a brief spike of natural nervousness when the time to kill drew close, but a profound calm settled upon him. He rose, nodded respectfully at the man who held the door open to the audience chamber, and stepped across the threshold.

There he sat: the pompous chief judge of the Nephites, son of a butcher. No wonder so many Nephites had been emigrating the last few years, many of them traveling far to the north. They couldn't abide being subject to such scions of heraldic corruption. Pahoran, looking bored and stupid, lifted a lazy hand to grant Kishkumen leave to approach. The distance to the front of the room measured only twenty paces, but the few moments it took to cross seemed to extend, as if Kishkumen labored under the waters of a swift-flowing river. At the halfway mark, he held out the small, ornate box designed to arouse the greed of the Nephite leaders, the inferno of his determination burning away the imagined current. The gold and gems decorating the top

and sides of the box sparkled with reflections of the chandeliers and finely sculpted columns of the well-lit chamber of liars.

He stopped two paces from Pahoran and his advisers, then bowed, his torso nearly parallel to the finely-tiled floor decorated with flamboyant specks of gold, silver, and ziff.

“Oh, mighty ones, I bring spices exotic and medicines new. I present to you as example of benefitting more trade between us.” He straightened, pleased at his perfect tone, accent and faulty grammar.

Pahoran nodded with rapacious interest, like a slaving animal, his watery eyes focused on the box. “You may open it.”

As Kishkumen lifted the delicate lid, he finally allowed himself a small smile. Then, in the space of two heartbeats, he withdrew the slender dagger hidden in the spices, tossed the box to the side, and lunged for the chief judge. He knew Pahoran’s arms would come up, that his body would turn slightly, that a look of shock would paint his face. Kishkumen’s knife entered under the ribcage before the first shout, and he waited an extra heartbeat to make sure the thrust moved up to pierce the villain’s heart.

He left the knife embedded in the dying body. Spinning away from the judgment seat to his right, he removed his cloak and flung it at the guard who rushed toward him. The guard used his spear to cast the cloak out of the way, as expected, and Kishkumen was under the weapon and past the man before he could bring the sharp edge to bear against him. Instead of heading for the door at the back of the hall, Kishkumen angled for a window, diving headlong through and tucking into a roll as he hit the ground of an inner garden.

He was back on his feet in an instant, letting the sounds around him guide his instincts in choosing the right escape path across the garden, through another part of the building, and out into the streets of the city. As he turned left, he heard running footsteps behind him. Servants and guards had exited the Hall of Judgment using the same entrance he had used earlier, and they had spotted him.

But he was fast. He hadn’t met anyone faster. He was still in his prime, and he took his physical training seriously, so he had great endurance to complement his speed. He also had a solid plan. He snaked through the streets, aiming in the general direction of the eastern gates and the river beyond. He

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knew what his pursuers would think—that he had accomplices with a swift boat, awaiting him along the bank of the great watercourse.

Large irrigation canals traversed the city, though, and when he turned up a familiar narrow alley to race along the back side of a warehouse, he took stock of his first escape option. No people cluttered his vision, and the canal he sought lay just ahead, running perpendicular to his line of travel. The deep water flowed north for a significant distance before curving east to eventually disappear under the unconquered stone walls of the storied Nephite capital—the site of his most recent dispensation of glorious justice. His pursuers already lagged well behind, though he knew they had spread out to find his trail. It wouldn't take them long if he dallied.

He reached the canal and slipped into the water with little sound. Then he took a deep breath and began swimming underwater with the gentle current. He wasn't tired yet. His body felt strong. He knew he could reach a certain secluded garden a short distance beyond the canal's bend to the east with only three or four brief stops for air underneath bridges or amid patches of thick overgrowth along the banks. People rarely swam in the canals this early in the day, and those who did were mostly children, so the risk was low that anyone would see him swimming fully clothed and question him. Once at the garden, he would be out of view of any uncovered windows or streets, and he could leave the canal after recovering the weighted waterproof bag he had secured at its bottom several days earlier. He had placed three other such bags around the city: one in a different canal, one on the roof of a warehouse, and another buried in a different garden.

He reached the secluded garden easily, though by the time he broke the surface of the water for the last time the adrenaline had abated. He quickly changed out of his expensive clothes and sandals and into the common attire stored in the bag, which also contained a plain but well-made and finely sharpened dagger in a simple sheath, along with a small, rough towel to dry his hair and rub the markings off his skin. He wrung out the wet clothes and stuffed them with the towel into the bag, which he tossed back into the water, where it sank quickly. If he didn't retrieve the bag by late summer, when the canals were running low, perhaps someone would find it. But that was an inconsequential worry.

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The dye in his hair had completely washed out. With the dagger, he trimmed the ridiculous braids growing out of his chin, shaving the hair close. He kept the two precious stones, placing them in a small pouch he attached to his belt. Then he waited several minutes, listening to the noises of the city. Zarahemla was a huge place, but he was still less than a mile from the Hall of Judgment, which sat like a pregnant and angry sow just a few blocks southeast of the crossroads in the city's center. Sounds of anger and panic occasionally pierced the air loudly enough for him to hear.

Kishkumen smiled for the second time that day, as broadly as the muscles in his face would allow.

CHAPTER 1

Now ye may suppose that this is foolishness in me; but behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass; and small means in many instances doth confound the wise. And the Lord God doth work by means to bring about his great and eternal purposes; and by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls.

ALMA 37:6-7

Kihoran, commonly known as Kai when he used his real name, waited patiently as a flock of sheep crossed the narrow road before him, their bleating sporadic and uninterested. They would probably have stopped entirely if the old shepherd and his two well-trained dogs hadn't urged them on. The shepherd dipped his chin in a voiceless apology as he finally crossed the road behind his sheep, the dogs running ahead. Kai nodded back with a smile. He had been gone for six months—a few more minutes wouldn't make any difference.

The night before, he had felt drained—physically and mentally. But the morning had brought new strength now that he was so close to his destination.

Home.

He hadn't always lived in Bountiful, but it was the only place he called home. In a few short miles, he would top a small hill to the northeast of the city, just after the noon hour. He could already picture the beauty and serenity of the most brilliant jewel in the crown of the Nephite nation. Bountiful

had become an important crossroads of culture and trade, its reputation still growing rapidly, as Kai could attest from his recent extensive travels. His adoptive parents, Gideon and Ishara, worried Bountiful was becoming too popular, that increased wealth and influence would lead to damaging levels of pride and moral corruption.

Kai was relatively young—having recently turned twenty-one—but he'd already seen a great many places and met literally thousands of people. It was clear to him his parents had a sound basis for their fears: humans were humans, and the fact that most Nephites were professed Christians didn't exempt them from the hard realities of life and human nature. The temptations still came, relentlessly, especially in the midst of great success. Pride was a monster with many heads, feeding on a vast array of lusts.

He had passed few people on this road. Much broader highways existed nearby, some of them finished with stone to handle heavy traffic and large wagons in almost any weather. All the paths around Bountiful were relatively safe, though. The people of Bountiful knew the importance of their city. It had been attacked before, was nearly overrun fifteen years ago by Amalickiah and his ravaging Lamanite armies at the beginning of the Great War, just after Moroni had put down the king-men. Kai's birth parents had been king-men. But that was long in the past, or at least his past. He loved Bountiful. The people were vigilant, the laws strict, the roads and neighborhoods safe. There were far better ways to make a living in such a prosperous city than turning to the dangerous business of banditry.

As he crested the final hill and beheld his beautiful city, his senses suddenly sharpened. Something didn't feel right. His training kicked in, and he instinctively moved off the road into the trees and brush, lifting and placing his feet carefully to avoid noise. He found a good vantage point, well hidden, and spent the next several minutes studying the city's surroundings.

He'd been taught to be patient and observant. Seven years ago, shortly after the legendary Captain Moroni's son, Moronihah, had taken command of the armies, one of Moroni's men had recruited Kai as a scout, and that man had schooled him well. Kai had even met Captain Moroni once, shortly before his lamentably early death, when he served as an adviser to his son. Kai would never forget the experience. Moroni had seemed otherworldly and invincible, yet detailed and thorough—so very thorough.

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After observing the area for several minutes, Kai noted nothing obviously amiss. The rolling, forested hills surrounding the city seemed to shrug at his concern. The shepherd had appeared calm, as had others Kai passed on the road. But the people in the city appeared to be moving faster than they normally would—he could tell even from this distance, with the city’s outskirts still more than a mile off. He listened for any unusual sounds, but none teased him.

Finally, he rose from his concealed position, feeling slightly silly. He still had an uneasy feeling, but he couldn’t identify any immediate danger, so he moved back to the road, not wanting to look suspicious—and even more foolish—by traveling off-road across pastures and fields of grain, corn, fruit trees, and other crops. Summer was nearing its end; the fields had nearly matured. If necessary, he could have easily hidden in most of them. He was no farmer—his blood parents probably were—but he could tell the harvest would be good that year.

He passed a few more people as he neared the city. One of them, a farmer and long-time friend of Gideon and Ishara, recognized him.

“Ho, young Kihoran!” the man said, stopping and smiling broadly. “Welcome home. Your parents will be excited to see you. Was your trip to the east successful? Did you go beyond the mountains?”

Kai grasped forearms with the man and produced a grin, easily slipping into his role as a commercial scout for one of the large merchant groups in Bountiful and Mulek. Though young for such a role in a profession that held little interest for him, he had a knack for it. Commercial scouting offered a good cover that had been carefully cultivated. Moroni himself had conceived the idea of a coordinated spy network and made most of the initial arrangements across the nation. Moronihah had later chosen Kihoran for one of the eastern roles. Men and women scouted and spied to the southeast, south, and west as well. The north was thinly populated, so diplomats or scouts were rarely sent in that direction.

“No, not this time. But I met a visiting Airoack priestess who wanted me to marry her daughter.” He laughed, and the older man joined in with a hearty guffaw. Kai remembered names well, but for some reason this man’s name took him several seconds to retrieve. Yes, there it was . . . Heleorum. “I made some good contacts, and I think the merchants will be pleased.”

Heleorum nodded, then gazed out over one of his fields. “We’ll have a nice surplus this year. The trade will be good . . . as long as the peace holds.”

Kai’s voice turned instantly serious. “Did something happen?” He swallowed in uncharacteristic nervousness. He could almost sense a storm.

Heleorum sighed heavily. “More trouble in Zarahemla. We don’t know many details yet, but the chief judge is dead. Murdered.”

And there it was. It felt like a mountain had just cracked. The news was devastating, though not entirely unexpected given Nephite history and recent political rumblings. He would need to complete his report and be ready. Almost ten years of mostly uninhibited prosperity had passed since the end of the Great War with the Lamanites, but the peace had grown increasingly uneasy over the last few of those years. Because of the renewed contentions, many people had left, some with the eccentric shipbuilder and explorer Hagoth, some in other groups.

Last year, new dissenters had again stirred up some of the Lamanites, who then attacked the border forts. Moronihah had handily defeated them, but it wasn’t clear to Kai why the Lamanites had come in the first place. They had fertile lands of their own, with plenty of trading opportunities. Claims of stolen birthrights were hundreds of years old, and seemed contrived anyway. It bothered Kai that he didn’t fully grasp their motives. Some of the other spies and scouts said they understood the reasons behind the attempted invasion, but whenever they tried to explain it to him, his mind went fuzzy. Their answers didn’t make sense, though the threat was obviously real. Suddenly he wished he were attached to the main army again. He knew what he did was important, but . . .

“Kihoran?”

Kai blinked. He had lost himself for a moment. He shouldn’t ever do that. But perhaps, he rationalized, such news affecting him so deeply further strengthened his cover, making him appear a frightened common citizen.

“That’s awful news,” he said with a grave look. “When?”

“It happened more than a week past. We heard just two days ago, when a fast courier arrived.” Heleorum laid a calloused hand on Kai’s shoulder. “We’ll get through this. There are still enough good people in this land who worship the Lord and serve each other. We are under his covenant. He will protect us, though we may pass through some hard times, as before.”

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Kai blinked again. He had stopped calling such pronouncements blind faith. A deep well of wisdom nurtured Heleorum's words. Gideon and Ishara had assiduously taught Kai to feel such conviction, to seek God's aid. He wasn't good at it yet, though he knew he had received divine assistance on several memorable occasions. He was a scout and spy, after all—paid to be observant and discount nothing.

"I must get home."

Heleorum nodded with understanding and compassion in his eyes. "It's good to see you again, Kihoran, healthy and safe. Please deliver a greeting to your parents."

Kai promised he would as he headed off, his pace quick. He easily maintained the appearance of a worried young Nephite, because he truly was anxious.

And strangely excited.

His sixteen-year-old sister Neva was the first to greet him as he approached the sturdy, wood-framed house, the plaster on its exterior freshly-painted in a light rose color. She had spied him from a side window and came bounding out the door, reaching a full sprint and barely slowing as she jumped into his arms. Her long, black hair billowed around his face as she impacted, and he took two bracing steps backward to catch his balance and hold her off the ground. Her embrace was strong. They shared a special bond, having grown up together in a strange new place. He was her protector, and he relished the role. His fierceness made many young men shy away from her. She didn't seem to mind, though, at least not yet.

She started to sob. After a few moments he set her down gently and pushed himself away so he could see her eyes, dark green to his hazel.

"Is everything okay?" he asked softly.

She nodded, wiping away tears. "I'm sorry, Kai. I didn't think I'd cry this time when you got home. I'm trying to be stronger, like you."

He shook his head. "You *are* strong. Crying has nothing to do with it."

She seemed unconvinced as she stared into his eyes, studying them. Most people told him his eyes revealed little—a trait that made him a good negotiator—but Neva claimed his eyes were wide windows into his soul.

Her gaze sometimes unnerved him. “You look good. It was a successful trip, yes?”

He smiled. “It was. I almost got married.”

The shocked look on her face was worth every senine of the deception. Within a second she had figured it out, though, and she slugged him hard in the shoulder. Had she been training with the soldiers? She was getting stronger. It hurt.

“Ouch!” he exclaimed teasingly. “What would you have done if I really *had* gotten married?”

Her stern expression brooked no argument. “You can’t marry anyone unless I meet her first. And approve. You *know* that.”

He almost chuckled. “I do, and I haven’t become fool enough to ignore it.”

She studied his eyes a few moments longer, clearly harboring doubts. Then she slugged him again, more softly this time. “And you won’t. Come, Mother and Father will want to see you and hear how your trip went. They’re both home today.”

He still felt slightly uncomfortable whenever Neva called Gideon and Ishara ‘Mother’ and ‘Father.’ But he understood. She had no remembrance of their birth parents. She was barely a year old when they were lost. She knew the truth, of course, but to her it was natural to see Gideon and Ishara as her parents. She even reminded him occasionally that she and Kai had been sealed eternally to Gideon and Ishara under God’s covenants. She was stronger in the Church than he was, her faith and trust brighter. He loved her for it, even when she pressed him on things—maybe *because* she pressed him on things.

It took a minute for Gideon and Ishara to wrap up their work and join Kai and Neva in the front room of their small but well-maintained home, which lay near the southeastern border of the city. The delay didn’t bother Kai. His adoptive parents were skilled and conscientious in their crafts—he a potter and she a seamstress. Neither of them was overly excitable, either, unlike their one blood son, Jevrael, who served in the army. Jevrael was three years older than Kai. Gideon and Ishara had never been able to conceive more children.

They greeted Kai with a fond embrace, Ishara adding the obligatory kiss. She offered to bring him some food, but he politely declined. Or at least he thought he was polite about it. Ishara gave him a stricken look.

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“You’re gone for six months, traveling the Lord knows how many miles on foot, you look thinner than a baby goat, and my food doesn’t appeal to you?”

He thought she was teasing, but even the hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth wasn’t enough to convince him, so he tried a safer path.

“Sorry,” he said with an appropriately penitent smile, “I just don’t want you to trouble yourselves for me.” Oops, that wasn’t right, either. “I mean, I know it’s not really any trouble, but . . . um, okay, what do you have?”

She couldn’t hold back the smile any longer. More than that, she laughed, then embraced him again and squeezed hard, breathing in deeply.

“I’m teasing, my son, but you know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, nothing you need that I would ever view as a troubling task.”

She didn’t often make such profound statements, but when she did, Kai took notice. He studied her eyes, and just as Neva could see into his soul, he could pierce his adoptive mother’s. She was worried about this assassination, about the welfare of their nation, their city, and their family—primarily their spiritual welfare, to which physical welfare was so often linked. She was a good, kind, perceptive woman—the kind of woman Kai didn’t expect to ever find for himself. Of course, he would never say that to her. If he did, she’d flog him with a belt, at least figuratively.

Ishara made them remain seated in the front room while she swished her robes and hurried to the kitchen, where she busied herself. It sounded like she was preparing to kill a fatted calf and prepare a great feast. Gideon pretended not to notice, while Neva cast furtive glances toward the kitchen, clearly wondering if she was expected to help.

Gideon leaned forward in his simply-crafted, lightly-cushioned chair, gazing intently at Kai. “What truth from the east, my son? All we hear are rumors.” Gideon and Ishara knew Kai was a spy, and Kai had told Neva just before leaving on this latest mission. She hadn’t seemed shocked or worried then, but she looked shaken now.

“I didn’t hear anything about the assassination, of course, since it happened so recently,” Kai admitted. Gideon’s eyebrows rose, so he clarified. “I ran into Master Heleorum on the way in, and he told me. It feels momentous. I could sense the tension from outside the city.”

Gideon nodded, his eyes locked on his clasped hands for a moment. “Jevrael has already been sent to join one of the garrisons on the southern

border. I've been praying and talking with several of the priests. You don't remember the 'Great Mourning' in the sixteenth year of the Reign of the Judges, since you hadn't been born yet. That followed the bloodiest, deadliest battle in all of Nephite history. For some reason, this assassination feels like it portends something similar, and it harrows my soul."

Kai let his head drop momentarily, a somber chill running down his spine. Jevrael had already left. Things were moving fast. "I've read about the Great Mourning, and Moronihah has talked about it." He glanced at Neva, still a bit uncomfortable about her knowledge of his secret place in the army. "He was only eleven at the time, but he accompanied the main camp with his father, and he helped bury the dead."

Neva shivered, though she hadn't witnessed what he had seen of war. Last year's battle came back to his mind in stark detail. It had been a slaughter. He hadn't directly participated, but he and the other scouts had performed their job well. Moronihah's captains had outmaneuvered and outfought the invading Lamanites, who left a trail of dead and dying for many miles when they retreated.

"Was this the army that followed the people of Ammon out of the old land of Nephi?" asked Neva.

Gideon nodded. "That was the angriest Lamanite army I'd ever heard tell of. They apparently felt like we were 'stealing' their people, in addition to the long list of vain and inaccurate grievances ingrained in Lamanite minds from the time they can walk. The man who wounded me screamed like a demon had possessed him until another Nephite soldier's arrow took him in the throat. I don't know if I would have survived if that arrow wasn't true."

Kai recalled the scars Gideon had shown him from that battle, including a long thick one on his upper right thigh.

Neva leaned forward on her chair. "There was a great battle two years later, when Zerahemnah led the Lamanites in another invasion. You were wounded in that one as well, right Father?" Kai noted the fear in her eyes had been mostly replaced by curiosity and admiration.

Gideon grimaced in remembrance. "It wasn't as bad, but Moroni released me from the army after that battle. And I missed action with the militias in the Great Rebellion started by Amalickiah because I was still recovering. Those were dark times, too, but Moroni put a quick end to it. I wanted so

badly to gather to the Title of Liberty he raised at that time—your mother knows. I almost went anyway, sword in one hand, crutch in the other.”

“But then there was peace,” said Neva.

Gideon smiled nostalgically. “Yes, for a few years. It was such a wonderful time. Everyone was so happy. We worked hard, we were kind to each other, and we were honest. We enjoyed new music, and plays, and dancing, and amazing art. We worshipped God with enthusiasm and studied his word. The Spirit was strong. It almost felt like angels walked the face of the earth with us, constantly.

“The Lamanites were still a danger, of course, so Captain Moroni fortified our cities and increased the strength and skill of our armies. We felt safer than I ever remembered feeling. Some people almost worshipped Moroni.”

“He hated that,” said Kai absently, surprised he had voiced the thought aloud.

Gideon nodded. “I imagine that’s true. Sometimes I forget you once carried reports directly to him or his captains. You’ve never said much about Moroni’s personality, though you’ve said a lot about Moronihah’s.”

Kai shrugged. “Moronihah is closer to my age. And his father is a legend.”

Gideon chuckled. “Moronihah’s fourteen years older than you. He’s married and has several children of his own.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” interjected Neva. “Kai almost got married on this last trip.”

Kai didn’t know whether to cringe or burst out laughing. Before he could decide for himself, he heard a voice that made him flinch.

“Oh?” said Ishara, entering the room with a large plate heaped with food, including some sizzling boar meat she must have warmed over the coals in their brick oven. Kai’s mouth watered. “And why didn’t you go through with it?”

She was teasing him . . . unless she was admonishing him. He looked at Neva and frowned, but Neva knew he could never really be mad at her. She used that to her advantage, often.

He looked up at Ishara, trying not to appear sheepish. “It was a ruse, set up by a well-connected trader in Airoack. I didn’t fall for it.”

“A ruse,” said Ishara flatly. “You mean an attempt to form some sort of alliance to secure favorable trade. And the young woman went along with it?”

Kai blushed. “Yes, she did.”

Ishara laughed, easing some of the tension in the room. “Of course she did. Look at you. Not just how handsome and strong you are, but how intelligent, and witty, and considerate. It’s a wonder you haven’t married anyone here yet.”

The tension returned, and Kai felt the usual embarrassment and annoyance that surfaced whenever the topic of marriage came up.

“I might marry Siarah,” he blurted out, surprising himself yet again. Ishara kept chipping away, and now he’d said something he wished he hadn’t.

“Oh?” Ishara said with interest, but then shrugged. “If you want to, she’s a fine choice. But don’t let us pressure you into it.”

Was this her way of *increasing* the pressure? Yes, probably, but he was a grown man, and an accomplished spy—a diplomat, too, after a fashion. He decided to exert some control over the conversation, such as he could.

“We haven’t spoken seriously about it, and she has other suitors as well. Perhaps that time will come.”

Well, he had certainly sounded as dry as most diplomats.

Ishara’s eyes narrowed slightly, her gaze boring into him for several long seconds. She didn’t frown, but she came close to it. Her voice was patient and compassionate, though.

“Do you love her?”

Kai’s diplomacy died. That question, not the silly dances circling it, was the heart of the matter. Did he love Siarah? Did he know what that even meant? He felt attracted to her, for sure. She was beautiful and talented, and his adoptive parents weren’t the only ones who had asked him whether he and Siarah would get married someday. Many of the young men he’d grown up with, all of whom were now married, had asked him the same question. To her credit, Siarah didn’t pester him about marriage or complain to her friends—at least not that he knew of. She seemed to genuinely like him, and while there were indeed other suitors, she didn’t give them much attention. He swallowed as the realization hit him that it was probably time to give her some kind of commitment.

Finally, he nodded, looking first at Ishara, then at Gideon, sparing a glance for Neva as well. “Yes, I think so,” he said, trying to affect a confident

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smile, “but that’s none of your business. You brought out food, Mother, and suddenly I’m much hungrier than I thought I was.”

It was the first time he had called Ishara ‘Mother,’ and though he meant it, he also hoped it would make her stop questioning him about marriage . . . at least for a little while.

Kai may have deflected Ishara’s queries temporarily, but he had clearly given her encouragement, too. By midmorning the next day, Siarah appeared at the house, dropping off a delivery of fresh-baked breads and dried apples, with the excuse that her own mother had “made too much.”

Neva giggled when she brought Siarah to where Kai sat at their kitchen table and announced her visit. He was examining a scroll on which he had recorded some notes from his trip. In his surprise, he nearly knocked it off the table. He looked askance at Neva, but smiled as he rose and greeted Siarah. He felt anxious about seeing her, but reminded himself that he was a brave scout—a warrior, right?

“Hi, Siarah. The bread smells amazing.”

“And I missed you, too,” she said, grinning as she handed the basket to Neva and walked over to give Kai a prolonged hug. “You were gone a long time.”

Kai winced as he thought about Neva bringing up the young Airoack woman, but blessedly she didn’t. Siarah pulled back, keeping her hands around his neck. She had never done that before. Now he was *really* glad Neva hadn’t mentioned the Airoack woman. Or had she beforehand? His face warmed.

“It was a success, I hope?” Siarah asked.

“Yes. And I almost made it far enough north to see where some of our people have settled. It’s a strange-looking land.”

Siarah pursed her lips as she lowered her arms. “I still don’t understand why they all left.”

“I don’t either.”

“When do you have to leave again?”

Her tone didn’t sound upset. In fact, she seemed calm and in control.

“Soon, I think, because of . . .” He hesitated, though the night before he’d spent some time thinking through how to tell her. He glanced at Neva, who listened intently as she held the basket. “Neva, can you give us some privacy?”

Neva cast him a disappointed look, but then nodded in understanding and headed back toward the front room, still carrying the basket. Kai returned his gaze to Siarah. A nervous curiosity danced in her eyes.

“Can we sit?” he asked. “Just here at the table?”

She nodded and pulled out the closest chair, sitting and turning it to face him as he sat.

“This sounds serious,” she said evenly.

Kai frowned, feeling nervous, which probably showed in his expression. “It is. I need to tell you what I really do.”

She searched his eyes briefly. “You’re not a merchant scout?”

“Yes, I am, sometimes, but mostly I’m a spy and scout for the army.”

“Oh,” she said. “And that’s your big news?”

“Well . . . yes. I thought it was time I told you.”

She didn’t appear stunned. “Hmmm . . . and why didn’t you tell me earlier? Did you think I couldn’t handle it? I’m not accusing you,” she added quickly, touching his arm, “just asking.”

Kai shrugged. “I wasn’t sure.”

Her eyes narrowed, and then her lips twitched into a smile. “You’re sure I can handle it *now*?” She was teasing him, but he didn’t mind.

“I never doubted you could handle it, but I can only tell certain people.” He realized the implications of what he’d just said, but Siarah didn’t launch into a discussion about their future together. Mercifully. He wasn’t quite ready for all that.

“It’s a dangerous job, I know,” she said calmly, resting her hand firmly on his arm. His skin tingled with warmth under her fingers. “But we all have to be strong and do what must be done to protect our people. God will provide where we lack and comfort us when we mourn, if we are faithful.”

Kai remembered why he sometimes harbored reservations about Siarah. She was too good for him—too spiritual, too full of faith. He was a warrior. He had seen battle. He hadn’t killed anyone yet, but it was only a matter of time. And his faith wasn’t nearly as strong. How could he ask someone like

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her to marry him? Someone who could become like . . . Ishara. Even if she agreed, would that be good for *her*?

“Um, you’re right, I know. He’s definitely protected me so far, more than once.”

“Really?” She leaned forward, subtle excitement pulsing from her eyes. “Can you tell me about one of those times?”

He wasn’t prepared for that question. He had spoken without thinking of anything in particular; it had sounded like the right thing to say. He cast about in his mind for an example. A weak one came, but it was better than nothing.

“Well, last year, just before Moronihah’s rout of the Lamanite army, I was scouting along a small river that flowed toward one of our positions. I heard an enemy scout approaching, well before he heard me, and I was able to spot him and keep him in sight to make sure he didn’t find us. He seemed like a good scout, too. Luckily, he turned around before he discovered our camp, and I was able to follow him to theirs. It was one of their smaller camps, but Moronihah said the information was extremely helpful.”

That was it. It sounded even less impressive than he’d feared.

Siarah nodded intently. “Sometimes our senses are heightened to help us. The Spirit can work in so many ways. He clearly helped you there.”

Kai wasn’t sure about ‘clearly,’ but he didn’t argue.

“What’s Moronihah like?” she asked. “Is he a lot like his father?”

Kai pondered a moment. Moroni had died just four years earlier. He’d gotten sick and apparently recovered, and then suddenly he was gone. Kai hadn’t asked Moronihah too many questions about his father. The entire country still mourned Moroni’s passing.

“He has big boots to fill, and he knows it,” Kai replied. “He’s a good chief captain, but I don’t know if he’ll be as good as his father. He wants to be; he loves the Nephite nation. And I like him. He’s a good man.”

“Well, I’m glad we have good men like him—and you—to protect us.” Siarah’s voice had softened, and she had somehow drawn closer without him noticing. Her face hovered mere inches from his, her hand resting now on his chest, radiating heat.

There was no good reason in the world not to kiss her, and so he leaned in.

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“Ahem, sorry.”

The strange voice made Kai nearly jump out of his chair. He whipped his head toward the doorway, where a sprightly older man leaned his head in. Neva was nowhere in sight.

“The front door was open, and I heard voices,” the man said with barely a hint of apology.

“Who are you?” Kai demanded, rising, his voice protectively gruff as he stepped between him and Siarah.

The man stood straight and took a step into the kitchen. “I’m Issachar, from the Merchants Council. We haven’t met, but I was sent with a message for you. I was told it was urgent.”

Kai knew instantly the message contained new orders, and not from the Merchants Council of Bountiful. “Written or verbal?” he asked.

“Written.” The man produced a small scroll, which he handed to Kai. “I’ll be off then.” He smiled broadly. “Good day, and the Lord bless this house.”

He was gone before Kai could say anything more. He listened closely as the man’s footfalls drifted away, out of the house and down the street. Kai went to the front door, waited a few seconds, and stepped outside. He noticed nothing suspicious along the street, so he walked around back, circling the house until he was at the front door again. Satisfied, he re-entered and returned to the kitchen table, where Siarah waited, her brow furrowed in puzzlement.

“He was just a courier, right?”

“Probably not. I’ve seen him before, though I haven’t met him. I think he’s a spy, too.”

“Oh.” The gravity of his job seemed to be sinking in.

“Does he really work for the Merchants Council? I mean, as a cover?”

Kai shook his head. “I don’t think so, but it wasn’t a high-risk deception.”

“High-risk deception?”

Kai smiled reassuringly and sat back down. “Tradecraft, I guess.” He tried winking at her, though he’d never been good at it. Her eyes focused on the scroll, however.

“Well, I guess I should see what it says.” He broke the seal, then carefully unrolled the parchment. He wasn’t sure whether he should read it aloud or

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not, even though Siarah now knew his role. He read the message to himself silently, just in case it contained something highly sensitive.

It did. He had ten days. The travel time would be tight, depending on how fast of a horse they gave him and how much stamina it had. He was given a few contact names, along with a password. The message would go straight into the banked embers of the fireplace once he had it all memorized.

“What does it say?”

He frowned. “I have to leave, today. I’ll end up in Zarahemla, which isn’t my area, but you can’t tell anyone that—not Gideon and Ishara, not Neva, not anyone, okay? I’m sure this has something to do with the assassination. Moronihah is nervous, and he should be if you believe my, um, father.” He realized he may as well have read her the note, or most of it, at least. It also struck him that his orders had traveled with the news of the assassination, and Moronihah couldn’t have known he was just returning from the east. Lucky timing?

Siarah nodded, staring solemnly at the place where her hand had rested on his chest. “I feel it, too. Something bad is coming.”

Kai was ready to leave within the hour. He exchanged his unwashed clothes for fresh garments, packed up some hard tack, salted meats, and dried fruits, and filled a new waterskin. He cleaned and oiled his short blades, then added spear and bow to his collection of weapons. Though he would still pose as a merchant scout, he doubted anyone would question a well-armed traveler after the assassination of the chief judge.

Gideon stopped him at the door before he set off to pick up a horse from a stable code-named ‘Gate 6’ outside the western wall of the city. Kai had already said his goodbyes to Siarah, his mother, and Neva. All three had cried. Gideon didn’t. Once in a while, he was known to shed a tear or two, but not this time.

“My son—and you *are* my son—you will be in grave danger. I would take your place if I could, but I realize I can’t. Know that your mother and I will pray for you unceasingly. Stay true to your covenants. The Lord will protect you. There is a great work to be done.”

He sounded like one of the priests when he became so solemn. His words sent a shiver through Kai.

“I’ll be careful . . . Father. I promise. We’ll all get through this.”

Gideon gave him a determined smile. “Yes, we will. Thank you for that reassurance, my son. God go with you now. Send word when you can. I’m very proud of you.”

Kai embraced him, then set out on swift feet, his feelings an odd mixture of trepidation and excitement, dread and hope.