

Chapter 14

“Lord, direct my hands and eyes,” I prayed as I reached for the quiver of arrows. I had no more fitted arrow to string than I saw a big outlaw come around the corner of a tent, and grab for Talitha. She managed to elude him, but he ran after her, knife in hand. I let fly with two arrows in rapid succession; one missed him to the rear, but the other caught him in the arm, and he went down, howling.

Another man reached for her as she twisted away from the rest of the group trying to catch her. This time, the man turned toward me, just as the arrow reached him; it caught him full in the eye, and kept going into his brain. I felt the gorge rise in my stomach as I realized I had just killed a man. At that point, the outlaws realized someone was shooting at them, and they began looking around for the source of the arrows. That caused just enough confusion for Talitha to get away into the trees. When I saw the eyes directed toward the cliff, to my very hiding place, I grabbed the quiver, and ran off into the bushes with bow and arrows in hand. I headed in the direction I thought Talitha must be, and stumbled into her minutes later.

“Let’s get back to the horses,” she hissed. “They’ll be coming this way at any moment.”

The next several hours passed in a gray haze. I hardly remember the nightmare run back to the horses, or the frenzied ride through the forest. My first clear recollection came when we stopped during the early morning, back in the lower reaches of the canyon country.

Talitha had to pry my hands off the horse’s bridle, and pull me bodily off the horse. We were in a clump of trees in the bottom of a ravine; I didn’t remember how we got there.

The first words I remembered saying were, “I killed him.” After that, I collapsed into Talitha’s arms, and wept uncontrollably, for how long I don’t know.

She kept telling me over and over, “It’s okay, you saved my life, it’s okay.”

When she got me sufficiently under control, she had me sit on a rock, and she fixed a cold meal for us. After we ate bread and meat, and drank a few sips of water, she told me her side of the story.

“It took me longer to get to the camp than I thought. I was afraid you would shoot the arrow too soon, but the timing was perfect. You couldn’t have picked a better target, but it was at a bad angle for you. I’m surprised you hit it so easily. Anyway, as soon as the guards and the other outlaws ran for the other side of the camp, I made my way to the tent, and freed Nociar and Crispan. We managed to make it to the horses; it took a little doing to get them to mount bareback, but they got away. I hoped the rest of the horses would follow, but they were just milling around inside the enclosure for some reason. By the time I realized I had been discovered, it was too late to change directions. If you hadn’t shot those two men, I’d be dead now, or worse.

“I don’t remember that you were that skilled an archer. I’m just glad you were.”

“I’m not, really,” I said, my voice still shaky at the memory. “The Lord directed my eyes and hands. I didn’t really mean to kill anyone, I just...”

Here I started crying again. Talitha said sharply, “Let it go, Lysia. This was God’s doing, and he directed your hands, and the arrows. You said so yourself. Don’t you know who it was you killed?”

“How could I? I can hardly remember anything of that awful night, after I saw the arrow enter his eye.”

“That was Cornelius himself. He’s murdered, or been responsible for murdering, dozens of people; men, women, and children. He’s sold dozens more into slavery, including you. That was God’s judgment on him.”

It took a time of earnest prayer and confession, but I at last reconciled myself to what had happened. I never forgot, but by God’s grace I was able to forgive myself. After all, He had forgiven me; I could not cheapen his grace and mercy by holding onto my guilt.

We were many miles to the west of the main trail, where Marcus and his party had presumably escaped safely. Either he had passed through before the ambush was set, or the outlaws had decided the party was too strong to attack.

We rode over a mesa I remembered all too well. I wondered what had happened after that; perhaps Demetrius had returned, with more of his men, and driven Cornelius away from his old camp. In any event, we found the trail Nociar and I had used, and headed back toward the main road. We looked nervously about us at every turn of the trail; Demetrius probably had scouts in this whole area now. He must believe that Cornelius was still a threat.

I wondered, as I had so often in the past couple of days, where Marcus was, and if he was still safe. He may have escaped an attack by Cornelius’s band, but Demetrius was another matter. Nociar told me at one point that there were almost a hundred riders in the gang. Marcus had a large train of loaded horses with him; Demetrius might be willing to risk some losses for such a rich prize.

We saw the riders almost at the same time they saw us. Even as I groaned inwardly, “Not again!” there was a shout from off to our right, and the chase was on – again.

This time we were maneuvered into a narrow canyon, which opened to our left. It was only after we rounded a twisting curve that we discovered there was no way out; we were trapped. I felt like a mouse trying vainly to escape the claws of the cat.

“Up there in those rocks!” shouted Talitha. “It’s our only chance!”

We were far enough ahead of the outlaws to guide our horses up among the pile of boulders, and throw ourselves down behind the sheltering stones. Talitha grabbed her quiver and bow, which was already strung, and shouted a quick command to her pony. Her mount dropped quickly to the ground; my horse just stood there trembling, ready to bolt at the slightest provocation.

The first two riders in the onrushing bandits went down with arrows protruding from their throats. The rest drew rein, and scattered to find shelter. Two more of them went down before they could get out of harm’s way.

I counted eleven men diving for cover. Talitha didn’t have that many arrows left; only the Lord’s hand would see us out of this trap, but he had never failed us before.

For the rest of that dreary, hot afternoon, we held our attackers at bay, but we saw one of them slip away. More outlaws would be on the way soon, and they were unlikely to be merciful. There were a few half-hearted attempts to force us out of our hiding places, but a couple of well-placed arrows dimmed the outlaws' enthusiasm for a frontal assault.

Talitha was looking around her, her eyes coming back constantly to the steep slope behind us. "I think we can climb out," she said as the sun fell below the canyon wall.

"But – what about the horses?"

"Banda is an old and loyal friend, almost like a brother to me, but if we stay here we'll be dead. Demetrius will send in more men, and he won't stop until he gets us. I'll soon be out of arrows; I won't be able to stop any sort of big rush."

We had nothing to do but wait; if reinforcements arrived before it was dark enough to try our escape, we were done for. The thought of going to meet my Lord was pleasing to me, but I still believed the word of his angel. He still had a plan for me.

Talitha suddenly grabbed my arm, and gripped hard. "Can you see them?"

"See what?" My eyes strained in the dim twilight. I could see nothing except the rocks, dust, and scrub strewn over the canyon floor, and the occasional horse or outlaw.

"Oh, my!" breathed Talitha, her eyes directed toward the bend in the canyon. Then, at last, I saw them, too.

Marching side by side, straight down the middle of the canyon, came six of the largest men I had ever seen. They were dressed in glowing white, and each of them carried a flaming sword.

The outlaws saw them at the same time. There were screams and yells of sheer terror from all over the canyon. As one man, the bandits jumped up and dropped their weapons. Some of them grabbed for horses; others just took off running. The angels - I knew that's what they were – stood politely to one side, and within minutes not one outlaw was left in the canyon, except for those lying on the ground with arrows protruding from them. As soon as they left, the angels disappeared from our sight as well.

I turned exultantly toward Talitha, but she appeared to be listening to something. She nodded, and focused on me. "The Lord says there is one left in the canyon who is injured. We're supposed to bind his wound, and take him with us. There's a horse for him; we have to leave soon."

He was lying behind one of the boulders, an arrow shaft protruding from his leg. Blood was pooled around him, and he was unconscious. His head tossed from side to side, and he was groaning in an insistent cadence of pain.

"The arrow must come out," I said, my training as a Korei healer coming to the fore. "Lend me your knife, Talitha, and find me a strip of cloth from somewhere."

He was little more than a boy, not much older than Talitha or me. He cried out when I cut the arrowhead out of his flesh, rousing for a moment but fainting away again almost at once.

Blood was gushing from his leg, but Talitha had a strip of cloth ready – from her undergarment, I could tell. I bound the wound as tightly as I dared, and tied the bandage in place with another strip of cloth.

We lashed him into the saddle of a horse waiting patiently nearby; it occurred to me that my own horse had not bolted after all, even during the worst of the noise and conflict of the day.

“Ride with his horse next to yours,” Talitha told me, as she mounted Banda. “We have to leave right now, or we’ll get caught here for good. I just hope he’ll survive the ride, because we won’t be able to rest for hours to come.”

We tied him to his saddle, with his head over the horse’s neck. He was a tough young man. I had to steady him from time to time, and we had to adjust his bindings. His moans, though, less frequent as the night wore on, told us he was still very much alive.

Talitha finally spotted a small cave in the wall of a canyon we followed for several miles, though it led us well away from the main road. It was clean and dry, and actually had a dogleg inside that would allow us to build a fire without being spotted from outside. Best of all, there was a small stream of water at the back of the cave.

We brought our patient inside the cave, and I tended him while Talitha collected water for the horses in one of our leather saddle pouches. At long last, we could rest with some assurance of safety, and try to discover the Lord’s plan for the young man we had saved from slow death. I had no doubt that there was a plan; that had to be the point of all we had gone through this day.

As I cradled the man’s head in my lap, and dribbled some water down his parched throat, he opened his eyes, looked up at me, and smiled.

His first words startled me. “Are you an angel?”

I smiled back at him. “No, just a prisoner of the Lord.”

He looked puzzled. “But – I see no chains.”

“I am the slave of Christ. Where he sends me, I go; and what he commands, I do.”

“Oh,” he said, and closed his eyes again, a look of quiet acceptance on his face. He said no other word until the next day.

Talitha came back from her chores, and sat beside me.

“How is he?” she said, stroking his head.

“I think he’ll be fine. He was awake for a few minutes; he asked if I were an angel. I’ll have to clean his wound, and change his bandage.”

“An, angel, huh?” Talitha said, smiling at me with such tenderness it made my heart ache. “Well, that’s not so far from the truth, sister mine.”

I slept well that night, my dreams filled with happy visions of being carried to my wedding bed. It wasn’t just a dream, I knew, but a promise.