



## Chapter 1

Sweat beaded on Watson's face as he imagined his sister in the clutches of the enemy. Was it already too late for her? *Why did I wait so long?*

Watson's mind always churned with planning and strategizing, but this was another level. Rescuing his sister rose above any mission he had ever undertaken. Plans coalesced in thoughts as he gathered supplies in the boathouse with Layth and Kailyn. Rigging, crossing the river, and carrying the boat to the boathouse on the other side shouldn't take more than a half-hour. If they didn't stop for rest, the journey up through the grasslands could be done in—

A distant roar interrupted his calculations. The moment they stepped outside, they saw it—a flash flood tumbling down from the north. In the few minutes they had been in the boathouse, the river had swollen to double its volume and was well over its banks.

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Crestfallen, Watson studied the torrent. “It’s impossible. We would never make it across. We would be swept into the gorge.” He shook his head. “We will have to wait it out.”

The delay felt like a prison sentence to Watson. Every second that passed was a second lost. But he saw no other option.

“Where’s Kailyn?” Layth asked.

The men returned to the boathouse and found her inside, tugging at a boat.

“What are you doing?” Watson objected. “We cannot—”

“We’re going,” she said, without looking up.

Watson stepped close. “Kailyn, stop.” He placed his hand on hers.

She stopped pulling and dropped her head.

“Believe me,” he said. “I want to get to Abigail as much as you. But we will do her no good if we are all dead. Flash floods never last long. We simply need to wait it out.”

Kailyn’s face hardened like steel. “Do what you want. I’m going. If you won’t help, I’ll swim across.”

Watson knew her well enough to know she would do it. And he knew the river well enough to know she would not survive.

“The gorge is four miles of continuous, deadly whitewater. There is no stopping. And the rapids are unnavigable even at normal water levels. Right now the volume is easily seven or eight thousand cubic feet per second. At that volume—”

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She held up her hand. “Did the Ruler send us on this mission or not? Every hour we delay could be the hour time runs out for Abigail. I’d rather die trying to save her than sit around here waiting.”

Layth shifted his jaw, shot an apologetic look at Watson, and carved a path toward the boat. He grabbed a handle and began dragging it out of the boathouse. Kailyn held Watson in her gaze for another long moment, then followed. Watson hesitated, then fell in line.

Layth took his place on the left front and Kailyn across from him, while Watson stationed himself in the stern to guide. They pointed the bow upstream at a steep ferry angle to ensure they would make it across without being carried too far downstream.

Watson shouted a command as they pushed out from shore and they all paddled in sync, struggling to maintain the angle. By their fourth stroke, the main current caught the bow and spun the raft so they faced straight downstream.

With some effort, Watson managed to turn back toward the east shore, but the three paddlers were no match for the accelerating current. With each stroke eastward, the river carried them another fifty feet downstream. Kailyn looked back at Watson. He saw in her eyes a moment of terror, followed immediately by the same steeled determination as at the boathouse.

The river narrowed, and the boat picked up speed.

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## BOOK 2 AT WAR WITH WIND

“He’s back,” Lucius said, nodding toward the grasslands.

Adramelech, the legion commander, stepped out to meet the dark spirit as he and his detachment approached the black timber. “Report, Anzu?”

“Success, sir. They tried to cross but dropped into the gorge. You won’t have to worry about those three anymore.”

Adramelech’s lips parted in a rare grin. “Impressive.”

Timing the flood and raising the flow just enough to prevent them from crossing but not so high as to stop them from trying were difficult feats. He had been skeptical about Anzu’s ability to pull all that off—especially given the unpredictability of the Mighty Wind.

Lucius, who normally deprecated everything Anzu did, held his tongue. Adramelech sensed that both his lieutenants felt relieved to be done with Layth. They feared him, though neither would ever admit it. Indeed, even Adramelech had been uneasy about possibly having to face the powerful man of faith. With him and the other two out of the way, Adramelech’s plans for Abigail should be safe.

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Watson, Layth, and Kailyn knew they would not likely survive what was coming. All three were ready to face death and the final judgment that followed. Their greatest anxiety was not their impending demise. It was

the much worse fate Abigail would face if she were not rescued in time and was taken with the city.

Throughout the tight box canyon there were not only powerful currents and crushing rapids but also sharp, jagged rocks scattered throughout the river. Being pitched out of the boat at any point in this canyon could prove fatal in multiple ways.

They had only seconds to prepare for the approaching ordeal. Hitting a large rapid at an angle would result in capsizing. And there were many rapids in the gorge that would flip the boat even if they hit them straight on. They must be avoided at all cost. Watson ruddered the boat to face directly downstream as they dropped into the mouth of the gorge.

“Dig in!” Watson shouted, as a wall of water slammed the boat. Kailyn spluttered and tried to catch a breath after the blast in her face. Wet strands of Layth’s hair whipped side to side as he tested the limits of his paddle in a furious forward stroke.

Kailyn caught Watson’s attention with a wave of her paddle. He couldn’t hear her shouts over the roaring river, but she pointed to a sharp, triangular rock jutting several feet out of the roiling torrent dead ahead.

“I see it.” Watson used the force of a diagonal wave and a powerful left draw to get the angle he wanted and shouted, “Hard forward!” He held the angle while Layth and Kailyn stroked furiously to avoid the deadly obstacle. “Hard forward!” he roared again.

The bow cleared, but the stern bumped and spun the boat, nearly knocking Watson into the river.

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Now they faced directly upstream, plunging backward toward the next rapid. There was no time to correct. “Backpaddle!” Watson commanded, hoping to punch through the wall of whitewater with a strong backstroke.

The boat accelerated, dropped, and slammed into the boiling wave like a brick wall. Kailyn slid backward, fell headfirst into the current, and was swept away. Her head popped up momentarily, then disappeared.

Watson’s knowledge of the river now became his enemy because he understood how hopeless their situation had suddenly become. Down a paddler, they were heading into even larger rapids than the ones that had given them such a thrashing. He froze, paralyzed with dread.

Layth seemed to sense Watson’s fear. He pointed straight at Watson and shouted over the roar of the river, “Don’t forget!”

The Ruler’s promise at the banquet hall cascaded through Watson’s memory. *I will be with you.* While his body remained in the doomed boat, his heart rested in the promise room, comfortably seated in the overstuffed fear-not-for-I-am-with-you chair. Peace flooded his soul. As violent as this death might be, the Ruler would be with him. And when it was over, he would be with the Ruler in the new world forever. “I am ready.”

The river poured into a massive cataract next to the left shore. Without a third paddler, Watson and Layth had no chance of missing it. The boil swallowed the craft like a lion devouring its prey.

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The boat remained upright but stalled in the hydraulic. A surge of whitewater exploded under the boat, pushing it backward to the cascade rushing down into the hole. When the boat collided with the current, it lurched up on its side, dumping Watson into the boil. Layth clung to the high side, which slammed down on a flat rock on the shore.

Watson was pulled so far under, the pressure hurt his ears. He flailed and kicked but didn't even know which direction was up as the torrent tumbled him and slammed him against rocks.

Desperate for air, he finally bobbed up and barely had time for a gasp before another wave shoved him under. He surfaced again and caught a glance of Layth lying on the rock, eyes vacant, body limp.

The last thing Watson saw before a current pulled him under again was the boat being pushed into a jagged, undercut cliff where it was ripped to pieces.

Then, blackness.



