

Chapter 13

In a low voice, Talitha called, "We go on the Lord's business."

There was the briefest of pauses, then, "Go with God, young sister."

The gate swung open, and we passed out of the city into the moonless night. We were on the east side of the city, which meant we had to swing around to the north. There was a connecting road between the northern and eastern routes a few miles out of town, but Talitha led us cross-country through fields and pastures. I could barely see my hands on the horse's bridle, but Talitha led on without hesitation.

Other than the occasional barking of dogs, there was no sound beyond the rhythmic drumming of horses' hooves. Neither of us spoke, not even after we reached the north road and headed after my errant husband and the scoundrel Crispan. They were several hours ahead, and we had no hope of overtaking them unless they stopped short of the Badlands to camp.

The thoughts that ran through my head ranged from grief to anger. I had been denied the joy of my wedding bed, and my new husband had both lied to me and deserted me. Seeing Talitha again helped ease the pain, but it felt as if God had reneged on a promise. He had turned the most important day in my life into a nightmare; Marcus might be killed by outlaws before I ever got a chance to even see him again.

Before the road entered the Badlands, as dawn began to break, Talitha led us once more off the trail, and into the woods. The reason was obvious; the border guards would be very suspicious of two women traveling alone, and might even try to keep us for themselves.

It was mid morning before we finally allowed the horses and ourselves to rest. As we unrolled our bedrolls, Talitha spoke for the first time since we left Kirjath.

"We'll find him, Lysia. Don't lose faith. We'll have to stay off the trail, and travel at night to avoid the outlaws, but they don't usually come this far south. As soon as we rest for a few hours, we'll go on. I may be able to pick up their tracks later in the day, but they'll stick to the road anyway. We may even overtake them before they camp tonight."

I wasn't so optimistic, but I agreed, for her sake, that there was still hope. I hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours, but it still took me a while to fall asleep. We needed prayer, but I was too angry with God to even consider that. I finally fell asleep weeping, and awoke later with a sense of having dreamed, but with no memory beyond a sense of pain and horror.

Talitha was wrong on two counts; we did not catch either Marcus or Talitha that day, and the outlaws did come south. Several miles north of where we made camp, we came to a place where the scent of death was so strong that it reached us well off the trail. Talitha had me wait while she went on foot to investigate; she slipped away so quickly and so quietly I lost sight of her almost at once. Minutes later, she returned, her face pale and drawn.

"What happened?" I asked anxiously. "Is Marcus...?"

She shook her head quickly. "I saw several dead men, but Marcus wasn't one of them. They were ambushed just up the trail, and there's evidence of a fight all around. A large number of hoof prints head off toward the north. It was probably Cornelius's band, because it's a long way from Demetrius's territory. It doesn't make sense that he would attack Crispan, one of his buddies, so it had to be Marcus's party they attacked."

I didn't know whether to be relieved that Marcus wasn't dead, or terrified that he had been captured. "What can we do?"

My sister's look of grim determination wasn't one I had seen on her face before. "We're going after them. I didn't spend four years among the Korei for nothing."

I opened my mouth to object, but closed it again. Then I said, "That's fine for you, but what can I do? I'm not a warrior like you."

She smiled. "Sure you are, my sister. We're fighting a spiritual battle, just like Paul spoke of in his letters. You're a prayer warrior."

I didn't feel much like a prayer warrior just then, but I knew God was our only hope of winning any battle against a band of brutal outlaws. Ashamed of my rebellious spirit earlier in the day, I bowed my head right then and asked God for forgiveness. Immediately I felt a sense of peace return to me, and the assurance that everything was all right, after all. God was still in control.

Even I could follow the outlaw's trail away from the scene of the ambush. They stuck to the main trail for several miles, before veering off onto a smaller one to the west. I recognized some the terrain; I had walked behind Crispan's horse here several months before. Once more, we left the trail and headed out into the forest again.

Some time later, we heard voices up ahead, some of them loud and angry. Before we reached them, Talitha once more called a halt, and handed her horse's reins to me. She slung her quiver of arrows over her back, then removed and strung her bow. Slipping to the ground, she held her fingers to her lips, and vanished once more among the trees. She returned a short while later, and greeted me with a smile.

"It's not Marcus they have; it's Crispan after all. Evidently he and Cornelius have had some sort of falling out. He's trying to convince Cornelius that he'll make good on his promises, but I don't think the outlaws are buying it. The only other man I saw tied up was a young man sitting on the ground nearby; he's pretty well beat up, but not seriously hurt."

Nociar! "Is he slender, about my height?"

"Yes. Why? Do you know him?"

"It's Nociar, the man who rescued me from Demetrius. We have to save him; I owe him that much."

Talitha didn't hesitate. "Okay, but we'll have to wait until night. There are too many of them to do anything on the trail. You stay here, and I'll track them on foot to find out where they're keeping him."

She helped me find a more secluded place to stop, and left me alone once more with the horses. It was almost dark when she returned.

“Cornelius has moved his main camp. It’s nearby, instead of up in the canyons. They have Crispan and Nociar tied up together in the same tent. I overheard the guards talking. Evidently they plan to take them out some place tomorrow, tie them to a big rock, and leave them for the vultures. They’ll want to have their fun with them first. If we don’t get them tonight, it’ll be too late.”

We mounted our horses, and Talitha led us through the darkness again. Her sense of direction was uncanny; there was much about her I didn’t know about or understand. A sliver of moonlight shone through the trees from time to time before we reached the camp.

“Stay with the horses, and be ready to ride. We’ll have to ride double, which will make it hard to get away, unless I can steal a couple of horses.”

I didn’t like the idea of not doing anything to help, but I knew better than to argue with her. This was her world; I was worse than useless when it came to sneaking around and killing.

She started to turn away, then stopped. “Maybe there is something you can do. I may need a diversion to draw away the guards. There’s a cliff about a hundred yards away from the camp. They’ll have a guard there, but I can take care of him. Take the tinderbox out of the saddlebag, and a piece of cloth.”

As I rummaged, I saw her take a small pot out of her own pack. She grinned, and said, “You never know when a little oil may come in handy. Follow me, but be as quiet as you possibly can. When you walk, set your whole foot down at once, and try not to step on any twigs and branches. Take my hand, so we don’t get separated.”

I tried as hard as I could to follow her instructions, but I sounded as loud as an ox crashing through the underbrush. After I followed Talitha for what seemed miles through the darkness, she squeezed my hand, and we came to a halt.

“Wait here,” she whispered, and was gone. About fifteen minutes later, she was back. She said, still in a whisper, “He’ll be out for several hours, and I tied him up just in case. Cone on.”

Before long, we went down to our hands and knees, and I got more than my share of cuts and bruises. We came in sight of the camp suddenly, and Talitha reached back a restraining hand as we neared the edge of the cliff. She pointed the guard out to me, off to the side. He was securely bound; I didn’t ask where she got the rope.

“Can you start a fire quickly?” She whispered, her eyes scanning the encampment.

I smiled in turn. “*That* I can do, Sister.”

“Good – I thought so.”

She took an arrow from her quiver, and got the cloth from me. After soaking it in oil, she tied it securely to the end of the arrow. She then removed her quiver, laid it on the ground, and handed me the bow and the oil-soaked arrow.

Pointing down toward the camp, she said, “They’re keeping Nociar and Crispan on the far side of the camp, which is good because I won’t have to move through the entire camp to get to them. What I want *you* to do is to shoot a fire arrow into a tent as far away

from there as possible. Don't pick one so far away you can't be sure of hitting it. You'll get only one try, and an arrow in the dirt will do us no good."

"How long should I wait?" I asked, the first hint of excitement stirring in my veins.

"Count to one thousand like this: one and a thousand, two and a thousand, and so forth. That'll give me enough time to work my way around to the camp."

I said a quick prayer, we hugged, and Talitha was gone yet again. I settled down to wait, counting silently. My eyes roved over the encampment, and I spotted a large tent, the largest of them all, not far from the cliff. That was my target.

The counting dragged on for what seemed hours. The number I was waiting for, "one thousand and a thousand," came around at last, and I reached for the tinderbox.

"Wait!" came an urgent voice in my mind. "Not yet!"

After what seemed an eternity came the almost audible release: "Now!"

A spark jumped from the flint to the cloth almost at once, and I notched the arrow with its flaming head to the bow. Rising to my knees, I raised the bow, and felt my hands being guided up and to the left. I'm certain I would have missed the target altogether if left to myself; the Lord's hand is always sure.

With the "twang" of the bowstring, the arrow leapt away into the night, arcing down with uncanny accuracy to the waiting target. The tent caught fire almost at once, and was soon burning out of control. Two figures ran screaming and cursing outside, one man and one woman. The man, I knew, was Cornelius himself.

Soon the entire gang was running toward the burning tent, and I was almost sure I saw my sister's slight figure slip among the tents on the opposite side of the camp. When I saw her enter one of the tents, I was sure of it. Seconds later, she was outside again, with two figures stumbling along behind her. I was puzzled as to where they were going, until I saw they were going toward the enclosure that held the horses. They were moving about restlessly and neighing, just short of panic themselves.

The gate of the enclosure consisted of two stout poles lying across an opening in the fence. One was at about three feet above the ground, and the other about five feet up. With Nociar's help, my slender sister quickly threw off first the top pole, then the other. After a brief but animated series of gestures, both men mounted horses, bareback, and directed them out of the enclosure.

Just at that moment, another shout arose above the general confusion in the camp. "The horses! They're after the horses!"

I prayed that Talitha would take one of the horses, or that one of the men would come back for her, but she was already streaking back in the direction she had come. My heart was frozen in terror at what I saw, but couldn't let her know: She was headed right into the arms of a knot of outlaws rushing toward the horses.

"Oh, God, what should I do?"