

Chapter 15

“My name is Diotrophes. My father is Demetrius. Why are you keeping me here?”

His voice was weak, but steady. We had tended him through the night, Talitha and I, and he managed to eat a little food during the morning. In place of the sense of wonder he had shown on awaking the night before was a look of hard, calculating suspicion. It was hard to believe he was the same man, but just now he looked every bit the son of a bandit.

“We brought you here to save your life. If we had left you there in the canyon, you would have bled to death.” I was trying to be patient, but I found it hard to deal with ingratitude.

He snorted at my last remark. “If you hadn’t shot me, I wouldn’t be here to begin with.”

Talitha came back from tending the horses just then. She wasn’t nearly as patient as I.

Tossing her head in anger, she said, “We can always take you back where we found you. If the Lord hadn’t told us to bring you along, you’d be buzzard food by now.”

Those last words seemed to strike a chord of memory with Diotrophes, and his face took on a look of puzzlement. “That dream I had, about an angel—it wasn’t a dream, was it?”

I smiled. “I’ve never been called an angel before. You were much nicer when you thought you were dreaming.”

He still looked puzzled. “No – it wasn’t your face I saw. I mean, I saw you, yes, and you spoke to me, but there was someone else there, sitting beside you. He was a very large man, like those I saw in the canyon before I passed out.”

Talitha and I exchanged glances. “Have you seen spirits before?” I asked.

He seemed reluctant to admit it, but nodded after a moment’s hesitation. “I see the spirits of the dead around us all the time. They are very ugly, but this spirit was beautiful.”

Something else came to his mind. “You were said you were a prisoner of the Lord. What gods do you worship? Who is your Lord?”

I praised God again for open doors. For the next hour, Talitha and I told him about Jesus. He listened attentively, but when we finished he said, “Well, maybe some time later I’ll want to know more. Not now, though.”

Talitha looked at him intently, then said, in a firm voice, “Demon of unbelief and demon of divination, I command you to loose your hold on him. Be gone *now*, in Jesus’ name.”

There was an almost audible *whoosh*, and the boy’s face cleared like the clouds after a summer storm. “Do you think – I’ve killed people... Could this Jesus ever forgive *me*?”

“If you ask him, and believe on him as the Son of God, of course he will forgive you.”

I led him to Christ then, and I don’t recall ever seeing some one so full of joy and peace as Diotrophes was after he accepted the Lord.

Later, as we shared a rabbit Talitha had killed, he shared a little of his story. “My mother died when I was a baby. I don’t even remember her. My father trained me to be his

successor from my earliest childhood. I learned to use a knife and a bow almost as soon as I learned to walk. When I turned twelve, my father began taking me on raids, against trading caravans from the east and against other outlaws. I killed a man when I was thirteen, and I've killed several more since. Thank God he's forgiven me; it will take me a while to forgive myself."

I asked him if he had seen another group of travelers before his group attacked us. He nodded. "A large group came through the day before, but they were too large for us. We sent messengers ahead to let my father know about them, but I doubt he would have gotten to them in time. Our men are scattered all over right now, looking for travelers to rob; things are pretty bad with the drought. Most of the traffic we see comes from the east, where the merchant caravans travel, but not many are coming now. I've heard that even the Mardath is drying up."

The prophecy was coming true; God cannot lie. That struck a chord in my spirit, but the main thing that thrilled me was knowing that Marcus was still safe.

Over the next couple of days, as Diotrophes' leg continued to mend, we answered endless questions about the Way. Talitha still had a few scrolls of the writings of Paul with her, but we had no copy of the Gospels. We answered his questions from memory, but we could not answer them all.

The day came when Diotrophes thought he could mount a horse. Walking still caused him some discomfort, but his wound was closed, and healing well. I was anxious to set out after Marcus, who now had a lead of several days over us, so I was more than willing to let him make the effort.

We made our way back toward the main trail, and Diotrophes did very well. He was young and strong, used to hardship. When we approached the road early in the afternoon, we stopped.

"Talitha and I can't go on with you. Your father and his men will still want to kill us, after what happened in the canyon. Can you make it from here?"

"They won't hurt you, not now. I won't allow it. Come with me, and tell them about Jesus. My father won't listen, but some of them will."

I smiled at him, a little sadly. "Even you couldn't stop Demetrius if he wanted us dead. I think you know that. The job of sharing Jesus with the others is yours; the Lord has appointed you for it. That's what all of this, all you've gone through, is all about."

He thought for a minute, then nodded. "Yes, I can see that. Will I ever see you again?"

"By God's grace, we'll be back this way one day, but it may not be for a long time. We have a dangerous road ahead of us. We're going through the Mardath, and on through the Kore to Tirzah, and beyond."

He was horrified. "But, that's certain death. Why would you ever want to go there?"

"We came from there, and that's where my husband is going. God will watch over us, just as he has in the Badlands."

Again he sat silent, this time for quite a while. “Let me help you, at least. I can lead you through the Badlands. I know all of the back trails, and ways through the canyons that not many use, not even of our people.”

I looked toward Talitha, and back to Diotrophes. “Okay, that makes sense. Where do we go from here?”

He pointed to his left. “That canyon is steep, and narrow in several places, but it’s the quickest way north if you’re headed for the Mardath. It comes out several miles west of the main road, which is already bending toward the east by then. I hear there’s a secret trail through the Mardath in that direction, but you probably know about that already.”

I nodded. “We do. I think I remember seeing the far end of that canyon as we came south.”

It took two days for us to navigate the canyon. At one point, here had been a shallow water hole about mid way through, but it was dried up. The heat between the high canyon walls was oppressive, and I knew the horses must be suffering terribly. We rationed our water as carefully as we could, but our water skins were dry by the beginning of the second day. All I could think of through that terrible day was finding water. None of us spoke, but Diotrophes carried a cheerful look on his face.

At long last, we rounded the last curve of the canyon, and caught sight once more of the Mardath at the bottom of the slope below the canyon mouth. It was not as I remembered it.

“Talitha, look!” My voice came out as little more than a croak. It’s *dry!*”

Where there should have been swamp grass and standing water, there was a sea of brown, rotting vegetation. Even the trees, whose roots normally stood in water, were dying.

Talitha looked around. “Over there – to the west. The water’s deeper there, and there are still some pools.”

Our horses smelled water, and we could hardly restrain them as they made for the stagnant pools. As before, we dropped some grain into one of the ponds, with a prayer, and allowed the horses to drink their fill. Diotrophes didn’t question what we had done; he saw us as giants of faith, I knew, despite all of my assurances there was nothing special about us.

We filled our water skins from a different part of the same pool, after we satisfied our thirst. The water was warm and brackish, but drinkable. We shared a simple meal of bread and meat back on drier ground, our first since our water gave out. Diotrophes rose to his feet after we finished.

“I must go now. My father probably thinks I’m dead, and I’m eager to tell him and the others about Jesus. Even if he won’t listen, I have to tell him. I’ll head for the road, which is a lot easier to travel.”

Our farewells were tender, but not tearful. Each of us knew what was required and expected of Diotrophes, but my own thoughts were directed far to the north. By now, Marcus must be on the Kore, and in more danger than ever. Talitha was reserved toward Diotrophes, more so than she needed to be. I suspected she liked him rather more than

she would admit, but maybe she was preoccupied as well. She did gaze after the young man rather wistfully as he rode out of sight.

We reached the trail through the Mardath before dark, but decided to camp outside the swamp for the first night. Even as dry as it was, the Mardath was not a safe place to travel in the dark, much less to sleep in. Our camp was on a level place back up the slope from the swamp.

A fire wasn't safe, and not really needed on such a warm night, unusual for this time in the fall. There might be predators around, but our horses would give us warning if anything approached. Talitha and I sat around for a while before lying down for the night.

"What do you think of Diotrophes?" I asked her.

"He'll do well as a witness for the Lord, I think," she said, dropping her eyes from mine.

"That's not really what I'm asking, sister mine. Do you think he's attractive?"

Even in the failing light, I could see her blush. "I really hadn't noticed," she said. She never was a good liar; lying never came naturally to her.

I smiled. "Oh, Talitha, you are such a transparent liar. I saw the way you looked at him, even in the cave, when you thought no one noticed."

Her face got even redder. "I don't know what you're talking about. Just because I look at an attractive man doesn't mean anything. I'm still single, and there are a lot of them around."

I let it drop there, and turned the conversation to something less embarrassing. It wouldn't do to dwell too much on Diotrophes anyway. We probably would never see him again, my promise notwithstanding. Talitha didn't need that kind of distraction in the weeks and months ahead; one man troubling our thoughts was enough.

We started our trip through the Mardath the next morning. The marks setting out the path were hardly necessary now; most of it was high and dry, and even the parts still covered by water were easy to make out. We made excellent time, and by mid afternoon we were at the first island, a trip that normally took all day. Not wanting to risk traveling further, we stopped there, and set up camp. Talitha found a large snake nearby, and we had our first hot meal since we had left the cave.

Our trip the following morning was uneventful for a while, until almost noon. That's when we saw the first dead cattle, their rotting remains lying in and about a stinking pool. About a mile farther on, we saw more, along with some horses.

"Those are Korei ponies," Talitha said in a hushed voice. "They must be desperate to try this. It's been only six months, but six months without rain... I wonder if any of the Korei tried to drink this water themselves?"

The stench in the place was overpowering, even for the Mardath. We left hurriedly; even our horses were nervous and jittery. Neither of us said anything more.

The trail made a sharp bend to the right. As soon as we made the turn, we stopped our horses dead in their tracks. Lying by the path were bodies, several of them, lying about like discarded firewood. Their clothing clearly marked them as Korei.