

PROLOGUE



Unpleasant laughter erupted from the throng of bodies that filled the expansive hall. Chanok was beginning to feel uncomfortable. The heat was stifling, smoke was drying his throat and the mingled smells of meat and sweat created a sickening in his stomach. Chanok loosened the neckline of his tunic and coughed, just as his host – a large, burly man with a thick dark beard, tinged with hints of red – rose from his seat and lifted his voice.

‘Adah and Tzillah, hear my words; you wives of Lamek, listen to what I say!’

The orator – Lamek himself – grabbed the waist of a woman standing near him and pulled her against his side. He spoke suggestively into her ear which made her squirm. She was a fine-looking woman. Her skin, the colour of iron-rich clay, shone in the firelight while jet-black hair, plaited into several braids, fell the length of her back. Chanok knew her as Adah, Lamek’s first wife.

His eyes darted to another woman near him, who was serving wine from a large, clay pitcher. Her hair was free and wild, bronze curls cascading around her neck, and she wore a low-cut tunic nipped in at the waist. At Lamek’s summons, Tzillah placed the pitcher down on a trestle table and threw her hands up in a gesture of exasperation.

‘Lamek, you old fiend! Leave Adah alone,’ she exclaimed. She made her way across the room, dodging the bodies slumped in various positions around it and stepping over one or two who were reclined on the floor. Raucous tittering greeted her as she did so, with several men grabbing at her ankles and almost pulling her down. Unfazed, she kicked them off or swatted them over the head, providing further entertainment for the men.

Ascending the raised platform on which Lamek stood, Tzillah reached her husband. Planting a firm kiss on his lips she allowed his spare arm to grasp her. Lamek released his first wife and encircled Tzillah in his arms before pulling her roughly in for another embrace. The room erupted in a drunken cheer at their display. However, Chanok noticed Adah standing behind them, staring at the floor in embarrassment.

‘That’s better!’ Lamek proclaimed loudly. ‘Now I have the attention of both my beautiful wives, and the rest of you despicable lot, I have an announcement to make.’

He stepped into the centre of the room, ensuring all eyes were trained on him, then lifted one arm in an oratory posture and spoke with a clarity that echoed through the hallways of the house:

Adah and Tzillah,
Hear my words,
You wives of Lamek,
Listen to what I say!
Today – this day – I killed a man merely for wounding me,
And also his boy for striking me.
If Kayin is avenged sevenfold,
Then may Lamek be avenged seventy-sevenfold!

There was a moment of shocked silence. Chanok stared aghast at Lamek. He knew his host had slipped into underhand measures in order to gain his current position in the city, but he never expected Lamek to brazenly admit to murder. Chanok’s eyes scanned the room, waiting to see how the people would react. Several of the revellers were shifting uncomfortably or muttering under their breath, but some had begun to smile, even chuckle. The murmur was escalating into acceptance. Suddenly, a prominent member of the city elders stood and raised his cup.

'To our fearless brother Lamek!' he cheered. Then, as a mob follows its master, the majority decided Lamek's announcement was hilarious and erupted into hoots, laughter and catcalls.

'May he live forever and ever be avenged!' another declared above the noise.

Pleased with the response, Lamek rewarded his audience. 'Refill the wine!' he shouted, to further cheers. His wives quickly dispersed to retrieve more from the storehouse. Lamek sauntered down the steps, into the crowd, to relay more details of his triumph.

Amidst the revelry, Chanok slipped out unnoticed. The cooler night air tickled his skin as soon as he left the main hall, giving considerable relief. Tiptoeing down some steps, he entered the dim corridor that led through the centre of Lamek's complex, trying to keep the slap of his leather sandals to a minimum. He then traversed several courtyards before reaching the guards watching at the gate.

Chanok didn't need to say a word, his instruction was intuitively understood. A guard exited and returned a moment later with a saddled creature. Mounting it, Chanok rode out of the gateway, stealing into the darkness of the night. He quietly navigated the city, passing numerous dwellings belonging to his kinsfolk which rose on either side of passageways cluttered with pots, pitchers and animal fodder.

As Chanok arrived at his own dwelling near the city gate, he hastily called an attendant, requesting a second animal. When it was brought, he hooked a rope around its face, grasping the other end in his free hand, then scratched the animal's stubble forelock. It snorted, unhappy to have been roused from its slumber, but Chanok pushed on. Once outside the city gate, he pressed his mount into a faster pace, forcing the second creature to keep up, and rode on until he reached the foot of a hillside. Then, the two cloven-hooved animals picked their way up a narrow path until the mouth of a cave appeared. Chanok dismounted, secured the beasts together and entered the cave.

Inside, the remains of a simple meal sat alongside the dying embers of a fire. The embers gave just enough glow to reveal a man and a woman lying huddled together under linen blankets and sheepskin. The man slept on his side; his head tucked into a folded arm. The other arm was draped over his wife. Chanok knelt next to the couple and gently placed his hand on the shoulder of the man below him.

'Abba,' he whispered, 'wake up.' There was a groan as he persisted in shaking his father's shoulder. 'Abba, please wake.'

Drowsily, the man turned over and squinted, trying to make out the features in the dark.

'Chanok?' he said at length, 'What are you doing here?'

'Abba, I'm sorry to wake you, but you need to come with me.'

'In the middle of the night? Why?'

As the elderly man's arm lifted from her body, his wife began to stir. She groaned and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

'Chanok!' his mother stated pleasantly, on recognising her son. 'What a lovely surprise.' She sat up and drew him into an embrace. Chanok was not a young man himself and his back, doubly stiffened from his ride, clicked as he leaned into her.

'Listen to you; you are getting old,' she chuckled, affectionately. 'Sounds like you need to eat more fish.'

Chanok laughed. Trust his mother to always be thinking about such things. She was right, though. He was nearing his seven-hundredth winter, and although time had been good to him, there was no denying he was not as sprightly as in the youth of his first few centuries.

Seeing no cause to delay the explanation of his unexpected quest, Chanok told his parents about the events that night in Lamek's house, urging them to return there with him.

'Should I know this Lamek?' his father asked.

'Lamek is the son of Methushael. He has become one of the most wealthy and influential people in the city,' Chanok replied.

'Hmm. I have no desire to visit that house, son. Methushael's people have wandered a long way from the truth. No good can come of me going there.'

'Abba, please reconsider. I believe they need to hear your story. Perhaps if they do, they shall turn from this evil.' Chanok did not want his journey to have been in vain.

'And what makes you think they shall listen to me?'

'You are the founder of our people! You may not be an elder of the city, but your word still holds sway.'

The older man sighed. Chanok knew his father had not ventured into the city for many moons, yet hoped he could see the wisdom in going now. He looked at his mother. She nodded and offered a gentle smile of encouragement.

‘Alright, I shall come,’ his father relented. ‘Do you have a mount?’

‘I have two,’ Chanok replied. ‘You may both come.’

Outside the cave, they mounted the creatures. Chanok’s mother was slight of build so swung up behind her son and wrapped her arms around his waist. They carefully descended the hill and, once on the plain, rode fast back to the city.

Arriving at the house of Lamek, the sounds of intoxicated merriment could now be heard from the outermost courtyard. The party was certainly not dying down yet. They entered through the gatehouse and surrendered their mounts then Chanok led his parents through several large archways on their way to the great hall. Stopping before the main entrance, the three huddled together for a moment, speaking quiet words into the night. Then they drew apart and walked through the passageway until they reached the steps leading to the hall.

A wolf-like creature lay there. It jumped up and growled at the newcomers. The older man recoiled in fright, but Chanok held out his hand to the animal and called its name. As soon as it recognised him, it wagged its tail and, after a brief welcome, went back to dozing on the step.

As they entered the hall, his mother’s eyes flew to one corner and she gasped. Six people were sat there, playing musical instruments. Some reeds, with holes along the length, were being blown. Others – carved wooden crescents, with strings suspended from a crossbar – were being plucked, producing a melody in harmony with that being blown. For a moment her face lit up before she caught the words being sung by the musicians. They were sensuous and lewd. In response to the music, others were dancing around the floor, barely covered by their clothing; claspng cups of wine from which they sipped as they continued their display.

‘Those are the people of Yuval. He is a gifted musician, yet he has ceased to use that gift for good things of late. His mother is Adah,’ Chanok said, indicating Lamek’s first wife. ‘She is an honest woman, but the evil of her husband seeps into her children.’

Chanok watched as his parents scanned the rest of the room. On the opposite side to the musicians the fire was still lit inside a stone circle. Suspended above it was a tall spit made of wood and pointed with hardened bronze. Hanging from one end was the upside-down head of a boar, its tongue lolling out. Its body was being carved and those around were eating its cooked flesh.

Just then, Tzillah caught sight of the newcomers and stopped in the centre of the room.

‘Well! If it isn’t The Wanderer, come to grace us with his presence at last! Lamek, witness who has entered our humble halls!’

Lamek was lounging on an impressive chair that stood on the same raised stage where he had delivered his earlier speech. A young woman – not one of his wives – was reclined on his lap, feeding him grapes. At Tzillah’s shout, he rose abruptly from his chair, throwing off the girl, and stood proud and tall in the presence of his ancestors. He began to utter words of perplexed welcome.

Chanok’s mother held back with her son, while his father walked calmly across the room towards their host. As the older man ascended the steps, his height began to dwarf that of the person in front of him. For although Lamek was of impressive physical stature, his ancestor stood a whole head taller. Despite his age, Chanok’s father had a muscular form from many years of toil and constant movement – he was a man not accustomed to rest. Strength and authority exuded from him. As he approached his grandson-many-times-removed, Lamek’s garbled greeting silenced.

Now the one they called The Wanderer turned and faced the people. The room quietened as, one by one, the revellers took in the scene before them and ceased their activities. Deflated, Lamek retreated into the shadows.

‘People of Chanok!’ The Wanderer began. ‘My son, the most senior elder of this city, has called me here tonight so that I may tell you a story. I suggest you take a comfortable seat.’