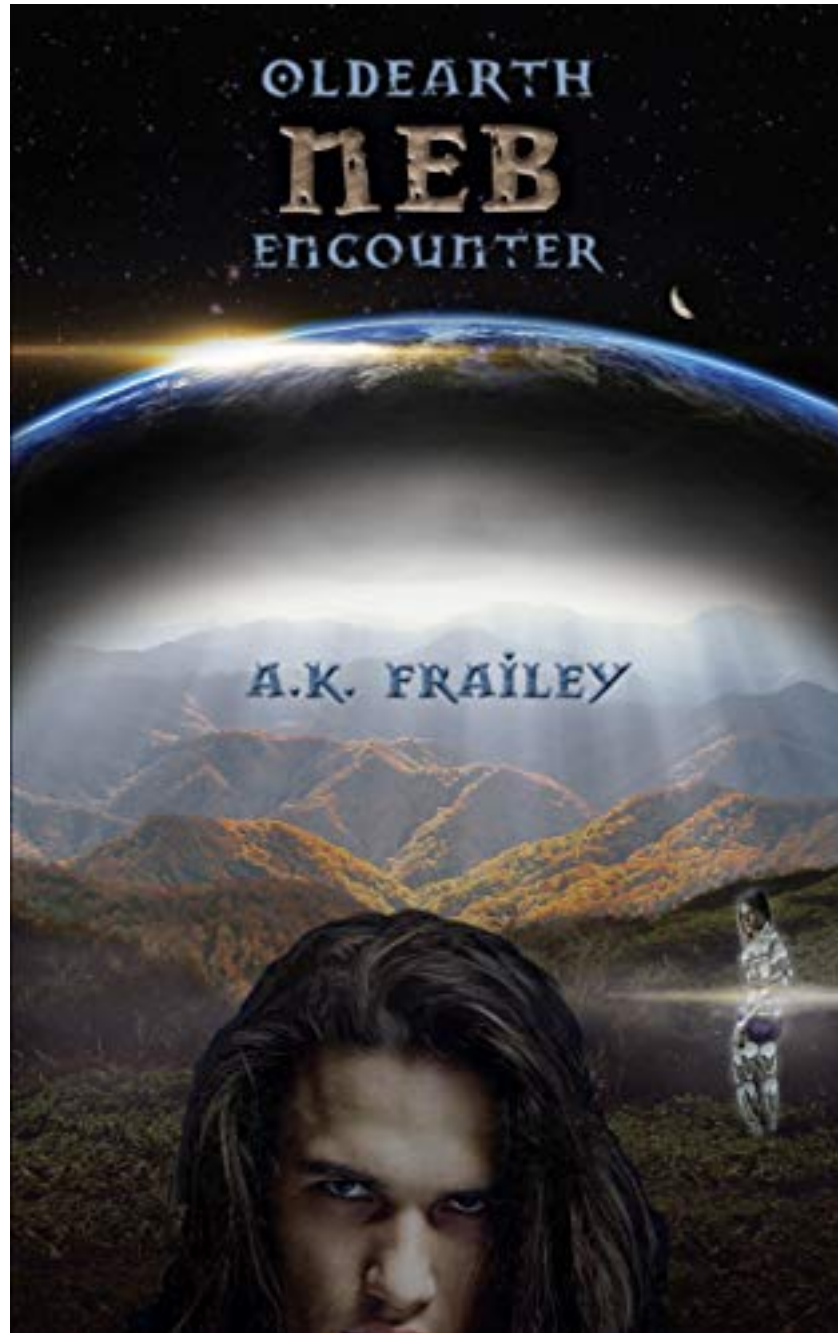


OldEarth Neb Encounter

Book Sample



<https://amzn.to/3iGqGlQ>

CHAPTER ONE
—GRASSLANDS—

FOR THOSE WHO COME AFTER

Gizah stepped outside her home into the glaring sun, balancing a food tray, two bowls, and a carafe of wine in her arms. A long yellow dress with wide, fringed sleeves draped her pregnant figure as she stopped before a wooden table built onto the exterior wall. Laying the tray laden with boiled fish, bread, and fruit next to the carafe, she tilted her head and smiled at her handiwork. A shout in the distance turned her gaze.

Her husband worked alongside five other men in the north field, a band holding back his long black hair and sweat gleaming across his shoulders. Amin hunched over the golden wheat and cut the stalks with a swift, steady hand. He called to another man and wiped his brow. Laughter erupted from the group.

Gizah grinned as a picture of her father Aram filled her mind. Aram and Amin were so alike, strong men who ruled their clans with skill and wisdom—yet so bewildered by their own souls. An ache swelled somewhere deep inside. She clasped her chest and shook her head to drive away the sense of loss. Aram had been a gentle father and a wise friend, and though years had passed since his death, still she longed for his presence.

Glorious sunshine cascaded over the undulating grasslands of their village, and a warm breeze stirred the distant line of river trees. Insects buzzed in late summer activity, and birds chirped and cooed their end-of-the- season songs.

Inhaling a cleansing breath, Gizah blinked away old memories and tried to rejoice in the glorious setting. She rubbed her rounded belly and smiled at her husband, but a memory rose and shadowed her mood. Her lips moved in silent rhythm as she repeated the

names she and Amin had discussed the night before: Neb, Enosh, Kenan, Madai...

She frowned. As distantly related clan members, she and her husband shared a long history, yet she knew little of their actual family ties. Last night, they had discussed baby names, and Amin had grown restless, abrupt even, his mood darkening with every reference to his family history.

She shaded her eyes and followed Amin's muscled arms as he cut great swaths of grain. She bit her lip.

Though the clan had often recited their lineage from long past into present day in tales, poems, sagas, and recitations, Amin would not relate his lineage to her. In taciturn moodiness, he had curled up on their pallet and fallen into a disturbed sleep. When he began thrashing and crying aloud, she awoke, afraid that invaders were at the door. Once she realized that Amin was dreaming, she shook him, but the nightmare continued. In fright, she splashed water on his face.

After spluttering his indignity, Amin calmed down, but the terrifying images returned even before his wide-awake eyes. He sat wide-eyed and shivering, babbling about horrors she could little comprehend.

As she listened, Gizah had grown afraid. What was this heritage that threatened to invade their present world? Who were these figures from long ago that formed so much dark legend?

Gizah sighed and turned from her recent memories to her home. Then she considered the tray at her fingertips. The midday meal lay ready, and her expanding stomach rumbled. She looked up and caught Amin's eye.

He smiled and waved.

Gizah waved back.

With a call and a gesture to his men, Amin started home.

Gizah poured a measure of wine into the bowls, clasped her hands, and waited.

Amin trudged to the house and flopped down on a wooden bench shaded by a thatched overhang. "I'm as weary as a rabbit after a long chase."

Gizah grinned and wiped a stray lock of hair from his face. "Well, it's your own fault. Unlike the rabbit, you could've stayed abed a bit longer."

Averting his gaze, Amin tore off a plump hunk of fish and stacked it on a piece of bread. "Not after last night. I couldn't sleep." He bit into the fish and bread and gripped the wine bowl with the other hand.

A snort escaped, but Gizah held a laugh in check. "You'll choke eating so fast. Slow down."

Chewing with dramatic emphasis, Amin stared at his wife as if in challenge. After a loud gulping swallow, he slurped the last of the wine and swiped a dribble on his chin with the back of his hand.

Leaning on the table, Gizah grinned and shook her head. "You're such a child."

Amin nodded through a shrug and continued to eat. He glanced up. "Aren't you hungry?"

Gazing across the field, Gizah absently tore off a piece of bread and pinched a morsel of fish. She chewed her bite-sized pieces meditatively, her gaze unfocused. After a dainty sip, she slipped onto the bench.

Amin leaned against the wattle and daub wall, closing his eyes.

She poked him in the shoulder. “Wake up. We need to talk.”

With a groan, Amin waved her away, his eyes still closed.

“Amin!”

His eyes opened with forced effort. He blew air between his teeth.

“You wanted me to rest.”

“This morning I wanted you to rest. Now I want you to talk.”

Amin straightened with a groan.

A twist in her middle sent anxiety shooting through Gizah’s body.

“You need to explain what happened. What...or who...sent you into nightmares?”

Amin slid off the bench and paced away. “I don’t know. I’ve only heard snatches of our family history.” He glanced at his wife. “Did Aram tell you anything?”

Gizah shook her head. “A little, but he didn’t like to talk about the past.”

Amin sighed and returned to his seat clapping his hands on his thighs. “Those names have a terrible history...a curse. We can’t pass them on to our children.”

“A curse?” Gizah stared ahead, her shoulders slumping as weariness enveloped her. “We need to know. We must ask—”

“We can’t! Neb nearly drove my father mad. I can’t ask him to revisit a past that could have destroyed him. Besides, he’s old—”

Rising, Gizah stared at her husband. “Our child won’t live haunted by fear! We must face our past if we ever hope for a future.” She rubbed her belly. “Besides, our ancestors don’t decide our destiny.

In his love for you, Ishtar crossed barren deserts and jumped through fire. I'm sure he'll share his family history to bring us peace." She shrugged. "I would."

Taking Gizah's hand, Amin caressed her fingers. "Of that, I have no doubt."

~~~

Ishtar sat in the shade outside his home and relished a soft evening breeze. Clouds scraped over the mountains in the west, but he didn't mind. The harvest was nearly in, and the long-awaited rain would refresh the depleted rivers and ponds.

A stone's throw away, Amin and Gizah approached with sober faces. He smiled indulgently and feasted his eyes on Gizah's expanding middle. A familiar thrill raced over his skin. Amin will make a wonderful father...and I'll be a grand— He swallowed the joyful thought as Amin stopped before him, grim-faced.

"Father." Ishtar stood and beckoned them inside. As the couple sat on pallets in the corner of the room,

Ishtar placed twigs on a smoldering fire in the hearth. He fanned the flames, which brightened the room. After pouring wine into small bowls and placing them before the couple, he brought out a tray heaped with nuts, figs, and dates.

Gizah accepted the fruit with graciousness, but Amin waved the offering away. "Father, we've been talking..."

Amused though perplexed, Ishtar settled cross-legged across from them, chewing languidly on a fig. He leaned back and grinned. "I would hope so."

Gizah laid her hand on Amin's knee. "Amin has been having nightmares."

Ishtar's smile vanished as he straightened. "About what?"

Amin climbed to his feet with a grunt and paced across the room, breaking through swirling smoke. "I can hardly explain. We were discussing names for the baby...and I mentioned those I knew from our history: Neb, of course, though we'd never choose that one. Serug, Athaliah, Madai, Kenan, Enosh—"

Ishtar leaped to his feet, his heart pounding, and nausea rising from a cauldron in his middle. "You don't know those people—who they were or what they did."

Amin swallowed and stared hard at his father. Their gazes locked. "That's the problem. We don't know. Not enough."

Gizah rose and clasped her husband's hand. "But we should. How can we keep our family traditions alive and remember those worthy of renown if we don't know who they were and what heroic deeds they accomplished?"

Loath to revisit the past, Ishtar grimaced. "Not all our ancestors were heroic. Some were devilish." Flashes of memory tore through his mind. Gritting his teeth, he willed himself to remember Matalah's gentle face, the innocent flock of sheep he tended in the distant hills, and the face of his beloved, departed son. "I don't know if I can—" He broke off and stepped to the doorway, gulping the cool evening air.

Gizah stepped near and rested her hand on his shoulder. "For the sake of our child—and those who come after— tell us about your great-grandfather, Neb the Great. Do as you have done many times before; tell us a story, but this time, tell us our true heritage. Weave what you learned from others and your own insight. Let Neb's life be your guide."

Clasping her hand, Ishtar turned and met Gizah's imploring eyes. Though their clansmen had never considered her beautiful because

of her misshapen hand and slight stoop, Ishtar saw beauty that soared far beyond the earthly realm. He remembered Pele, the slave girl who had saved his entire clan with her daring courage. He glanced at his son, a boy now grown to manhood, who deserved to know his real heritage, no matter how bitter that truth might be.

Ishtar nodded.

## CHAPTER TWO

### —WOODLANDS—

#### DESTINED FOR GREATNESS

#### (THREE GENERATIONS EARLIER)

Neb knew that he was destined for greatness. The first son of a first son who was also a first son. When he was born, his mother, Meshullemeth, declared that he would rule far and wide and great would be his name. She repeated this prophetic declaration to him on more than one occasion and then proceeded to raise Neb as a ruthless despot who would let nothing get in the way of his all-consuming desire to rule everything—and everyone.

Standing with his hands clenched on his hips, Neb stared at a shivering servant bowing before him on the floor of his tent. He scowled in disgust. Even at the tender age of eight, he knew when he had been defied. He puffed his cheeks in raging indignation.

The servant, a mere boy himself wearing only a scanty tunic, trembled in clear expectation of the accustomed blows that Neb was known to hurl against anyone guilty of a clumsy mistake or a thoughtless word.

Neb glared at his mother who stood to the side. “I want him thrown off a cliff or speared through the chest!”

Meshullemeth glanced from the servant to her son, one eyebrow lifted, accenting her long face and sharp features. She pursed her lips. “Seems a waste...he’s young enough to be useful for years to come.”

“I don’t care!” Neb stomped to the wall of his tent and dragged his spear forward. With blind fury propelling his every move, he grabbed the hapless slave, and shoved him through the open doorway. “Get out there where I can line you up properly.”

Meshullemeth followed, clucking her tongue.

His head down, the slave dragged himself across the compound until Neb called a halt.

Neb shoved the boy against the wide girth of an ancient tree. “Stand still!”

The servant wailed as he watched Neb take a giant step backward, his gaze fixed, aiming the spear. “Please! Master, it wasn’t my fault. I didn’t know—”

Gray-haired and slump-shouldered, Hezeki dressed in a fine robe and soft leggings trotted near, his face reddening with each step. “Neb? What are you doing?”

Scowling, Neb faced his father. “I’m going to kill this worthless—”

Meshullemeth’s eyes darted from husband to son, her lips pursed.

With surprising agility, Hezeki swooped forward and plucked the spear from his son’s grasp. “Foolish boy! An infant, indeed, if you think you can kill an innocent slave— ”

Spit flew as Neb’s wrath exploded. “Innocent? He broke my best knife!”

Hezeki glanced at the trembling slave whose eyes implored mercy. Hezeki turned to his son and pointed the spear at Neb's chest. "You must learn patience and understanding. Anyone can make a mistake. Even you!" Without another word, the old man beckoned the teary-eyed slave forward. "Go home and get the mid-day meal ready."

The day's entertainment over, Meshullemeth shrugged and, with a sly wink at her son, meandered away.

Hezeki cleared his throat. "I won't speak of this again. You can kill anything in the forest, hunt to your heart's desire, but you must never kill a human being except in uttermost need." Neb turned his piercing black eyes from the retreating slave to his mother's back and then shifted his gaze to his father. His spine stiff and his teeth clenched, he muttered under his breath, "Uttermost need."

~~~

Neb grew like a sapling, wiry and strong like his father, never as thick or robust as his mother. When Meshullemeth gave birth to two strapping boys three years apart and eventually to a beautiful daughter, he paid them little mind. As long as his mother's attention stayed focused on him, he was satisfied.

On a bright day in the southern hills with no hint of a breeze, Neb, grown to his full stature, went into the wild to seek game for his family. Other hunters in the clan could do the job as well, but rumors spread near and wide that a bear of enormous size roamed the hills to the south.

Long desiring a noteworthy prize to bring home to his people, Neb wandered the woods, scanned tree trunks for claw marks, and searched the ground for scats, crushed stems, or bits of victims scattered among the ferns and saplings. When he came upon promising signs, he slowed his steps through the undergrowth.

Late in the day, as sweat dripped down the side of his face, he stopped at the sound of rustling in the distance. He scanned the forest and saw the brown humping form of a great she-bear. It padded slowly, stopping and snuffling through the bracken with a small form shadowing her left side. Neb smiled. Mother bears with cubs were hard to kill. Finally, a feat worthy of his skill.

Keeping his scent downwind, he stealthily followed, and when he came upon the mother from the right side, he readied his spear. In his mind, he could hear his father's voice. "Never attack a dangerous animal alone. Always keep a clear path to escape." Neb chuckled at the memory. The bear, not he, would long for escape.

With an upturned nose, the bear stopped and sniffed the air. Suddenly, she swiveled around and rose on her back legs to her full height, a low growl emanating from her chest. Her black eyes glittered in alarm and fury.

Neb's heart exalted. "Frightened? Ah! Fight as you wish, but I'll spill your blood and take your cub for my own." He approached steadily, lifting his spear, and balancing his weight with each step. After bracing himself and leaning back, he gave a mighty grunt and threw, using every bit of his muscled strength.

The spear arced through the air and then...fell short...landing softly, ignobly, in the ferns.

The bear's growl deepened and grew louder.

In all his years of certain kills and absolute demands, Neb had never been so defied. He had willed his spear into the heart of the beast, and yet it had landed harmlessly before the animal like a pathetic offering. He stood transfixed.

Pure instinct incarnate, the mother bear charged, her muscles rippling. Her thrusting shoulders and grunts throbbed to the rhythm of her fury.

Shock quickly gave way to self-preservation. Neb turned and ran for his life. Branches and thorns tore his skin, nettles pricked his feet, sweat poured down his back, but Neb pressed on, running beyond his strength, even though he feared his heart would burst with the effort. By the time he dropped to the ground in exhaustion, the bear had given up and returned to her young.

Well after dusk, Neb dragged his weary body into his village. Seeing his ripped, bloody clothes and multiple wounds, word quickly spread that a bear had bested Neb.

He slipped into his tent and collapsed on his pallet. Meshullemeth scurried to his aid, brandishing wet cloths and strong brew. “My poor boy! How could this happen?” Neb pushed her away. “Leave me alone, woman. I’m resting.” He curled on his side and offered his back along with his scorn.

With a huff not unlike the disgruntled bear, Meshullemeth turned away.

Neb closed his eyes, but burning shame scoured his cheeks and intensified the stings across his body.

Heavy footsteps padded near. Neb squeezed his eyes tighter to shut out the intrusion. His father spoke into the darkness, undoubtedly with his mother wringing her hands beside him. “Stupid child, you could’ve been killed. What made you attack such an opponent, alone, against all wisdom? A mother bear is often beyond the skill of even experienced hunters.”

Ignoring the pain searing his skin, Neb turned and rose to his feet. He glared at his father. “I will challenge her again. I’ll kill her and take the cub. She will fear me in the end.”

In the darkness, Hezeki chuckled. “And who will undertake to support you in such a challenge? Not I or any of my men. We have more sense. There are many fine animals that may be had at half

the risk. We are not so desperate for food as you seem to think.”

Neb’s gaze fixed on his father. “It’s not her flesh I wish to consume but her life.”

Hezeki snorted. “You, of all my children, are the most senseless. Enosh and Kenan would never attempt such a thing. Even Eva, a little girl, knows better.”

Meshullemeth stood by, watching the exchange between father and son, her eyes narrowed.

With a wave of dismissal, Neb grabbed his pillow and closed his eyes, shutting out his parents.

Grunting in disgust, Hezeki left. His distant voice soon mingled with anxious villagers who shouted questions, asking about Neb’s condition, but Hezeki did not answer.

Meshullemeth laid her hand upon her son’s head and stroked his hair. “You need more than your father or I can give you. A power we do not possess.”

Turning, Neb opened his eyes, and for a moment, he stared at his mother feeling like an infant needing comfort. But the glittering fury of the she-bear blackened out every other thought. He clenched his hands. “Truly, you cannot give me what I need.”

Exhaling a long sigh, Meshullemeth rose and stepped away. “I will find someone who can.”

His mother’s footsteps padded out the door, and at long last, Neb let exhaustion have its way with him...

In the dark of night, a howl rose with the wind. Neb stirred.

A hulking bear rose before him, large and menacing, opening her mouth in a bellowing roar.

Neb turned to run, but he tripped and fell backward. Suddenly, a frenzy of hate enveloped him. He sprang to his feet and faced the wild animal that towered over him. Gripping his spear, his gaze met hers.

The great hulking beast growled in human speech. “Honor me, and I will spare you.”

In response, Neb braced himself and thrust with every bit of his strength. This time, his spear struck true.

Put Your Mind in a Better Place
Entertainment for Life
akfrailey.com

As a teacher with a degree in Elementary Education who has taught in big cities and small towns, Ann Frailey homeschooled all of her children. She manages her rural homestead with her kids and their numerous critters. She writes books and a Friday blog alternating between short stories and her *My Road Goes Ever On* series.

Her nonfiction work focuses on the intersection of motherhood, widowhood, practicing gratitude, and rediscovering joy.

Her fiction novels expand from the OldEarth world to the Newearth universe—where deception rules but truth prevails.

She earned a Masters of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing for Entertainment from Full Sail University.

In her spare time, she serves as an election judge, a literacy tutor, and as secretary/treasurer of her small town’s cemetery.

She is currently finishing a new science fiction novel in the Newearth world and a historical fiction & science fiction blend in her OldEarth series. To check out her stories, novels, inspirational books, and her film and TV scripts, visit <https://akfrailey.com/>



Books by A. K. Frailey

Science Fiction Novels

Last of Her Kind <http://amzn.to/2y1HJvg>

Newearth: Justine Awakens <http://amzn.to/2pq0vWN>

Historical Fiction & Science Fiction Blend Novels

OldEarth ARAM Encounter <https://amzn.to/2KLhlsN>

OldEarth Ishtar Encounter <https://amzn.to/2OAKDQF>

OldEarth Neb Encounter <https://amzn.to/3iGqGlQ>

OldEarth Georgios Encounter (In production)

Oldearth Melchior Encounter (In production)

Children's Book

The Adventures of Tally-Ho <http://amzn.to/2sLfcI5>

Inspirational Non-Fiction

HeartBeats—Spiritual Being, Human Journey <https://amzn.to/2KvF3Ll>

The Road Goes Ever On—A Christian Journey Through The Lord of the Rings <http://amzn.to/2lWBd0z>

**For a FREE Short Story or *My Road Goes Ever On* reflection each Friday—
Hit *Follow Blog Via Email* button below on the right
<https://akfrailey.com/>**