

Chapter Two

“It is fortunate for you, girl, that the Great Bear chose to see that vile red water as a sign from the gods, or you’d be dead by now. This is absolutely more than we’ll tolerate from you.”

I could not help trembling as I knelt before my master. He was sitting in the seat of judgment, with Maritsa standing behind him. Both of them were stony-faced; I had never seen Bantal so angry, especially not at me. It occurred to me that my plan, clever as it was, had not worked out as I had anticipated; I’ve always had a talent for understatement. How was I to know that that sneak Bernice would see me leaving the clothier’s room with the dye? I certainly couldn’t be expected to know that the Great Bear himself would crash the party.

“Your mother has pleaded for mercy for you, as she has often in these past three years, but this time her tears don’t move me. Lydia loved you like a child, but the only gratitude and respect you’ve shown for her memory is to become more rebellious with each passing year. Well, your insolence and rebellion will come to a stop now. Tomorrow you’ll be sold at the slave market, to the highest bidder. May the Great Bear have pity on you, for I will not.”

“But, Master,” I pleaded, finally beginning to panic.

“Silence!” Bantal roared. “You will not speak unless spoken to. Be thankful I have not beaten you to within an inch of your miserable life. Maybe your next master will beat some sense into you. Now, report to Barak, the overseer. He’ll put you with the field slaves until you’re sent to the market tomorrow.”

I decided then and there I would never submit to being sold like an animal, a decision I couldn’t live always up to. Meekly I bowed out of the presence of my master and mistress; he never dreamed I would disobey this command along with so many others. I slipped quickly away from his public room along familiar hallways until I came to one of the many staircases to the second floor of the villa. This time, I looked around carefully until I was sure I wasn’t being watched, then all but ran up the stairs. I knew my mother’s quarters would be empty – at least they should have been. As I entered the door I had entered so often before, I heard the sound of sobbing coming from the far side of the room. My mother was lying on her face on the floor, weeping as if the world had come to an end, as indeed it had for her.

I threw myself to the floor beside her, adding my tears to her. She started, then raised up enough to turn her face toward me.

“Lysia! What are you doing here? You should be with Barak by now!”

“I’m running away, Mother. I will not be bought and sold again, like a sheep or a cow. I came to get a few things, then I’ll get out of here by the back ways. I know how.”

“But, Lysia, child, where will you go? You know no one outside this house, and the world is a very dangerous place for a young girl.”

“I don’t know,” I said stubbornly, “but I’ll survive. I can take care of myself.”

She looked at me hard for a moment. “Yes, I think you can. Your father’s blood is strong in you. Wait, let me think... I know – you must go and see Garris. He’s a seller of pots in the market; you remember the place. I did a kindness for him once, when his wife was sick, and he has always said he would repay the debt when I asked. Go to him, quickly, and tell him Mari is claiming payment. He will take care of you. Now, go quickly child, before the master begins a search for you. He’ll look here first. Go down the back way; the other slaves don’t know your punishment yet – I pray.”

After helping me gather a small bundle of clothes and a few personal treasures, my mother gave me a quick, fierce hug, and sent me on my way. Tears still dimmed my eyes as I headed for the stairs, and I brushed them fiercely away as I headed back downstairs. Some of the other slaves looked at me curiously, but they were used to seeing me act in unpredictable ways. I even grabbed a quick snack from the kitchen on my way out of one of the side entrances.

The morning sun was bright and hot on the top of my head; it would soon be noon, and the master would be sitting down to eat his midday meal. I scurried as fast as I could to a tree-shaded path through the gardens, away from the sun and from prying eyes. In a few chest-pounding minutes I was away, and out on the dirty, busy streets of Tirzah. The villa was not far from the market, and I blended in with the sweating, hurried mass heading in that direction. I was not used to being there on the streets by myself, but I had done it often enough with my mother. The way was a familiar one.

Doing my best to stay out of everyone’s way, I wound my way through the maze of carts and stalls until I came to the booth of Garris. He was a stout, kindly man, with a face lined with years of toil, and years of laughs and smiles. At the moment, his shock of gray hair was bobbing up and down in agreement as he settled on the purchase price of a large iron pot with a plump customer.

“Yes, Doria, that’s agreeable, certainly a fair price. You know I always strike a fair bargain. Besides, I could never cheat a sister in the Lord.”

Just then he spotted me. “Why, it’s young Lysia, Mari’s daughter. What are you doing here alone, child? Is your mother well?”

I swallowed hard, and said boldly, “Mari says she wishes repayment of your debt to her.”

His face changed from a jovial expression of greeting to one of concern.

“Certainly, child. What’s wrong?”

I glanced toward the woman, who stood patiently waiting to pay for her purchase.

“Don’t worry about her, child. You can say anything in front of her, just as you can with me.”

Quickly, I told him my story, leaving a few of the details he didn’t need to know, like the nature of the offense that had brought on my crisis.

Garris’s expression changed to one of anxious sympathy. He looked carefully around, as if to be certain no one else had overheard. “The Lord tells us we should serve our masters well, but he says nothing about sitting quietly by, while we’re being sold. We

have to get you somewhere safe quickly, because Bantal will surely send the authorities after you.”

Doria interrupted at this point. “Let me take the child, Garris. I’ll take care of her, until we can decide what to do. I’m certain the brethren will want to help, once you bring the situation before the assembly.”

I was a little puzzled by the references. Rumors of a new religious sect had reached the villa, but no one seemed to know much about it. Those who did know weren’t talking; practicing another faith other than worship of the Bear was an offense punishable by death in Tirzah. Doria was speaking in little more than a whisper; it would not do for the wrong person to overhear these remarks.

Garris nodded in quick agreement. “Take the pot – I’ll consider it as part of my debt to Mari. Go quickly; someone may remember seeing the girl with you. God bless you, Lysia. I’ll see you again soon, and I’ll get word to your mother somehow.”

Doria clutched her pot under one arm, and grabbed my arm with her free hand. In spite of her soft, flabby appearance, her grip was surprisingly strong. She whisked me through the throngs in the marketplace, and into the surrounding streets, in a direction I had never been. Minutes later, she turned into a shabby-looking tenement, and ushered me ahead of her up the stairs.

My nose, already assaulted by the floods of unwashed humanity in the streets, and the dirt and filth underfoot, had to contend with a myriad of new unpleasant sensations. Smells of rotting food, unclean chamber pots, and various stages of cooking washed over me. It was hard not to gag, but I didn’t want to offend my benefactor. Before long, I would ignore the odors as easily as she did.

Doria’s tenement was clean, in marked contrast, no doubt, to most of the others. She explained to me that she was a widow, eking out a bare living taking in laundry, and cleaning houses for those better off than her. The pot she had brought home would have been an extravagant purchase had she paid for it, though Garris would probably have sold it to her at a loss. I didn’t stop to think at the time what a great hardship having another mouth to feed represented for her. I blithely assumed that everyone had all the money they needed, not questioning where it came from. True, I had been a slave, but a much pampered one, who had never known want before now.

In the days following, Doria set me to work helping with the laundry, and with the cleaning chores around her little home. I had enough of a sense of gratitude not to complain at the unaccustomed physical labor. Actually, I enjoyed the feeling of doing something useful, for a change. At first, Doria didn’t take me along when she had cleaning jobs, for fear I would be recognized by some friend of Bantal. One of her clients, though, was also a friend, so one morning she told me to come along.

The house we visited was modest, not one inhabited by the nobility. Most of the places she cleaned were part-time residences, visited only on rare occasions by the owners. This one, though, had the look and feel of someone’s home, someone well enough off to own his own dwelling, but not enough to have full-time staff.

The woman who greeted us at the door had the same look of quiet peace and contentment that Doria always exhibited. “Why, Doria, it is so good to see you, always! Is this the young woman you told me of?”

I did a polite curtsy as Doria did the honors. “This is Lysia, my ward. Lysia, this is my dear friend and sister in the Lord, Nyla.”

I was a bit taken aback by the warm hug the other woman gave me in greeting. “Come in, Lysia. My home is yours. May the Lord bless you this day, and every day.”

Her words weren’t just a greeting. Two days later, Doria took me back to the home, this time accompanied by my few worldly possessions. My dear host of the last couple of weeks wept as she said farewell, promising to come back to see me often. I made no effort to hide my own tears; I knew when I was being loved, and being loved made me think of my mother, whom I might never see again.

Nyla embraced me again once Doria left, more firmly than she had in greeting. When she released me, she still held me at arm’s length.

“L’nai hachté, n’isia!”

I understood the greeting well. “Blessings and peace, my daughter.” It was my native tongue, the tongue of Berith. Seeing the wonderment come over my face, she laughed, a tinkling, pleasant laugh that warmed me to the tip of my toes.

“I, too, am a daughter of Berith, carried here as a slave when I was about your age. My husband bought me, but later freed me and made me his bride. He is a merchant of cloth, one who travels to other places to buy and sell. He will love you as much as I do, once he returns. Come, let me show you your room.”

I soon discovered that I was to have not only a room, but a roommate. The slender, dark-haired girl who rose to greet us as we entered wasn’t much older than me. Her brown eyes were full of both fire and laughter. With just a glance, I knew I had found a friend, a lifelong friend.

“Lysia, this is Talitha. She has agreed to let you share her room. Think of her as your sister.”

Our eyes met, and we both smiled at once. Talitha offered me her hand in greeting, and I gripped it without hesitation.

“M’istra, l’isnai,” she said. In the tongue of my mother, “Welcome, my sister.”

I couldn’t help myself. I cried again. For the first time since Lydia had died, I felt comforted and at peace.

The next few days were among the happiest of my short life. Talitha and I talked for long hours, sharing our most intimate thoughts. She laughed and cried with me as I told the story of the blood-red water that had flushed me out of my home, even as she chided me in mock disapproval for being such a scoundrel. We wept together at the story of the destruction of my birthplace, and of the loss of the father I never really knew. She seemed almost embarrassed in sharing her own story, one of a secure, loving home, of two parents who loved each other as deeply as they loved her.

“But,” she said finally, “There is One we love even more. You’ve seen Mama and I talking with him since you’ve been with us. I’d like to introduce you to Him soon, but Mama says we should wait a while, until Papa comes home.”

I gathered she was talking about some kind of god, a dangerous one in this stronghold of the Great Bear. The thought was exciting to me; I always enjoyed a hint of danger. It never occurred to me that the introduction she promised would be the central event of my life.