

Chapter 1: The Strange Order

The scent of fresh-cut cedar wood was usually a comfort to Caleb, but tonight, it tasted like ash in the back of his throat. Thunder rumbled, not the distant, rolling kind that promised a passing summer shower, but a low, vibrating growl that shook the sawdust off the beams of his timber yard. The sky had been the color of bruised iron for three days. No rain had fallen yet, but the air felt heavy, squeezed tight by an unseen fist. Outside in the shadowed streets of the Town of Enoch, where wickedness had long taken root like thorns among wheat, Noah and Caleb met one final time outside the gates of Caleb's sprawling lumber yard. The air was thick with the scent of fresh-cut timber and the acrid smoke of nearby forges. Torches flickered in the gathering dusk, casting long, wavering shadows across stacked logs and half-finished wagons. Noah's weathered face was solemn, etched with both sorrow and unyielding conviction, while Caleb stood rigid, his fine merchant's cloak suddenly feeling too heavy on his shoulders.

Beyond the sturdy wooden fence, a growing mob had assembled. Their voices rose in a hateful chorus that echoed off the stone walls: "Death to Noah! Death to the madman and his floating delusion!" Stones clattered against the fence. "Caleb is a traitor! He feeds the heretic while we starve!" The shouts grew louder, uglier, laced with the raw fury of a city that had long rejected righteousness. Fists shook in the torchlight. Faces twisted with rage glared through the gaps in the fence. Caleb could not help but to feel the full weight of what his association with Noah had cost him in the eyes of his own people.

Noah placed a steady hand on Caleb's arm, untroubled by the violence just beyond the gate. "The time is nearly upon us, my son," he said quietly. "The door will soon be sealed. I pray you will not be found outside when that day comes." Caleb's throat tightened as another wave of shouts crashed against them... "Traitor! Traitor!" ... but he could not look away from the old man's eyes, which held neither fear nor condemnation, only a father's aching love. Caleb slammed his ledger shut, the heavy leather thong whipping against the wood. "More?" he demanded, his voice straining to carry over the unnatural wind whistling through the yard. "You've cleared out my northern ridge, Noah. You've drained my men to the bone. I have contracts with the city elders, men who pay in solid silver, and you come asking for the last of my seasoned pitch and planks?"

Across the rough-hewn table, Noah stood motionless. He wore no jewelry, no fine linen of the merchant class, yet he commanded the room like a governor. His beard was silvered, his hands calloused deep from adze and mallet, and his eyes... Caleb hated looking into his eyes. They possessed the terrifying calm of a man who had looked past the horizon and seen the end of all things. "The elders' silver will be dust before the moon wanes, Caleb," Noah said. His voice was remarkably quiet, yet it cut straight through the rising wind. "The wood must be sealed. Inside and out. And I need every barrel of pitch you possess."

"And if I refuse?" Caleb leaned forward, planting his palms on the table. Since his first contract with Noah, Caleb has become a wealthy man, a powerful man in the valley, but right now, he feels incredibly small. "The town is already shouting. They say you're mad. They say the massive hull you're building on the dry hills is an insult to the gods of the earth. If I sell you this final shipment, the council will blacklist my family. We will starve."

Noah stepped closer, the shadows of the flickering oil lamp stretching long and distorted against the wall. He placed a heavy, weathered hand on Caleb's ledger. "If you keep the wood, you will starve anyway," Noah said softly. "The window is closing, Caleb. The ground beneath our feet is groaning. Can you not hear it?" As if on cue, a sharp, violent crack echoed from the earth below, not from the sky, but from the deep bedrock beneath the timber yard. The oil lamp slatted violently, spilling a thin line of black grease across the table. Caleb froze. His heart hammered against his ribs. It wasn't an earthquake. It felt like something was pushing from underneath, trying to break through.

"One final transaction," Noah urged, his gaze locking onto Caleb's with an intensity that felt almost physical. "The wood for your life. Load the wagons tonight. Tomorrow may be too late." Noah's words cut sharply. It was the last time Noah would come to the city of Enoch that never slept. It only paused to catch its breath before plunging deeper into its own corruption. The city of Enoch was a masterpiece of human rebellion, breathtaking in its beauty, horrifying in its depravity. It was the city of Noah. The city he once loved.

Sprawled across a fertile plain between two mighty rivers, Enoch was the crown jewel of the ancient world. Its massive walls, constructed from immense blocks of limestone and reinforced with cedar beams, rose over a hundred feet high. Watchtowers crowned with golden statues of false gods gleamed in the sunlight, visible for miles across the plains. Inside those walls lived nearly two hundred thousand souls, all descendants of Cain, thriving in a civilization that had rejected God for generations.

The city was divided into districts that perfectly reflected its moral decay. The Temple Quarter dominated the center, a sprawling complex of towering ziggurats and shrines dedicated to a pantheon of invented gods. Here, priests in blood-stained robes performed daily human sacrifices, usually infants or captured enemies, on altars slick with gore. The air was thick with the smell of burning flesh and expensive incense. Temple prostitutes, both male and female, openly plied their trade on the marble steps, their bodies adorned with gold and jewels.

The Merchant District, where Caleb's timber yard stood, was a chaotic hive of commerce. Fortunes were made and lost in a single day. Merchants cheated one another without shame. Debt slaves were publicly whipped. Women and children were sold in open markets like cattle. Luxury goods from distant lands, silks, spices, rare gemstones, and narcotics, flowed through the streets while the poor starved in the alleys.

Then there was the Pleasure Quarter, which never slept. Music, drums, and frenzied laughter echoed day and night. Men and women engaged in every form of sexual perversion imaginable, often in public view. Orgies spilled out of lavish villas into the streets. Men lay with men, women with women, and both with animals as crowds cheered them on. Strong wine and mind-altering herbs flowed freely, dulling consciences and inflaming lust. Violence was not hidden. Instead, it was celebrated.

Fighting pits operated around the clock, where professional warriors and desperate slaves fought to the death for the entertainment of the wealthy. Blood sports were so popular that parents brought their children to watch. Murder had become so common that bodies were often left in the gutters until the stray dogs and vultures had their fill. Rape was treated as a minor

offense unless the victim belonged to a powerful family. The strong devoured the weak without remorse.

At night, the city transformed into something almost demonic. Hundreds of fires lit the darkness as citizens engaged in unrestrained revelry. From the rooftops, one could hear the constant din of debauchery, screams of ecstasy and agony blending together. Philosophers in the academies openly mocked the idea of a single Creator God, teaching instead that man himself was the measure of all things. “Do what you will” became the unspoken law of the city.

Yet for all its evil, Enoch was undeniably prosperous. Grand palaces with lush gardens and fountains lined the main avenues. Engineers had built sophisticated aqueducts and sewage systems. Artisans created works of stunning beauty, golden statues, intricate jewelry, and colorful murals depicting scenes of conquest and carnal pleasure. The markets overflowed with goods from across the known world. Music, poetry, and learning flourished, though always twisted toward the service of human pride and lust. This was the city Caleb loved.

He had grown rich within its walls. He had laughed at its excesses, participated in many of them, and justified the rest. To him, Enoch wasn’t evil, it was simply life. Raw, exciting, and unapologetic. But lately, something began to change. Even Caleb could sense it. There was a growing heaviness in the air, as though the land itself was groaning under the weight of its sin. The pleasure felt increasingly hollow. The violence more pointless. The laughter carried a desperate, frantic edge.

The city had forever changed when an old man named Noah came, speaking of a coming flood that would wipe it all away. Most people laughed at him. But deep in his heart, Caleb was

beginning to wonder whether the real madness belonged to the city, or to those who still believed it could continue forever. From the wide balcony of his luxurious home, Caleb watched the nightly frenzy with a mixture of pride and detachment. Torchlight danced like fireflies across the sprawling metropolis, illuminating scenes that would have shocked earlier generations. In the central plaza, temple prostitutes, painted with kohl and scented oils, performed their sacred dances before towering idols of Baal and Asherah. Their bodies glistened with oil as the crowd roared, throwing coins and flowers at their feet. Further down the street of merchants, a violent brawl had broken out between two rival trading houses. Bronze knives flashed, men screamed, and blood pooled on the cobblestones while spectators placed bets on who would die first.

Caleb took a slow sip of his spiced wine and smiled. This was his world. Raw. Profitable. Alive. At thirty-four years old, Caleb son of Jared had risen higher than most men dared dream. His timber yard supplied the finest cedar, cypress, and oak in the entire region. He controlled the trade in pitch from the bubbling black springs to the east. Kings and high priests sent messengers to his gates. His wealth had purchased a grand house with shaded courtyards, three wives (though only Sera still truly held his heart), and four strong sons who would one day inherit his empire. He had earned every shekel.

The next morning broke hot and merciless, the sun beating down on the city like an angry god. Caleb arrived at his timber yard just after dawn, as was his custom. The massive wooden gates stood open, and the yard already hummed with activity. Two dozen workers sweated under the sun, hauling heavy planks onto ox-drawn carts. The air was thick with the sharp, clean scent of fresh-cut wood and the heavy, acrid smell of pitch. “Jathan!” Caleb called, his voice carrying across the yard. His foreman, a thick-muscled man with a scarred face, hurried over.

“Morning, master. Twelve loads going to the temple district today. They’re building another pleasure pavilion for the priests of Asherah.” Caleb nodded with satisfaction. “Double the price on the cedar. They can afford it.” He moved through the yard like a king inspecting his domain. Workers greeted him with respectful nods. Merchants waiting for orders bowed slightly. This was more than a business, it was his kingdom. He had just settled behind his large wooden table to review the morning’s accounts when the stranger entered.

It was seventy-five ago that the old man first walked through the gates with measured steps, leaning lightly on a long, worn staff. His robe was simple and dust-covered from travel, yet he carried himself with an unmistakable dignity. A long white beard reached nearly to his chest, and his eyes, clear and piercing, swept across the chaotic yard as though seeing something deeper than the stacks of timber and barrels of pitch. Jathan moved to intercept him. “State your business, grandfather. We don’t have time for beggars or preachers today. “I am not here to beg,” the old man replied, his voice calm and resonant. “I seek Caleb the timber merchant. I have a commission for him.”

Caleb set down his clay tablet and rose, brushing sawdust from his fine linen tunic. He studied the stranger carefully. There was something familiar about the man, though he couldn’t quite place it. “I am Caleb,” he said, flashing his practiced merchant smile. “What can I do for you today?” The old man met his gaze directly. “I am Noah, son of Lamech. I need timber. Vast quantities of it. Cypress for the frame, cedar for the interior, oak for reinforcement. And pitch, more pitch than you have ever sold in a single year.” Caleb raised an eyebrow, amused. Another dreamer with grand visions. He had seen many in his line of work, men who wanted floating palaces or temples to their own vanity.

“How much are we speaking of?” Caleb asked. Noah’s answer came without hesitation. “Enough to build a vessel three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high. Three decks. Many rooms and stalls. Strong enough to withstand the greatest storm the world has ever seen.” For a moment, the entire yard seemed to fall silent. Caleb stared at the old man, waiting for the joke. When none came, he threw back his head and laughed. The sound echoed across the yard, and soon several workers joined in. “You’re serious?” Caleb said, still chuckling. “That’s larger than any ship ever built. Larger than the great barges of the eastern kings. What in the name of all the gods do you need with such a monstrosity?”

Noah did not smile. “It is not a ship for sailing. It is an ark. A vessel of salvation.” Caleb’s laughter faded. Something in the old man’s tone made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. “Salvation from what?” he asked, half-mocking. Noah lifted his eyes toward the cloudless sky, as though he could see beyond the blue. When he spoke again, his voice carried a weight that silenced even the most cynical workers. “From the judgment that is coming. The Lord has seen the wickedness of man. The earth is filled with violence. Every thought of man’s heart is only evil continually. A great flood is coming, waters that will cover even the highest mountains. All life not inside the ark will be destroyed.”

A stunned silence fell over the yard. Then someone in the back laughed loudly. Another worker spat on the ground and muttered, “The old fool has finally gone mad.” Caleb forced a smile, though it felt strained. “You speak of divine judgment, old man. The gods have tolerated our ways for generations. Why destroy everything now?” Noah turned those clear, sorrowful eyes back to him. “Because the time of patience is ending. God has been merciful, but mercy has limits. The blood of the innocent cries out from the ground. The violence, the perversion, the

shedding of blood, it cannot continue.” Caleb felt a strange chill despite the blazing sun. There was no wildness in Noah’s eyes. No foaming at the mouth. Only a deep, unshakable certainty that unsettled him more than any street preacher he had ever encountered.

He crossed his arms, trying to regain control. “This ark of yours... it will be extraordinarily expensive.” “Money does not concern me,” Noah replied. “The Lord will provide everything we need. Name your price, and it shall be met.” Caleb hesitated. Every business instinct screamed that this was dangerous. Associating with Noah and his family already carried risk, the city had begun to mock and threaten them openly. But the potential profit... He extended his hand. “We have a deal, Noah. I will supply your ark.” Noah took his hand. His grip was surprisingly strong. For a long moment, he held Caleb’s gaze with those piercing eyes.

“Take heed, Caleb,” he said quietly, so only the two of them could hear. “Many hands will help build this vessel. Very few will enter it when the time comes.” Caleb pulled his hand back quickly, masking his discomfort with a confident grin. “I’m only interested in the business, old man. Not the passenger list.” Noah nodded with deep sadness, as though Caleb had given the exact answer he had expected. As the old man walked slowly out of the yard, Caleb stood motionless among the stacks of timber, watching the white-haired figure disappear down the dusty road. For the first time in many years, a small, unwelcome seed of doubt had been planted deep in his soul.

He shook his head sharply. *Madness*, he told himself firmly. *Nothing but the ramblings of a broken old man who has lived too long.* Yet as he turned back to his ledgers, Caleb couldn’t shake the image of that impossible ark rising in his mind, or the quiet power in Noah’s voice

when he spoke of waters that would swallow the world. Little did he know that this single decision would entangle his life in a divine drama far greater than profit and loss. A drama that would one day force him to choose between everything he had built... and the only hope of survival.