

Chapter 10

Our momentum carried us into the oncoming group. Several of the men surrounded us, bringing our horses to a rearing halt, but the rest continued on, which puzzled me until I managed to look back. Demetrius's party was headed back the way they had come, whipping their horses for more speed. A large group of the newcomers was after them, loosing a few haphazard arrows that didn't hit anything before falling back to earth. Near the far side of the mesa, the pursuers reined in, and allowed the other outlaw band to escape down the trail down the other side.

Nociar was already trying to answer questions being hurled at us by our new captors. I imagined the questions were similar to those posed by Demetrius the day before – had it really been only a single day? Our questioner looked sharply at me at one point, so I imagined Nociar was telling him about my origins. Once the first round of questioning was over, Nociar was finally able to speak to me.

“This is Cornelius's band. One of their scouts must have spotted Demetrius and his men coming into their territory, and they wanted to see what they were after. I told the leader here, who is one of Cornelius's lieutenants, that you were from Tirzah. He thinks you're a boy, and I didn't tell him any different. He has the same idea as Demetrius, except he wants to sell both of us as slaves. They have a trader in their camp right now, and he's going to take us to see if he and his boss can make a deal.”

I was reminded again of what the angel had told me; I was destined for a period of slavery. I had already accepted that, so the prospect did not distress me as much as it might have otherwise. It still wasn't a pleasant prospect.

As it happened, there was a trail off the mesa on the other side of the rock that provided a hiding place for the outlaws. It's doubtful we would ever have seen it in time to avoid a catastrophe. The Lord was still in charge.

The slave trader was not what I expected. Physically he was quite handsome, but his charm was the kind you see from a serpent trying to hypnotize its prey. His name was Crispan. When he discovered I was from Tirzah – Nociar didn't volunteer that information for himself – he was decidedly interested, though he tried to pretend indifference to the outlaws. Nociar told him, or so he informed me, that he had learned the language of Tirzah after having lived there for a few years. Just the fact that he knew the language, though, seemed to be enough for Crispan.

He poked and prodded me, as if inspecting a piece of beef or a horse, but for some reason his inspection didn't include my chest. He turned away from me and Nociar, and back toward the outlaw I now knew to be Cornelius, a wiry little man who didn't seem to fit the role of bandit chieftain. He and Cornelius began talking at some length, and eventually he followed the outlaw leader into a hut nearby.

“They're bickering over the price,” Nociar told me, after we were left alone with our guards. “He's interested, and Cornelius knows he is. There will be some tough bargaining, but he'll pay what Cornelius wants when it's all over. I have no idea why he wants someone from Tirzah so much, but I suspect we'll soon find out.”

We were herded into a filthy hut, with our hands securely tied in front of us. One of our guards brought some dried meat and water to us, and we were left alone. I had no doubt that would be well guarded against any possible escape.

The next morning we were roused early. Our ropes were replaced by ankle chains and manacles. Our horses and personal effects were not returned; we would be walking the rest of the way to Kirjath, led along like dogs behind the horses of Crispan and one of his servants. I managed to protect my modesty enough on the way, with Nociar's assistance, to do my personal business in private. I was allowed to go behind a bush or rock still connected to my chain. Nociar told them it was a custom of Tirzah, and that violating it would cause me so much distress I might become ill. Crispan was not about to endanger his investment.

On the four-day trip to Kirjath, I began to pick up a smattering of the common tongue of the region. Nociar did his best to tutor me, but he was not a patient teacher. He became angry if I forgot any of the vocabulary he taught me the day before. I learned to tell Crispan or his servant when I needed to take care of personal necessities, and I knew the words for the various food items, and for the things in our surroundings.

We began to descend from the canyon country, and the vegetation gradually changed again. Before we got to Kirjath, we were walking through pleasant woodland. In this area we met our first Roman patrol. The soldiers, with their smart uniforms and professional manner, impressed me. I began to understand why the Empire had conquered much of the known world. Warriors like the Korei would have a hard time standing against disciplined, trained troops like these.

The commander of the troops, as I judged him to be, knew Crispan, even if he didn't particularly care for him. We were allowed to pass on without incident, but not before Crispan slipped a few coins into the officer's hands.

Once out of the woodlands, we entered into an area of farms and fields, like those around Tirzah. Nociar told me that most of those working the fields were slaves, though there were a few tenants and freeholders on the smaller plots. The farther we went down the road we now followed, the more traffic we saw. Besides a large number of other people on foot, there were lines of heavily-laden carts, carriages, asses, and horses. Other roads joined ours from the sides, and the main road broadened. We camped on the road that night, in a field used by other travelers as well.

The next morning, we drew near the walls of a city, a smaller one than Tirzah, but still quite a large one. We had come at last to Kirjath. Perhaps soon I would know what God had in store for me here. An eagerness and anticipation I hadn't known for a while stirred inside of me.

If anything, Kirjath was dirtier and more odorous than Tirzah. I saw nothing approaching the grandeur of the palace of the Great Bear, and the surrounding buildings in the center of Tirzah. What I did see, though, was a lot of bustling activity; this was the early part of the produce season, and heavy-laden carts moved through the streets in a steady stream toward the market. Crispan skirted the market area with us, and took us to a dingy-looking hut nearby. We were ushered inside the filthy place, which had no windows, and

was already stifling hot in late morning. Our chain was attached to a post inside with a lock, and we were left alone.

“They’re just putting us here temporarily,” Nociar told me after our guard left. “We’re to be taken to the holding area at the slave market as soon as they make arrangements. We’ll be with other slaves there, and I’m not sure how long we’ll be able to keep your secret.”

I had a rather urgent need to empty my bladder already, and made use of a corner of the hut that had served that same purpose many times before. The place reeked of urine and feces, especially as it got hotter.

Crispan returned for us, along with his two servants, a few hours later. He talked briskly with Nociar, but he was looking at me through much of the conversation.

When he finished, Nociar turned to me. “He says he already has a buyer for you, a merchant who has a great interest in Tirzah. Evidently this man is a friend of his, and he’s been on the lookout for someone like you for some time. He’s going to take you to get you cleaned up, and put you in clean clothes, then the buyer will come and check you out. The deal’s already done; he just wants to be sure he’s getting what he’s paying for. His name is Marcus, a seller of jewels.”

At the mention of the name, my heart leapt, and I felt a warm flush move from the top of my head down to my feet. Crispan was already turning away, but Nociar noticed. He just raised an eyebrow; he couldn’t know I had just heard the name of my husband-to-be. The Lord had given me that knowledge as surely as if he had shouted it in my ear.

I was allowed to bathe and dress privately, my gender hidden from Crispan until it was too late for him. My secret was soon to be revealed, though.

I was taken in tow, along with Nociar, to a house not far from the market. It was a pleasant place, in the style of the Romans, with an ornate gate separating the interior of the house from the street that it fronted. Inside was a walled patio, and that was where my new – Master—waited for me. He had a household slave attending him when we were ushered into his presence, but he dismissed her.

He had me come and stand in front of him; my heart was pounding so hard I was certain he must hear it. There was nothing out of the ordinary about his appearance; he was of medium height, with a full head of dark brown hair, but a clean-shaven face that made him look like a boy. His eyes were brown, too, and showed keen intelligence, and something unpleasant I couldn’t quite put my fingers on. He looked me up and down, then turned to Nociar. After he spoke a few rapid words to my fellow slave, Nociar translated for me.

“He says he has a document from Tirzah that he had translated. He wants you to read it, and tell me what it says. I’m to tell him, so he can check the translation.”

Marcus produced the scrolls, and handed one of them to me. It was in royal script, a proclamation from the Great Bear, the usual trash proclaiming his greatness, and telling the people of Tirzah how blessed they were to have him as their ruler and their god. I read it without difficulty, and told Nociar what it said. He relayed my interpretation to Marcus, who nodded.

He then put the scrolls away, and issues another command to me through Nociar.

“He says to remove your clothes. I explained the custom of modesty, but he’s not buying it. He wants to see what he’s paying for, like any other buyer.”

My hands trembled. I had never had to stand naked before a man before, not even Portius or Bantal. In a small voice, I asked if at least the other men would leave me alone with Marcus. Nociar relayed my request, and after some argument, Crispan agreed to withdraw for a few minutes with his servants. Marcus insisted that Nociar stay to translate. I was gratified when he turned his back, something I would not have expected after our experience in the cave.

I allowed my robe to fall to the floor. There was an audible gasp from Marcus.

“A girl! That scoundrel Crispan has lied to me – again! You couldn’t be over sixteen or seventeen, but with clothes you could easily pass for a boy.” I knew what he said only because Nociar translated for me as he spoke.

He had me get dressed again, and called Crispan back in. There was a heated exchange, clearly related to the fact that I was a girl, after having been represented as a boy. The look of shock on Crispan’s face made the humiliation of standing naked almost worthwhile. Nociar related the gist of the conversation to me; Crispan wanted to renegotiate the price, claiming he had been deceived all along, and that female household slaves were worth more. Marcus thought he should pay less, since females could not do as much physical labor. In the end, the blustering and complaining mattered not all, and when Crispan left, I was left alone with Marcus.

He removed my manacle and chain, with great gentleness, and called the female slave who had attended him earlier. She was an older woman with a kind face, and, I knew at once in my spirit, a Christian. Marcus gave her instructions, and she motioned me to follow. When we were out of sight of Marcus, I touched her shoulder, as she walked ahead of me. I made the sign of the cross for her. Her face melted into wonder, and she embraced me, her tears wetting my cheeks as she pressed hers against me.

She drew back, and began speaking to me rapidly. About the only words I caught were “sister” and “Christ.” I shook my head, and said, with the small vocabulary I knew, “No can talk.” She paused, nodded in understanding, then took my hand and led me down the hall to my quarters, which I would share with her. Her name, she said, was Lydia. My heart rose to my throat; how kind the Lord was to bless me with two women of the same name in my lifetime! I pointed to myself, and said, “Lysia.”

A look of utter astonishment crossed her face. She began weeping again, trying to impress me with the meaning of a flood of words. For a moment, I thought this must somehow be my own Lydia come back to life, but she understood nothing of the tongue of Tirzah. After much effort, using sign language and the limits of my understanding of her language, she led me to understand that Lysia was the name of her own daughter, now dead. Only later was I able to tell her the story of my own Lydia, and she of her Lysia.

Lydia left me alone in the room, making me to understand I should rest for a while. Later, she returned to waken me from a sweet and prolonged nap, and presented me with two outfits of clean clothes, suitably feminine. She also took me to the kitchen to meet

the cook, and to eat my first civilized meal since I had left Tirzah. The wine was not of a good quality, as it was meant for servants, but to me it tasted like the finest vintage served to the Great Bear.

After I gobbled down my food, with unseemly haste that caused Lydia vast amusement, she took me back to our room. The house was not that large, and I could easily have found the room myself, but I enjoyed the company.

I changed into one of my new outfits, which fit me perfectly without clinging too closely to my body. At least I wouldn't be treated like a concubine, based on how I was dressed. I rested for a little while longer, while Lydia left me once more. The room was already growing dark when she returned. She lit a candle, and made me understand that I was to follow her and see the master. Perhaps I would learn something of why I was here.