

ALMA
THE YOUNGER

OTHER BOOKS AND AUDIO BOOKS
BY H.B. MOORE:

Out of Jerusalem: Of Goodly Parents

Out of Jerusalem: A Light in the Wilderness

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Out of Jerusalem: Land of Inheritance

Abinadi

Alma

OTHER BOOKS PUBLISHED UNDER
HEATHER B. MOORE:

Women of the Book of Mormon: Insights and Inspirations

ALMA THE YOUNGER

a novel by

H.B. MOORE

Covenant Communications, Inc.



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PRAISE FOR H.B. MOORE'S BOOKS

“*Alma* has it all: vibrant characters, danger, spiritual challenges, and bittersweet joy. Moore has created an epic tale that’s simply impossible to put down.”

—Jason F. Wright
New York Times Bestselling Author

“. . . an exciting and faith-promoting tale—the Book of Mormon in 3-D and Technicolor.”

—Richard Cracroft
BYU Magazine

“In a pattern that has become warmly familiar, H.B. Moore crafts a page-turning yet well-researched story of the challenges that a Book of Mormon personality faces when trying to lead a colony of believers to safety, not once but twice. Alma the Elder, who begins his life in debauchery, becomes the respected adviser to a king and the leader of his church, and more. On a personal level, this man becomes the model for all of us who seek to arrest a wasted life and turn it into something grand and meaningful.”

—S. Kent Brown
Assistant Director, BYU Jerusalem Center

“*[Alma]* is an exciting and interesting exploration of the followers and enemies of Alma and how they might have been involved in and affected by what happened. Not only do they struggle to survive, but the characters love and mourn and laugh and misunderstand and grow together, or apart, as the case may be. Moore is true to what is known about that time and place, and this book offers worthy speculations of what surrounded those events.”

—Kathleen Dalton-Woodbury
Mormon Times

“H.B. Moore takes the reader on an incredible journey of a man who makes the ultimate sacrifice. *Abinadi* is a historically rich, well researched, poignant account of one of the most influential prophets in the Book of Mormon. Moore’s creativity, mixed with the heart of Mesoamerican culture, brings new insights to the influence that the prophet Abinadi had on generations to come.”

—Dian Thomas
#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

“This book is a delightful combination of careful research and getting inside an inspiring character. Although H.B. Moore disclaims being a scholar, her *Abinadi* not only lives and breathes but is authentic to the time and place in which he lived. While she paints a fuller picture of a fascinating Book of Mormon character, she stays close to the facts, as presented in that book.”

—Ann Madsen
Professor of Ancient Scripture, BYU

“*[Moore]* is adept at building suspense even in such a well-known story. Those who like scriptural stories dramatized will enjoy this one whether young or older. Even those who prefer to not mix scriptural stories with fiction will find this story will draw them in with vivid

details of the life and culture of this historical era in Mesoamerica and Moore's careful adherence to the facts of the story."

—Jennie Hansen
Meridian Magazine

"In the first three volumes of her [Out of Jerusalem] series, H.B. Moore showed that she could create a view of an ancient world that combines the best scholarship with a lively imagination. She does a fine job of walking the tricky line of faithfulness to the scripture and creative storytelling. She opened up the hearts of her characters in ways both remarkably touching and authentic. In [the] fourth and final volume she does all of that, as well as writing one of the most exciting adventure tales that I have read in a while."

—Andrew Hall, *Association of Mormon Letters*

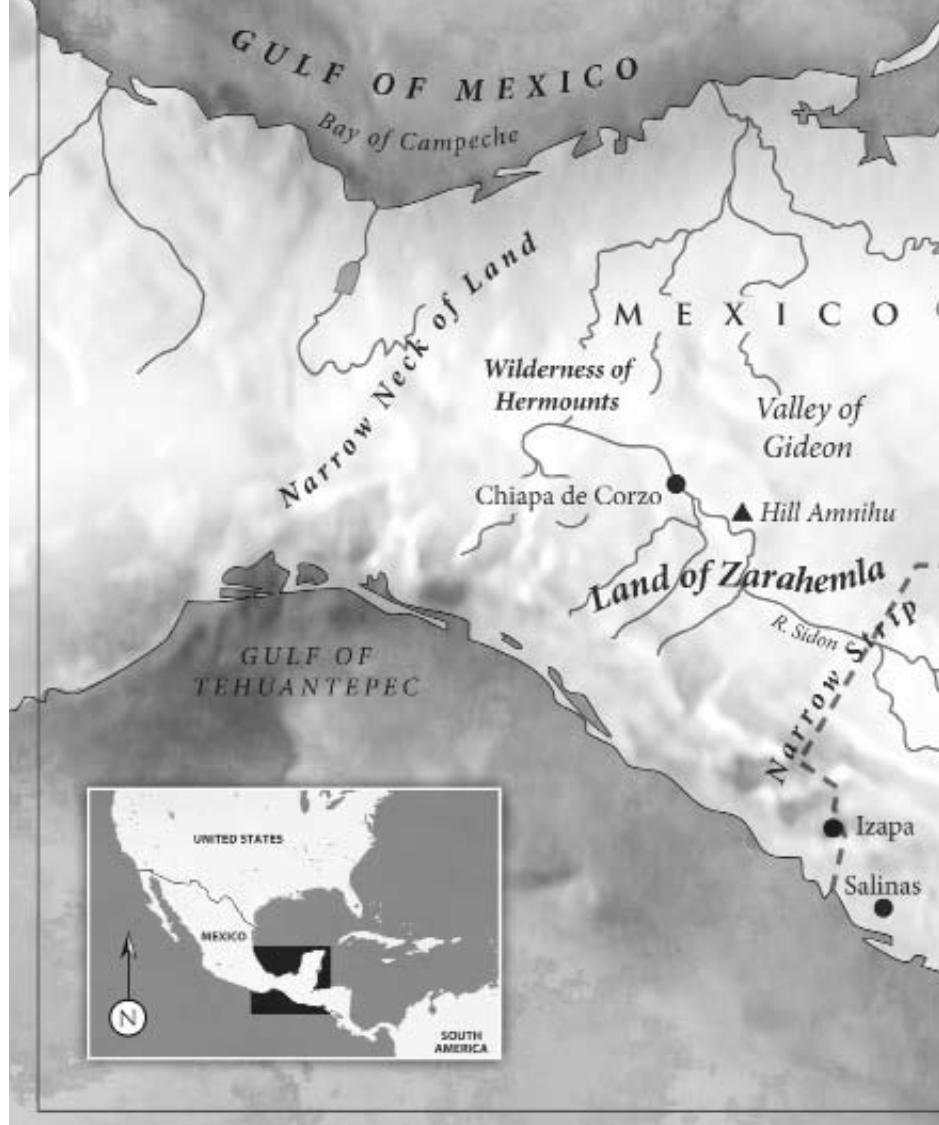


For my son, Kaelin
A mother's prayer is always heard.

MESOAMERICA

The Late Preclassic Era

300 B.C. — A.D. 250





Map © 2010 Andy Livingston



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The brainstorming of plot and character are essential ingredients before a word is typed onto a page. Preparing to write Alma the Younger's story was no exception. Part of the challenge was creating a protagonist who was also the antagonist of the story. Thanks to my parents, Kent and Gayle Brown, who answered endless questions and read early drafts of the manuscript.

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PREFACE

In the book of Mosiah, we learn that Alma the Elder has been made high priest over all of the land of Zarahemla (Mosiah 26:7–8). When he and his band of believers who had escaped the wicked leader Amulon had arrived in Zarahemla, King Mosiah was there to greet them (Mosiah 24:25), just as he welcomed Limhi, former king of the land of Nephi, and his people (Mosiah 22:14). A fantastic reunion must have taken place among friends and possibly family members.

Life for Alma and his people must have been bliss compared to the previous years of near slavery in the land of Helam. Alma and his followers are finally able to worship the Lord openly and establish His Church throughout the land with the blessing of King Mosiah. The years pass in relative peace, except for some persecution from the nonbelievers toward the members of the Church.

In spite of King Mosiah’s decree against religious persecution, his sons, along with one of Alma’s sons, choose to join the unbelievers and become a threat to the stability of the Church of God. Alma discovers that his son, Alma the Younger, has turned into a “very wicked and an idolatrous man . . . therefore he led many of the people to do after the manner of his iniquities” (Mosiah 27:8). If there was ever a time for a father to pray for his son, this was it.

The question is whether Alma the Younger knew that what he was doing was wrong. Or had he been so carefully led by Satan down the path of idolatry, and an anti-Christ pattern of belief, that he truly believed he was in the right?

Another question we might entertain is how Alma the Younger could exert so much influence over people as to lead them astray from the Church. The record tells us that he did “speak much flattery to the people” (Mosiah 27:8). He must have been a natural leader, charismatic and easily loved by people, with the power to persuade. His influence nearly toppled the Church in Zarahemla as he stole “away the hearts of the people; causing much dissension” (v 9), so his preaching was no small thing.

In studying Mosiah 26–28, I was struck with the idea that Alma the Younger was no rebellious teenager, playing pranks or skipping Sabbath meetings to go fishing or hunting. He must have been intelligent and well educated. If he was so intellectual, could this have contributed to his lack of faith or to a lack of humility to turn to the Lord like a little child? This led me to a study of the classic analogy of an anti-Christ.

Robert L. Millet gave an exemplary description of an anti-Christ: “they deny the need for Jesus Christ”; “they use flattery to win disciples”; “they accuse the brethren of teaching false doctrine”; “they have a limited view of reality”; “they have a disposition to misread and thereby misrepresent the scriptures”; and “they are sign seekers.” (See Robert L. Millet, *The Book of Mormon: Jacob Through Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy*, “Sherem the Anti-Christ,” 176–182.)

“They are sign seekers” is a powerful consideration. In discussion with several colleagues who’ve had family members and friends stray from the Church, there was a resounding theme. Their loved ones wanted “proof” or a “sign” that the Lord was real and that His Church was true. They desired intellectual and physical manifestation or they refused to believe. Also, these doubters had “all or nothing” types of personalities. I can very well see that when Alma the Younger doubted, he went to the extreme and led souls down with him. When he believed, he did just the opposite and spent the rest of his life preaching and sharing his testimony. This does not make his story one that was “happily ever after,” however. In fact, Hugh Nibley clarified that Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah “suffered the rest of their lives because of what they had done” (*Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester Two*, 153).

A final question we might ask is why the Lord saw fit to send an angel to intervene in Alma the Younger's behalf. Yes, his father and many others had been praying and fasting for him to have a change of heart. But there are many parents who pray for their errant children and angels aren't sent. This led me to believe that what Alma the Younger was doing had such grave consequences and the potential to devastate an entire nation—thus thwarting the Lord's plan—that extreme action was needed. Nibley pointed out that “throughout the Book of Mormon . . . angels only appear in times of great crisis to reverse the course of history. They turn it around” (*Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester Two*, 151).

Alma the Younger is a story of hope and redemption. It's my hope that we can learn from Alma's journey and fully embrace the Atonement in our own lives—just as Alma did.



CHARACTER CHART

Alma the Elder—High Priest in Zarahemla

Married to Maia*

Sons: Alma the Younger

Cephas*

Daughters: Bethany*

Dana*

King Mosiah—King of Zarahemla

Married to Naomi*

Sons: Ammon

Aaron

Omner

Himni

Daughter: Cassia*

Limhi—Former king of the land of Nephi

Married to Miriam*

Son: Nehem*

Daughter: Ilana*

Gideon—Legion Commander

Priests in Zarahemla

Helam

Jachin*, father of Maia*

Ben*

Abe*, son of Abinadi

Future missionaries who will serve with the sons of Mosiah

Muloki

Ammah

*Denotes fictional names/characters created by the author

CHAPTER 1

A foolish son is a grief to his father, and bitterness to her that bare him.
—Proverbs 17:25

94 BC

Alma the Elder

The pulsing of the drums vibrated the walls as Alma the Elder entered his home, frantically searching for his wife and children. “Maia!” he yelled, alarm in his voice betraying the fear in his heart. Something moved in the cooking room to his left, and he spun around. “Maia?”

She stepped out of the late afternoon shadow that stretched across the room, her trembling hands gripping the arms of their girls, Bethany and Dana. “Is it the Lamanites?” she whispered, her eyes wide with fright.

“No,” Alma almost shouted, crossing to her in three steps and enveloping his family in his arms. He buried his face against his wife’s hair, breathing deeply, trying to calm himself. “A mob has broken into the temple.”

“What?” Maia gasped and clung to him, shuddering.

But Alma drew away, staring into his wife’s dark gray eyes. “Listen to me carefully. Rebels have threatened to destroy the temple before, but now it’s happened.”

“Who is it, Alma?” Maia breathed. “Who’s leading this mob?”

“We don’t know. King Mosiah thinks it might be a former Church member or maybe a former palace guard, someone with just enough knowledge of the temple to find the weak spots in our security.” His wife nodded, but Alma hadn’t delivered all the news yet. “Threats have reached the king’s ears—threats against his family . . . and ours. We need to evacuate our property immediately.”

Maia stiffened, a horrible understanding dawning on her face. “They’ve threatened *us*?”

The girls seemed to melt behind their mother, their expressions anxious.

“Yes,” he said, trying to keep panic out of his voice. “We are to take cover at the king’s hunting lodge. Until Commander Gideon and his soldiers who are stationed at the borders arrive to offer additional defense, we are in great danger. Some of the king’s own soldiers have defected—we don’t know who to trust anymore. There’s no telling how many have switched loyalties. Two guards are outside waiting to lead us to safety. The royal family has already fled. We need to move quickly. Bring what we can carry.”

His wife’s gaze faltered, and she looked around the cooking room. “All right. Then we’ll put together some food, and the rest will be left behind,” she said as she released Alma and turned to the girls. “Go get two tunics each, one extra robe, and one favorite item.”

The girls broke from their mother and hurried to their room.

“Cephas is napping in our bed.” Maia pushed past Alma and entered the bedchamber. Alma followed, trading his indigo and silver embroidered high priest robes for a plain brown one that hung on a peg by the door.

He crossed to the platform bed where the copper curls of Cephas’s head peeked from beneath the rug that covered him. Alma pulled back the rug and touched his six-year-old son’s shoulder. “Wake up.”

Cephas’s eyes flew open. “Father!” His small arms wrapped around Alma’s neck. For a second Alma allowed himself to cradle the child’s head against his shoulder. His heart swelled, thinking of the sweet innocence of this boy, and how his older brother used to be just like this.

“Come on, son, we’re going on a hike,” Alma said.

“Can Mother come too?” Cephas asked.

Alma smiled and pulled his son close again. “Yes, Mother will come too.” He looked over at Maia, who was rifling through a small wooden chest, pulling out pieces of jewelry. “Just take the box, Maia.”

Her hands paused as she looked up at him. “I don’t need it all—just some things to pass down to the girls in case—” Her voice cut off as her mouth trembled. She bit her lower lip, turning away again.

“What’s wrong with Mother?” Cephas asked.

Alma turned to him. “Go help your sisters get ready for the hike.”

Cephas looked from his mother to his father, then nodded and scurried from the room.

Alma pulled the rug from their platform bed and spread it on the floor. “Just pile things on this. I’ll carry it.” She nodded without speaking, and Alma left the room in search of weapons. He hesitated outside of his oldest son’s room. His namesake, Alma the Younger, had left months before, after a heated argument—he was old enough to be married and living on his own but had never taken responsibility seriously. His son’s last rebellion—at least, as far as Alma knew—had been to quit his position as a temple scribe. Soon after deserting the temple position, his son had moved out of the home, leaving no word of his whereabouts.

Alma walked through his son’s doorway, seeing the bow and sheaf of arrows propped in the corner of the room. The bow had been one of his son’s prized possessions, left behind in a flurry of anger. Alma gathered up the bow and sheaf, then from a high shelf, he took down a knife with an elaborately decorated hilt—a gift from Ammon, the eldest son of King Mosiah. Ammon had a fascination with weapon-making, and Alma the Younger was the finest hunter in the land of Zarahemla.

And tonight these decorative weapons may save my family, Alma thought. He hid the knife in his waistband and hoisted the bow and quiver over his shoulder. He took a final glance about his son’s room before leaving. It felt empty—as if the room had never been occupied by a vibrant, brilliant young man—a young man who refused to believe that a Church member could rely on faith alone, a young man whose intellect was so vast he could not humble himself to ask the Lord a simple question.

Alma turned from the emptiness and left the room, dreading the position that he was in tonight with his family. When he had arrived at Zarahemla more than twenty years before, he had thought he'd never have to gather up his loved ones and run from hatred again. And now it was within the city that the hatred had festered.

"We're ready," Maia called out.

He walked into the front room, where his family stood holding separate bundles. At their feet lay a larger bundle for him to carry. Even Cephas carried a rolled up bundle. Ten-year-old Dana's angelic face was paler than usual, her gray eyes—so much like her mother's—blinking back tears. Bethany, at fourteen, had a protective arm about Dana's shoulders.

Alma's gaze moved to his wife, and emotion rocked through him. Maia knew that the bow he carried was their son's. If the rebels invaded their home, it might also be the last remaining item they'd have to remember their son by.

"What if he returns and we're gone? How will he find us?" Bethany asked, the boldness of her words hidden by her dark eyelashes that fluttered nervously.

"Your older brother has had plenty of chances to return," Maia said in a dejected tone. "He'll certainly hear of what might happen to our home, wherever he is." Her gaze met Alma's again over the head of their daughter.

"Can we leave him a scroll with a message?" Bethany asked, her eyes hopeful.

Alma shook his head. "It could fall into the wrong hands." The unending pulsing of the drums from the city brought back the sense of foreboding, and a new urgency filled him. "We must go." He reached for the bundle and swung it onto his back with a grunt. His days of hard labor were long over. Although he still spent many hours overseeing his crop workers and fields, the majority of his time was spent in the temple. This trek would be physically hard, yet he hoped it wasn't a permanent sign of things to come.

He grasped his wife's hand as they followed the girls out the door. Cephas ran ahead, only to be called back to wait for the rest. The drums were louder now, vibrating through the warm afternoon. The

thudding echoed the sick feeling in Alma's stomach. From their property they could just see the roof of the temple over the trees.

In his mind, he pictured the edifice perched on top of a western hill above King Mosiah's elegant palace. It was as if the building were set in its own grove of beauty—luxurious gardens surrounded the temple, flowers blooming along the edges of the stairs, creating a heavenly scent that reached down the hillside. But he suspected that tonight the gardens would be trampled. He hoped the priests had been able to get most of the records out of the archive. A single flaming torch could destroy the stories of their people forever.

The two guards waited by the gate of the courtyard. They nodded a silent greeting, then led the way, avoiding the wide road that led into the heart of the city. The center plaza at the foot of the palace would certainly be crowded with the mob. The guards guided them along a narrower side path that was used mostly for leading animals to market.

Suddenly Dana broke away from them. "My goat. Eli!"

Maia handed her bundle to Alma and hurried after their daughter. She reached Dana before she could get very far. "We'll be back," she said, putting her arms around Dana.

But she shook her head, the tears coming fast. "Who will feed Eli in the morning?"

Alma would have chuckled if his daughter didn't look so pitiful. Her favorite goat would have no trouble finding something to nibble on.

Reluctantly, she returned to the family, and they continued following the guards along the bumpy trail. Just before the path joined the main road that led into the city, the guards stopped. "We'll cut through the trees until we have circled the palace," one said. "There will be a lot of hill climbing once we reach the king's preserve. But we should arrive at the lodge before it's too dark for traveling."

Cephas still ran and skipped, his energy far from depleted, but the girls looked exhausted, so Alma redistributed their bundles and put more weight into his. Dana's eyes were bright with unshed tears; Bethany's lips were pursed with determination. His wife cast him a grateful glance, and they set off through the trees.

As the trees thinned, the temple came into view. It stood on the opposite side of the grand plaza, a centerpiece to the orange sun to the west. The brilliant architecture rose from the escarpment, seeming to touch the sky. Alma stopped, and the guards paused. He stared at the people who had gathered in the plaza. At least a dozen drummers had set up in front of the temple steps, pounding on their instruments in powerful unison. All three tiers of the steps were occupied by various groups, and others hovered by the sacrificial altars on the platform that surrounded the temple mount. His gaze moved to the tower that had been erected by King Benjamin at the side of the temple. Just beyond the tower was a smaller building, used to archive the priestly records—where his son had once served as a scribe.

At least the door to the records room remained shut. For now.

Northeast of the temple stood the palace, surrounded by King Mosiah's royal soldiers—at least the ones who had remained loyal. The palace seemed well protected, but the king's soldiers made no move to scatter the temple intruders—there were just too many of them. Alma knew they were waiting for Gideon and his border soldiers to arrive and offer reinforcements. The king's soldiers kept an eye on the mob in the plaza below and those above at the temple but didn't attempt to intervene or control the crowd. Alma shook his head in disbelief at the number of rebels mixed with defected soldiers milling in the plaza. There were more than he could have ever anticipated.

Maia's hand rested on his arm, pointing toward the temple. "What are they doing?"

His stomach knotted as he spied men running through the carved stone archway leading to the temple entrance, their bare heads and torsos painted with dark crimson marks—as if they were ready for war. Then his heart jolted as a man was dragged out of the temple. He was clearly a priest, wearing the indigo robes trimmed in silver embroidery that marked his temple office.

"Ben," he whispered. Ben was a master blacksmith and newly ordained priest.

Maia grabbed Cephas's hand and drew her daughters closer as they watched Ben fight fiercely against his captors, but he was outnumbered. The unbelievers forced Ben to his knees, and one of

them struck the priest on the side of his head, finally bringing him into submission.

“No,” Alma said, jerking forward. His mind raced. There was one of him, and hundreds of unbelievers—but something had to be done. Maybe he could urge the palace soldiers into action. Ben was struck again, and this time the force sent him sprawling.

Maia put a hand over Cephas’s eyes, and Bethany and Dana cried out and clung to their mother.

Alma turned to the guards. “Take them to the king’s lodge. I’ll meet you there.”

“No, Alma,” Maia said, and Dana started to cry.

He met his wife’s gaze, feeling her fear pierce him straight through.

“Hurry,” he said, then looked at the guards. “Keep them safe.”

Maia backed away, pulling Cephas and the girls with her. “Please Alma, come with us.”

“I can’t,” he said in a pained voice, watching his family leave with the guards. When they had disappeared into the thick of the trees, he tore his gaze from the last glimpse of his family to look at the temple mount.

Ben had rolled over, and one of the men kicked him in the side.

For an instant Alma couldn’t move, his gaze locked on the horror before him. His head throbbed as the drums seemed to grow louder, faster, matching the rhythm of his pounding heart. No man deserved this treatment, especially Ben. He was no criminal facing his fate. Ben was a man who had been orphaned as a child, stood up to a wicked king, suffered wrongful imprisonment, traveled the length of a country with Alma, been forced into servitude by the enemy, and . . .

Now several men were on top of Ben. *They’re tying him up.*

Memories flashed through Alma’s mind—prisoners tied up, prisoners killed for little more than a small infraction, prisoners beaten to death with flaming sticks . . . burned alive.

Like Abinadi.

Not again . . . Something snapped in Alma’s mind. It didn’t matter that he was armed with only a knife and a few arrows. He was not a soldier commissioned to protect an empty palace, but the protector of his people as the leader who delivered them from the hands of King Noah and Amulon.

Alma started running toward the plaza.

Withdrawing the knife at his waistband, he pushed through the last of the brush, his eyes focused on the limestone platform at the top of the temple steps.

His feet hit the hard earth of the plaza, and he jostled his way through the crowd. It parted, letting him through, as if the men were curious to see what this madman would do.

Alma kept the knife low and angled downward; he didn't want anyone to know his plan before he reached Ben. He sidestepped the rebels on the steps leading to the temple. His legs burned as he leapt up the stairs, but he ignored the deep ache, focusing on the laughing men who had started to kick Ben again.

A man moved in front of him, and a fist slammed into Alma's stomach. He reeled back. Losing his balance, he stumbled backwards, his hip then shoulder crashing against the stairs. He slid down to the base. In the fall, he'd lost hold of his knife. The rebels buzzed around him, but it was difficult to understand what anyone was talking about. Alma rolled over and moved to his knees. His shoulder pulsed with pain, and his left hand was badly scraped.

He scrambled to his feet again, scouring the ground for the fallen knife. He wiped at his nose, coming away with blood on his hand. He turned, scanning the stairs to see if the knife had tumbled down, but the moving feet made it impossible to see much. A few men gave him curious looks, yet no one asked him questions.

Alma took a deep breath and turned toward the steps. As he started to climb, he noticed stone idols perched on the top platform. They were in the form of a woman, a warrior woman. Before he could guess which pagan goddess the statue was, a hand clamped down on his shoulder, and a large man moved in front of him. "You didn't learn your lesson the first time? Where's your armband?"

Alma looked the man over, noticing the red leather armband with the imprint of a half-moon. Was this their leader? He certainly looked ferocious enough. The man's dark hair was long and filthy, and his skin and robe reeked of spoiled wine.

"No armband, no access to the temple," the man growled.

The increasing weight of the man's hand on his shoulder caused Alma to stagger down a step. "I want to free that man up there—the man wearing the blue robes."

"The king's priest?" The man's eyes narrowed. "You know him?"

"He's done nothing to you. I'll give you whatever you want."

The man threw his head back and laughed. Then he sobered and glared at Alma. "I don't want your silver, old man. I'm afraid it's too late to help him. Maybe you'd like to join him, though?" His grip tightened on Alma's shoulder, and he leaned forward. "You can stay in the plaza and watch the ceremony, but if you try to step on temple steps again, I won't be so kind."

Alma took another step down, reaching ground level. His gaze swept upward, seeing the red leather bands worn by the men surrounding the temple. They no longer seemed to be a random crowd milling about looking for trouble, but were organized in groups of twelve. Each group formed two lines, some stationary, watching over the crowd, others walking in unison along the limestone platform. The men surrounding Ben were also an even twelve. He had stopped moving. Alma's stomach tightened, and bile rose in his throat. He had to get past these men and reach Ben before it was too late.

The crowd quieted, and the drums dimmed to a soft rumble. Alma looked around him, then followed their upturned gazes. Someone walked out of the temple toward the tower. He wore a deep scarlet robe with a hood, and the unified hush that had fallen over the crowd told Alma that this tall man was their leader. His mere presence seemed to command attention without a word.

The leader climbed the ladder, and eleven other robed men, all wearing matching scarlet hoods, exited the temple and formed a line in front of the tower. The sun had sunk behind the temple mount, casting its brilliant orange and yellow across the gardens, turning them from green to golden. Darkness would quickly follow, and Alma knew he was not safe among these rebels, but still he could not move.

This is the leader of the opposition, he realized. The man who has incited this rebellion and those all over the city over the past few weeks. Alma's throat constricted as the leader reached the top of the tower. This man dared to preach from the very place that King Benjamin,

beloved former king of Zarahemla, had uttered his final blessings upon the people of the Church. This man defiled the tower with his very presence. He raised a hand and the drums silenced at last, creating an eerie quiet.

“Greetings,” the leader’s voice bellowed out over the crowd. “Tonight is the first step we take in reclaiming what we have lost!” His voice carried well across the plaza.

An unexpected chill spread through Alma’s entire body as he shuffled against the crowd to get a better look at the man at the top of the tower. He recognized that voice. *It can’t be.*

A shout went up among the crowd, then the leader raised both hands for silence, and the noise abruptly died. “Tonight marks a new beginning—one that allows every man to choose for himself!”

The crowd responded with shouts and cheers again, but Alma had stilled, his eyes locked on the red figure above. He knew that voice, had heard it every day for twenty-one years, each inflection and tone etched into his soul.

No! It’s impossible.

The crowd cheered wildly at something the leader had shouted. The man raised his arms again, and his hood slipped from his head.

Alma froze. My son.

Even as the realization tumbled into his mind, Alma couldn’t grasp it. His own son . . . the leader of the revolt to bring down the Lord’s Church. His mind argued with his heart, but there was no doubt as he gazed at the man at the top of the tower. His son had shorn his thick wavy hair, but the chiseled face was the same. Nausea rocked through Alma. His heart felt as if it would explode. But he kept his eyes focused as dread flooded his soul, his hands clenching into fists until his fingernails broke the skin of his palms.

His son was grinning, basking in the mob’s ecstatic yelling. The yelling formed into a chant until hundreds of people were chanting the same words. “Save us! Save us!”

Alma spun, looking about wildly. What did they mean? He turned back to the tower; his son had his hands clasped together, head bowed.

Then his son raised his head and held up a single hand. The crowd's shouting faded. "Your cries have been heard. Tonight we will sacrifice the old church upon the altar of the new church—*our* church—the Church of Liberty." He pointed to the steps as the crowd hushed further.

Alma looked to where the men surrounding Ben had moved aside, and the scarlet-robed men started to walk toward the prostrate figure. Four of the men lifted Ben, then carried him toward the tower. The drums started up again as the crowd chanted, "Save us! Save us!"

With horror, Alma watched the robed men carry Ben to the sacrificial altar.

Alma's knees buckled as he gasped for breath. *They can't. They won't.*

"No!" Alma cried out, pushing through the frenzied crowd. The drums kept beating, drowning out his voice, and the robed men continued tying Ben to the altar as Alma plowed his way to the temple steps. He leapt up them, and no one tried to stop him this time. He was almost to the top when he was sure his son had spotted him. They locked gazes, and for an instant, Alma thought his son would come to his senses and abandon the sacrifice, but his eyes were cold, dead.

Then a man in a scarlet robe blocked Alma's way. He wore the crimson hood, his face shadowed.

But Alma recognized him. *The king's oldest son—what is he doing here? Why isn't he with his family at the hunting lodge?* "Ammon?"

"Sorry, old man," Ammon said, then shoved Alma backward down the stairs.



CHAPTER 2

*Honor thy father and thy mother:
that thy days may be long upon the land which the
Lord thy God giveth thee.
—Exodus 20:12*

THREE MONTHS EARLIER

Alma the Younger

The leaves above Alma shuddered as if in anticipation of the death of the deer that stood three dozen paces down the ridge.

“You’ll lose control if you take the downhill shot,” Aaron whispered.

“Shh! If anyone can hit it, Alma the *Younger* can,” Ammon said in a hushed, teasing voice.

A smile pulled at Alma’s face, but he kept his aim steady as he slowly pulled back on the already taut string of the steel bow. Every chance Ammon had, he made fun of Alma’s “younger” title. He’d been called that since birth, since his own father was named Alma too, but only adults referred to him as the younger one.

The surge of adrenaline in Alma’s chest told him that he’d pinpointed the target and it was time to release. He spent another two breaths rechecking the measure, then fired the arrow. The soft twang of the bow sounded in his ear and seemed to alert the animal. The deer moved a fraction before the arrow hit, but instead of piercing its heart, the arrow bedded into the upper chest, and the deer bolted.

Alma leapt to his feet and burst out of the line of trees.

“Ha!” Aaron called after him. “I knew you’d miss!”

At a half-run, half-stumble, Alma ignored the jibe and made his way down the steep ridge, trying to keep from tumbling.

The brothers plunged after him. Alma could hear their bickering as he ran ahead, trying to keep the deer in sight.

“It wasn’t his aim, it was the bow,” Ammon said with frustration. “Not finely crafted. I knew that merchant was telling us a story—”

“Alma missed the other two deer we saw earlier too,” came Aaron’s panting voice.

“Because you couldn’t keep quiet . . .” Ammon started to say.

Alma tuned out the brothers. He had a deer to track. Ahead, the animal disappeared into the thick foliage. He was losing ground already. When he reached the spot where the deer had been hit, Alma was out of breath, but he smiled. Dark spots of blood colored the ground, creating a scant but readable trail. Now it was just a matter of time before the deer collapsed. By the position of the sun, Alma still had a good hour of daylight left in which to follow. No longer worried about startling beasts, he called back to his friends, “You better keep up, or you’ll miss your supper!”

A whooping shout answered; the brothers ran faster and caught up with Alma, shoving each other in the process. Alma shook his head—they never seemed to stop, probably even fought in their sleep. “Let’s go!” he said and started running again, balancing the bow in one hand.

Ammon, the oldest brother, kept pace with Alma quite easily. At twenty-three Ammon was two years older and was also the more logical of the two brothers—having been trained for the kingship since birth—although he let his unruly temper get the best of him sometimes. His stride matched Alma’s as they wove in and out of trees pursuing the deer.

Aaron lagged behind but not due to lack of strength. He was tall and lanky and, compared to the other two, not as tough of a fighter, yet he made up for it in intelligence and determination.

Alma glanced over at Ammon, seeing the perspiration soaking his close-cropped hair and the band of red-dyed leather he always wore around his head. “Tired?”

“Never,” Ammon said with a huff and pushed a little faster. Soon he pulled ahead.

“Wait for me,” Alma said, “or you’ll lose the trail.”

“You’re not the only one who can track a deer,” Ammon said. “Besides, that long hair of yours is getting in my way.”

“You better watch out, or you’ll trip and fall on those thirty knives you’re carrying—”

“Two! I only have two with me,” Ammon called back.

Alma laughed. He knew Ammon was just envious since he had to keep his own hair short—as princes, the brothers had to conform to even stricter rules than Alma. His hair was just to his shoulders, falling in dark waves, yet it was “too wild,” according to his father. But that was the least of his and his father’s differences.

The men came to a meadow, and all three slowed. “The blood trail is heavier here,” Alma said, pointing at the ground. They started walking the tree line, looking for more signs of blood.

“Six knives,” Aaron said in a mocking voice. “He carries at least six at all times, just like a little boy with his collection of rocks and sticks.”

Ammon’s face was dark red. “Tell my brother to shut his mouth before I use one of my knives on him.”

Alma glared at Aaron, who raised his hands in frustration. “What?” Aaron huffed. “Why do I always have to be the one to back down first? You’re older than me.”

“He’s right,” Alma wheezed, nodding to Ammon. “Both of you need to cool down. We’re already in trouble for stealing the turkeys last week.” The three of them had traded a couple of the king’s turkeys for some pulque, a very potent agave wine. “And now we’re hunting illegally on the king’s grounds.”

“Well, I say these are *my* grounds,” Ammon said. “I’m heir to the throne, after all.” He threw his brother a superior look.

“That is, if I don’t put a snake in your bed some night, *Your Majesty*,” Aaron said, his voice a sneer. “The people like me better anyway.”

Ammon stopped and blocked his brother, crossing his thick arms over his chest. “Is that a threat?”

Aaron stepped closer and narrowed his eyes. “Do you want it to be?”

Alma put a hand on both brothers’ shoulders. “That’s enough,” he growled. “If you don’t stop now, both of you will be sorry. Next time, I’m bringing your younger brothers. At least Omner and Himni know how to stay quiet.” He turned away with a disgusted shake of his head. “Come on.” Settling into a brisk walk along the edge of the meadow, he kept his eyes trained to the ground. A moment later, he heard the unmistakable tread of footsteps behind him. Their voices had fallen silent—blessed silence.

Alma had grown up in Zarahemla with the sons of King Mosiah. The two oldest, Ammon and Aaron, were as close as brothers to him, even closer than his own siblings. But some days, like today, they grated on his nerves. Today’s hunt had taken much longer than it should have because the brothers, with their incessant arguing, had scared away the first two deer. *Spoiled* is what they were. They’d never had to work for their food, so hunting was a game to them.

Not that I’ve really ever had to go hungry either, Alma thought, but shook the idea away before it could fester. He hadn’t gone hungry as long as he never stepped out of line. His parents gave him plenty of hard-labor chores during his youth and even sent him to work in the fields with the commoners. He could hear his father’s rebuke right now: “Don’t call them commoners. All men are equal in God’s eyes.”

Casting a quick glance behind at the princes, Alma knew that all men weren’t equal, so how could his father make that claim? If God viewed all men as equal, then why were there so many divisions in society?

Not all men lived in a palace like the royalty with servants preparing food and the best masters brought in for lessons and discussions on politics, art, law, and commerce.

All men didn’t wake up in beds of luxurious fur like the aristocrats, surrounded by sturdy stone walls. All men didn’t wear jewels at their throats and on their fingers or carry daggers made of the finest obsidian like the successful merchants.

No, his father was wrong. There were commoners, and there were aristocrats, and they were not the least bit equal. A child born into a

poor family had no choice but to remain poor. A woman could only marry a man her own rank. The classes in society stayed separate no matter how much the Church leaders preached equality.

The problem was that he had no one to discuss it with—except for his friends, who were locked into a confining lifestyle just as he was. *Don't question*, Alma had been told. A good debate about a religious concept ignited the fire in his father's eyes more quickly than a single flame held against a dried maize stalk.

The blood trail thickened, and Alma turned to alert the brothers. They both nodded, their expressions saying they understood. The men moved into the trees, and Alma held up his hand for silence. The sound of snapping twigs reached them, and about a dozen paces away at the edge of the meadow, the deer staggered out. Its legs crumpled beneath its weight, and the animal sank to the ground, its ribcage heaving up and down.

"It's still alive," Ammon whispered.

The men waited a few more minutes, making sure the animal didn't try to get up to flee or to defend itself. Alma pulled his knife from his waistband and crept to the brown, shuddering creature. In a single swift action, he slit the deer's throat and put an end to its suffering.

"Bravo!" Ammon clapped. "Supper!"

Aaron snorted as he looked down on the bleeding animal. "There's a whole spread of delicacies waiting for us at the palace."

Both Alma and Ammon started laughing.

"What fun is that? Why would you trade the wild for the tame?" Alma said. "How will you lead a whole city of commoners when you don't even know what it's like to be one?"

"That's what my advisers will be for," Aaron said.

"Hmm," Ammon said. "I guess you'll have to kill off *me* and *my* advisers before you can achieve your precious destiny." Ammon turned to Alma. "And you call *me* spoiled? At least I can get my hands dirty." He held them up to prove his point.

Ammon grinned and started stripping off his outer robe. From his waistband he withdrew not one, but two knives, each with jeweled hilts. Another benefit of being royalty. "I made them myself."

Alma was impressed. "Let me see them." He took both knives and turned one over in his hand. The steel hilt was smooth and elegantly curved. The obsidian blades were thinner and sharper than he'd ever seen.

"I put the steel through a second smelting process. That made the hilt smoother and the blades thinner without breaking them," Ammon said.

"Quiet!" Aaron said.

"You're just envious," Ammon said, anger in his voice. "The only thing you can do with your pretty hands is—"

"Shh!" Alma said, hearing a low growl coming from just beyond the deer. Unless the deer's spirit sounded like a jaguar, they had some competition for their supper.

Ammon's eyes widened, and he yanked one of the knives from Alma's hands. "To the trees," he hissed.

The three men moved as a cohesive unit to the tree line and crouched to watch. Another low growl filled the clearing. Alma could almost feel the excitement emanating from Ammon. "We can't let it get the deer," Ammon whispered.

Aaron shushed his brother again.

"Let's wait to see how big it is first," Alma said. He'd killed jaguars before, but with an arrow from a distance, not one that could see him before an attack.

A black speckled head appeared through the trees on the other side of the meadow, close to the deer. It looked young, maybe two years old. Alma reached for his bow, then carefully nocked an arrow. The jaguar moved toward the deer, looking around as if he were confused at the various scents. Alma kept his arrow trained on the large cat's neck. It would be harder to kill a moving target, but he wanted to hit the beast before it touched the deer.

He glanced at Ammon who was gripping a knife in his hand. One signal and the prince would probably try to single-handedly wrestle the cat to the ground.

The jaguar walked past the deer, then turned around, sniffing the air. *It knows we're here*, Alma thought, his pulse hammering. He made the adjustment with his bow. Then he noticed the cat's sagging belly.

A nursing female. As he held his position, sweat began to bead along his forehead, and he relaxed his hands.

“Take it,” Ammon whispered.

The jaguar turned its head toward their hiding place.

“Now!” Ammon whispered louder. “It’s either him or us.”

“*Her*,” Alma corrected, lowering the bow. Ammon was at his side instantly, jerking the bow from him and taking aim. The movement warned the cat, and it retreated a few steps until it was standing behind the deer. Ammon released the arrow—too fast, without careful precision as Alma would have done. The arrow hit the deer, and the jaguar bolted.

Ammon turned to Alma and stared at him in disbelief. “Why did you let it go? You had him.”

“*Her*,” Alma repeated. “A nursing female. Did you see how her belly sagged with milk?” He looked to Aaron for support. The prince just shook his head and started for the clearing.

Ammon threw the bow to the ground at Alma’s feet. “This thing is nothing but bad luck.” He turned his back to Alma and followed after his brother. Over his shoulder he called out, “I can’t believe you were afraid to shoot it. Could have had a nice fur cape to impress the women with.”

“I don’t need a jaguar coat to impress women with,” Alma retorted. But inside he was embarrassed. He’d gone soft over a female cat. If this story got back to their other friends . . . he had to make up for it somehow. He left the shade of the trees and hurried to catch the brothers. “I’ll clean the deer, and you both get the fire ready.”

Aaron turned, squinting at him in the fading light. “The smoke will attract too much attention. Someone will spot us.”

“What? Are you scared now?” Alma said. “I thought this was *your* land. We shot it, and we should be able to cook it where and when we want to. Just because this is the king’s land doesn’t mean he should get a share. He had nothing to do with the hunt.” He hesitated, looking from Aaron to Ammon. “We’re still together on this, right?”

Ammon gave a half-nod. “I’m just glad we’re fast runners.”

Alma grinned. “Get the wood.” He borrowed one of Ammon’s knives, then set to work cleaning the deer. He ignored the proper

order of preserving the best parts for the temple priests—there were no priests hovering over him here. He'd dry and preserve those parts for himself, later. He didn't want to beg food from the princes or return to his parents' home. Besides, he'd eaten without following all of the rules many times and nothing had happened to him yet. That was one of the questions his father didn't seem to be able to answer, other than it was God's will. What did God's will have to do with preparing supper?

When the fire was laid, Ammon helped Alma finish cleaning the deer. Alma filleted several pieces to be cooked over the fire. Aaron paced nervously, as if watching for a king's guard to appear at any moment.

Alma placed the filets on the rocks next to the fire. "I'm going to find a place to wash," he said.

"I'll come too," Ammon said.

The two of them left Aaron behind to watch the fire, and they set off downhill. "Let's go to the pond just below here," Ammon said, shaking his head. "I still can't believe you let that jaguar go. Since when do you care whether it's male or female?"

Alma shrugged. "It was a mother, and we want her babies to grow up, right? More coats for us later."

Ammon laughed, slapping Alma's back. "You're right. You should have been born a prince. You're far smarter than both of us—just don't tell *Aaron* that."

"Don't tell my father, either," Alma said in a quiet voice. "I'm just a lowly scribe to him."

"Have you talked to him lately?"

"Not for a couple of weeks," Alma said. "Every time I show up, he has a long list of complaints. He wants me to work from sun up to sun down copying manuscripts in a cell-like room. I'll be gray and bent over with age before I'm able to make my living. The only one I really feel sorry for is my mother, but she's obviously taken my father's side."

"At least you have a choice," Ammon said.

"A choice? How? My father told me that I had to live by his rules if I stay in his house. There's no choice in that. So I left. Hunting feeds me and brings a little extra income to improve my hut."

“You can stay with me if you want,” Ammon said.

“Sure. How are you going to sneak the vagrant son of the high priest into the palace?”

“You wouldn’t be the first person I’ve sneaked in,” Ammon said.

“I enjoy living in a village of idol-worshippers. Life is much more interesting. Besides, it’s the last place my father would look.”

Ammon shook his head.

Alma smiled, then stopped walking, listening. “Did you hear something?”

“Is it back?” Ammon asked, reaching for his knife.

“No—not a jaguar—someone’s laughing.”

“Maybe it’s Aaron.”

The high-pitched laughter sounded again.

“Unless Aaron’s laughing to himself like a girl, there’s someone else at the pond.”

They slowed their pace to stay quiet. Within minutes, they could see the pond, the low moon reflecting off the dark water.

“Oh!” Alma said, too surprised to whisper. Two girls . . . women . . . were wading along the shoreline, their robes hiked up to their knees. He felt a quick stab of warmth as he recognized the taller one.

“Hey,” Ammon said. “What’s my sister doing here?”

Cassia. Alma started to backtrack, his heart pounding even harder than when he’d faced the jaguar. “Don’t let them see us like this—we’re covered in blood.”

“Good idea,” Ammon said as they crept to a group of trees.

Laughter floated in their direction again.

“Who’s the other one?” Alma asked.

“Aaron’s betrothed, Ilana. The daughter of Limhi,” Ammon said.

Alma peered at both the women. Ilana was shorter and looked quite a bit softer and more shapely than Cassia—but then again, Cassia was practically still a girl. Practically. They’d been friends until about two years before. Around the time Cassia turned sixteen, her father forbade her from spending time with him—another wrongful injustice. They’d grown up as playmates, all four of them: the brothers, Cassia, and Alma.

“Is Ilana the one who broke down and cried when she found out she was to marry you?” Alma asked, trying to hold back a laugh.

Ammon punched him in the arm. “It wasn’t like that. She thought Aaron was the oldest, and when she discovered I was, she was confused . . . and quite emotional.”

“So, the second brother gets married before the crown prince? I’m surprised your father, the supreme rule-maker, would allow any sort of error,” Alma said.

“There was already an agreement for Ilana to marry me. So when she requested to marry Aaron instead, my parents couldn’t very well back out and maintain their good relationship with her father.”

Alma shook his head. “But what woman in Zarahemla doesn’t know the difference between you and Aaron? Yes, you are both annoying, but you don’t look much alike.”

“Is that a compliment?” Ammon asked, his eyes glinting in the dark.

“Not really,” Alma said. “But you can take it as one.”

“Only if you admit I am the more handsome one.”

“Oh no. I’ll admit nothing. I’ll let the poor sap of a girl who has to marry you pay the compliments. Hopefully she won’t be a crier like Ilana.”

Ammon elbowed Alma in the ribs, and Alma sprawled on the ground with a moan. “That really hurt!”

“Try seeing your ‘used-to-be-betrothed’ around the palace every day. Ilana came a whole month before the wedding to live in the palace,” Ammon said, shaking his head in disgust. “Aaron isn’t supposed to officially spend time with her until the welcoming ceremony tomorrow night.”

“And has he?” Alma said.

“What do you think?”

Alma chuckled quietly. Aaron’s sense of entitlement to everything and anything in Zarahemla would have propelled him to arrange secret meetings with his wife-to-be. Especially one who had chosen him over the crown prince. “So what does he think of her?”

“Oh, he likes her well enough,” Ammon said. “He’s keeps hinting that he’s glad he is marrying before me. I don’t know why. He won’t

be able to spend as much time with us anymore—he'll have to spend time with his *wife*." He started laughing.

Alma nodded absently, no longer paying attention to Ammon. He watched the two women leave the shoreline and walk along a path that led back to the palace. They had linked arms and conversation and laughter seemed to flow easily between them. Cassia was definitely extending the warm welcome to her new sister-in-law. A deep jab of loneliness flooded through Alma, but he shook it off as he stood. He'd grown up; Cassia had grown up. Things had changed. He couldn't very well show up at her palace door and ask her to have an archery contest like they used to.

"We'd better clean up and hurry back to eat—assuming Aaron hasn't absconded with supper."



CHAPTER 3

And I, the Lord God, said . . . that it was not good that the man should be alone. . . .

—Moses 3:18

Alma the Younger

Alma watched the flames dwindle to their last orange coals. He was tired and was reluctant to douse the fire. “Let’s just sleep here,” he said with a big yawn.

Next to him, Ammon stirred, his eyes glazed over. “Did you say something?”

“Yeah—look at Aaron,” Alma said.

Ammon looked over at his brother. “Sleeping like a babe.” He chuckled quietly. “Should we leave him?”

“Not if we want him to ever do anything with us again,” Alma said, stifling another yawn. The night had grown cool, and he moved slightly closer to the dying fire. “You two can return to the palace—I’m staying here tonight.”

“When are you going to let us see your hut?” Ammon said.

“As soon as I get it fixed up.”

“I wish I had my own place,” Ammon said in a quiet voice.

Alma rubbed his eyes. “You have a whole palace.”

“Yes, and I never get a moment alone,” Ammon said. “Tomorrow morning at dawn, my mother will be in my room—my private quarters that is—telling me to get dressed for the ordination.”

“You’re going through with it?”

Ammon shrugged. "It's all to present an image to the city. I don't know anything about being a priest—you know more than I do. I still don't know how you got out of your ordination."

Alma waved his hands toward the fire. "That's why I'm out here, eating over a fire. Do you think my father would allow me to exist beneath his roof for very long—one who embarrassed him at every turn?" He pulled his knees to his chest and stared at the glowing wood. "It's your duty. You'll be king someday."

"But you don't seem to care about duty. You're out here, free, doing what you want."

Alma grinned. "There are some benefits to being cast out of your home."

"You are the bravest man I know," Ammon said, his tone reverent.

"Who's the bravest man?" a voice chimed in. Aaron pushed up on his elbow, staring at the two with bleary eyes.

"Alma," Ammon said. He turned back to Alma. "You've stood up to one of the most powerful leaders in Zarahemla—what's more, your father may be more powerful than mine. The king goes to your father for many of his questions."

"The king has given my father too much power, in my opinion," Alma said. "My father not only oversees the Church, but hands down civic judgements to the people."

"Some of the other priests do that as well," Ammon said. "It gives my father more time to attend to other matters."

"Agreed. But the line between religion and government is too thin. Why should an unbeliever be judged by a Church leader?" Alma said in a bitter voice. "Although I suppose it gives my father something more to do, and he *loves* to stay busy. When he's not preaching or condemning those who aren't in church each Sabbath, he can preach to your father. Sometimes I think my father believes he *is* the Christ he's always preaching about, and one of these days, he'll say to the people: *Surprise, it's really me. Now bow down and worship me.*"

Ammon laughed. "That sounds like blasphemy."

"Yeah," Aaron said, sitting up and scratching his head. "Blasphemy."

"It's not blasphemy if there's no Christ," Alma said.

The brothers were quiet for a moment.

“Do you think there’s no Christ?” Ammon finally asked.

“Have either of *you* ever seen God?” Alma said.

Both brothers shook their heads.

“So how can you blaspheme against someone who’s not real?”

Alma picked up a few twigs lying next to him and tossed them into the fire. “All my life, I’ve listened to my parents preach—done what they have told me to—”

“Blasphemy again and definitely lying,” Ammon cut in with a laugh.

“All right,” Alma said. “But until recently, I’ve done things their way. And I’ve never seen any proof that what they are saying is true. I’m a reasonable man, and I know the value of a good deer carcass. It’s straightforward. You bring deer meat to the market, and you sell it for a certain price. You can see the meat, and you can see the silver onties.” Alma picked up a nearby stick and held it in the air, as if illustrating his point. “Preaching of Christ, a god who hasn’t even been born, and the necessity to follow all of these laws is a ploy parents use on their children to get them to do what they want.” He paused, snapping the stick. “Show me Christ, and I’ll believe.”

“Has your father said he’s seen Christ?” Aaron asked, fully alert now.

Alma lifted a shoulder. “Some of the old stories are filled with claims that he heard God’s voice. I guess that keeps King Mosiah coming to him, but *I’ve* never heard God say anything.”

“Neither have I,” Aaron said. “I think God ignores most of us.”

“*All* of us,” Alma said. “Isn’t it strange that those who have the most power claim some special relationship with God? Maybe that’s how they get their power in the first place.”

“But why would so many people believe in the Church?” Ammon asked, his eyes bright.

“People want to believe in something, and they want someone to tell them what to do,” Alma said. “It takes away the responsibility of making their own decisions. They are like little children, too frightened to go out on their own and ask questions.” He looked from one brother to the next. “But I’m not afraid.” His eyes narrowed as he focused on Ammon. “Tomorrow they’ll ordain you a priest. Can you

honestly tell me you believe that what they are doing is right for you? Are you ready to be a priest in the temple? Talk in hushed whispers all day long, wear those long, stifling robes, and give up all of this freedom?" He waved his arms at the trees above them.

Ammon's gaze dropped, and he scraped his foot in the dirt. "No," he said in a quiet voice.

"What did you say?" Alma asked.

"No!" Ammon looked straight at Alma. "I don't want to be a priest. I don't want to be who they want me to be. I want to make my own decisions."

Alma folded his arms, nodding, then looked over at Aaron. "What about you? Are you ready to marry Ilana because your parents want you to?"

Aaron looked from Ammon to Alma, his gaze wary. "What does that have to do with Ammon becoming a priest?"

Alma burst out laughing. "I'm teasing. If you're happy with Ilana, that's all that matters."

A look of relief crossed Aaron's face. "Good tidings, because I wouldn't mind being married to her. But even if the two of you didn't approve, I wouldn't care."

"Am I supposed to believe that?" Alma said, exchanging a knowing grin with Ammon.

Aaron's face reddened and he leapt to his feet, pouncing on his brother, wrestling him to the ground.

Alma leaned back on his elbows, laughing as the two brothers scrabbled together, and the dwindling fire sent a few last sparks shooting into the dark sky.

Life is good out here, he thought. In fact, he wondered if it had ever been better.

* * *

Cassia

Cassia hugged Ilana at the doorway of her bedchamber. *It is going to be wonderful to have a sister*. Not that she could complain about her

childhood, but having four brothers, especially ones like hers, was not always the sweet side of honey.

“Thank you for showing me the pond,” Ilana said, blinking her long, dark lashes.

Normally Cassia might have felt a pang of envy at Ilana’s natural beauty, but there was not a mean thought in Ilana’s whole body, and Cassia could never hold anything against the woman.

“You’re welcome,” Cassia said. “Tomorrow I’ll show you the cooking rooms. They’ve been renovated.”

Ilana arched a fine brow. “That would be wonderful.”

“Until tomorrow then.” She bade goodnight and left her soon-to-be sister. She knew Ilana wasn’t interested in cooking like Cassia was, but Ilana was just the type of person to be gracious no matter what she was doing. Cassia hummed as she walked the corridor to her own room, thinking of how fortunate she was to have such a pleasing sister-in-law—one with a ready laugh and a mild temper—nothing like her rambunctious brothers. She only wished her new sister could share some of her beauty. Cassia’s own lashes were short and stubby, her hair too curly, taking forever to grow, and her body was mostly angles like her brother Aaron’s. *If only I had a few more curves like Ilana.*

She cracked the door open to her bedchamber. An oil lamp had already been lit, and she closed the door with a soft sigh, welcoming the quiet. Now that she was alone, exhaustion hit her hard. It had been continual entertainment for the past week as she’d served as Ilana’s official escort. Pulling off her outer robe, Cassia settled onto her bed with her day tunic still on. She was suddenly too tired to change her clothing, wash her face, or even blow out the lamp.

Tomorrow, she thought, tomorrow I’ll impress Ilana with one of my honeyed creations. Then her sister-in-law would be delighted. Cassia’s stomach did a small tumble when she remembered that Ilana’s brother was arriving the next evening as well. As sleep claimed Cassia, she wondered what Ilana’s brother was like and whether he favored women on the thin side.

The morning meal is taking forever, Cassia thought, but she smiled politely at the conversation surrounding the women. Her mother, Naomi—the queen of Zarahemla—sat on Cassia’s right. To her left was Ilana. Then across from her was Alma’s mother, Maia, and her two daughters. The women sat together in a circle, eating sweet corn-meal tamales. They were in the queen’s day room, where she hosted her good friends when they came to visit.

The younger girls, Bethany and Dana, had finished first and were trying hard not to wiggle around too much. Finally, their mother excused them to go walk in the gardens. Cassia looked after them longingly. Although she was eighteen now, she wished she didn’t have to be included in all of the grown-up occasions. Maybe she could offer to walk with the girls, but then she also wanted to be with Ilana and find out more about her brother. But Cassia could hardly ask those kinds of questions in front of everyone.

“I don’t know when they returned last night,” Naomi was saying when Cassia focused back on the conversation.

Maia’s face paled. “Have you spoken to Aaron yet today?”

“Only briefly,” Naomi said. “My husband took him into a conference early this morning.”

“What about Ammon?” Maia’s voice sounded subdued.

“He’s probably still sleeping.”

Cassia wasn’t sure what they were speaking about, but tension was thick in the air. If Ilana hadn’t been in the room, there might’ve been a lot more information shared.

But Maia didn’t seem to mind the presence of the bride-to-be. “Do you think they were with Alma?”

“I’m not sure,” Naomi said. “I’m sorry I don’t have more information for you about your son. I know you miss him.”

Cassia’s head came up sharply. She knew Alma had left home several weeks before—some argument with his father. But Alma was so easygoing she’d assumed he was back, though from Maia’s strained expression, she could see he hadn’t returned. If he had been with her brothers the night before, surely they’d talk him into restoring favor with his father.

Cassia knew there was more to the story, and she burned with curiosity to know it, but she decided to do her mother a favor. “Are you ready to tour the cooking room, Ilana?”

Ilana patted her mouth with a square of cloth and smiled. “Certainly.”

The two linked arms and walked together down the corridor to the back wing of the palace. Cassia couldn't help but grin at the surprise she'd show her sister-in-law.

“What's your favorite sweet?” Cassia asked.

Ilana turned her dark eyes to her. “Cacao.”

Cassia clapped her hands. “I love that drink. I enjoy it with delicacies such as amaranth seeds and honey—it makes a delicious combination.”

Ilana's brows drew together. “I don't think I've ever tried that.”

“I'll show you how to make it, then we can take it with us on our walk this afternoon.”

“Your mother allows you to prepare food?”

Cassia smiled and squeezed Ilana's arm. “Not very often. But the servants are good at keeping my secret.”

“Then I'll keep your secret too,” Ilana said with a laugh.

They stepped through the arched doorway that opened into a high-ceilinged room. Several low tables lined the walls, and baskets of drying herbs hung to one side. The newly laid stone floor seemed to gleam in the morning light. This was Cassia's pride—she'd made the suggestion to add a stone floor to the cooking room so that less dust would be kicked up during the warmer months.

Already, with less dust, there had been an improvement in cleanliness and the presentation of the food, even noticeable to the king. Two women looked up from a basket of beans they were snapping. Their eyes widened with surprise when they saw Ilana. Cassia motioned to her new sister. “This is Aaron's betrothed. I want to show her how to make a treat.”

The women bobbed their heads and retreated to the second cooking room, where dried slabs of meat hung and a large stone pit was laid for an additional cooking fire.

Ilana rotated slowly around, taking in everything. “This room is almost as large as my home.”

Cassia laughed, knowing that Ilana's home was plenty large. After all, her father had been a Nephite king before coming to Zarahemla. "The palace is your home now. Here," she said, showing Ilana a tightly woven, leather-lined basket that contained the tiny amaranth seeds. "We need a couple of handfuls to put into the clay bowl, but first we have to grease it."

Ilana grimaced as Cassia dipped her fingers into a small jar of animal tallow. The smell wasn't too pleasant, so she used just enough so that the honey wouldn't stick to the sides.

"Do you want to try?" Cassia asked.

Ilana shook her head. "I'll just watch."

"All right," Cassia said as she scooped two handfuls of the amaranth seeds into the bowl. "Now for the honey. The trick is not to use too much or too little." She reached for a dark brown jar and lifted the lid, peering inside. "Oh. The jar is empty." She didn't want her plans to be ruined. "We'll just have to go to the beehives behind the garden and see if any honey has been collected." She moved to the outer door and took the leather mitts and a veil from a hook. She turned—her sister-in-law was absolutely pale. "What's wrong?"

"I—I don't think I want to go near the beehives," Ilana said. "Perhaps we can let the servants do it."

Cassia looked from Ilana's worried expression to the second room where the women had disappeared. She didn't think either of them collected the honey. It was usually a man's job, but she'd seen it done before.

"Don't worry, we'll probably find a servant in the bee yard who can bring the honey back for us." She held up the leather mitts. "These will protect us just in case no one is there."

Ilana shook her head, looking even paler. "I don't think you should try that. We should wait."

Cassia felt deflated, and she replaced the mitts and veil on their hook. She hoped that they'd have something more in common—at least a little sense of adventure. And now . . .

Squeals sailed into the cooking room from the garden just beyond the doorway. Cassia turned to see Alma's two sisters chasing each other. She smiled, then made her face serious as she turned again to Ilana.

“Why don’t you visit with the younger girls while I walk down to the beehives and see if any honey is ready? Since we found the jar empty, the servants may have already put in a request.”

Ilana nodded but still seemed hesitant.

Cassia leaned out of the doorway and called to Alma’s sisters. “Come over here, girls. Ilana wants to see you.” The two girls stopped, then Dana rushed to Cassia, throwing her arms around her. The older girl laughed and pulled away. The sisters stared at Ilana. Cassia didn’t blame them; Ilana was beautiful.

“Can you show me your favorite part of the garden?” Ilana asked.

Inwardly, Cassia sighed with relief. Ilana was so kind, diplomatic, and . . . well, accommodating. She was certainly the perfect match for Aaron. Cassia watched the three of them walk off, then slipped back into the cooking room and snatched the leather mitts and veil. She might as well be prepared.

It didn’t take long to walk through the gardens to the beehives. They were somewhat secluded behind a short stone wall, with high bushes running along the edges, adding to the concealment. In the quiet of the morning, the buzzing reached Cassia’s ears before she could see the hives. She reached the narrow opening in the stone wall. “Anyone working here?” she called out before venturing farther.

No one answered, and she hadn’t seen any servants on her walk to the bee yard. She searched for clay jars next to the stone wall, hoping to find one filled with honey, but there was nothing. She knew the keepers used a smoking stick to make the bees drowsy, so she looked for the basket with the fire-lighting tools. It was near the first hive, and she crept to grab it without alerting any bees. There were about twelve hives, all with a few slow-circling bees outside.

Cassia’s stomach tightened, but she remained determined as she struck two pieces of chert together to create a spark. After a few tries she was able to light a long, thick stick. She propped it against the basket carefully, so as not to ignite anything, then drew on the mitts and put on the veil. She picked up the burning stick and continued toward the first hive. Right before she reached it, she blew on the stick to extinguish the fire and create a smoking end. The small

flame flickered out, and Cassia thrust the smoking end into the hive opening. Immediately, at least a dozen bees flew out.

She jerked back with a yelp. She'd forgotten to wait until more smoke had filled the hive before moving the stick inside. Holding still, she kept the stick steady as the bees circled the hive and a few reentered. Cassia moved toward the opening again, but this time held the stick at the entrance for several minutes.

But more bees flew out, and she felt a sharp pinch on her upper arm. "Ow!" she cried out. Then another pinch on her neck. This one hurt more, causing her eyes to smart. She panicked and started waving the stick at the bees. She knew she shouldn't make a sound, but after another bite, she started screaming and waving her arms frantically, ripping her veil off to swat at them. "Get off! Get off!"

More bees came out of the hive, heading directly at her, and Cassia turned and ran toward the wall opening. But before she could reach it, she tripped and fell, landing on the smoking stick.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



H.B. Moore is the award-winning author of the Book of Mormon historical series *Out of Jerusalem*. Her next series includes *Abinadi*, which won both the 2008 Whitney Award for Best Historical Novel and the 2009 Best of State in Literary Arts; and its sequel, *Alma*, another Whitney Award finalist. She is also the author of the non-fiction book, *Women of the Book of Mormon: Insights and Inspirations*, published under Heather B. Moore. Heather loves to hear from her readers. You can contact her through her website: www.hbmoore.com.