

Chapter 21

The troopers in front of us in the column, and a part of the guards around us, peeled off toward the rear. The rest galloped forward, with us in tow, and the priest at the front. We weren't far from the frontier border posts, but these were too lightly manned to hold off a major attack. Besides, the Korei were certainly aware of the side trails, like the one we used in our escape. I wondered why they hadn't already invaded the plateau; the force they were pursuing before, and attacking now, couldn't have stopped them. The nearest fortifications, of any strength, were closer to Tirzah itself, well inside the plateau.

Some of my questions were soon answered; the burned out border posts, some hastily repaired, spoke of an earlier attack. Evidence of fire, and a number of fresh graves, extended all the way up the winding path, and into the edges of the plateau itself. Several of the deserted villages had been razed to the ground; burnt red splotches spoke in grisly reminder of the fierce fighting that had recently raged here. The line of destruction ended abruptly several miles into the plateau, and the guards finally allowed our winded horses to slow to a walk. In front of us was a line of recently erected defenses consisting of mounds of dirt and stone, and ragged wooden walls. The positions appeared to be thinly manned, and I wondered how long they would stop several thousand warriors of the Ghost Talkers.

The priest hailed the guards at the gate that blocked the road. "I am Rechab, of the Truth Police of the Great Bear, and I bring prisoners for judgment."

"Where are the others of the field army we sent? Are you all that's left?"

"We may be," answered one of the guards grimly. "We defeated the Korei several days since, but this morning they attacked us again, from the rear. I don't know how long our men can hold them."

There was some discussion inside the makeshift fort, then the gate swung open. Anxious faces greeted us as we rode through, and I could see a messenger already galloping ahead of us to carry the news. At Rechab's insistence, the guards were given fresh mounts; the needs of our mounts were ignored.

We rode on into the night, pausing occasionally to allow our horses to rest. Only when we reached the main line of outer fortifications did we stop. At that point, we were given our first food of the day; since that morning, all that we had was water, and precious little of that. As soon as we were placed in a cold stone cell, all of us fell to the floor, exhausted, and went to sleep on the dirt, unmindful of physical discomfort.

The next morning, we learned by what we overheard that the force that had won such a spectacular victory days before had been all but wiped out. The Korei had broken through the first line of defenses, and were even now moving toward the place where we spent the night.

"Do you think the defenses here will hold?" asked Marcus, as we shared the scant meal provided to us.

"I think so," I responded. "The Korei have no skill in storming strong fortifications, or conducting a long siege. Except for one time long ago, they have never broken through to attack Tirzah itself, and that time they had help from traitors inside the walls. They

will probably pillage the countryside, and burn the villages, like the ones we saw yesterday. This time, most of the people have already been moved to safety. I wish I knew what happened before we got here, but we'll find out eventually. What we need to be concerned about is the Bear's court of justice; we should be in Tirzah by tonight, and the trial, such as it is, will probably take place tomorrow. We need to pray, together, that God will protect us."

After our prayer time, Mazi tugged at my sleeve, and leaned over to whisper in my ear. "I think Brutellas is ready to receive Christ now, if you ask."

The big man had been silent through the entire trip, other than the occasional word to Mazi. He was never much of a talker, despite his teasing, and he seemed to be deep in thought for the last few days. I looked toward him; his head was sunk on his chest, but he wasn't asleep, I thought. An idea occurred to me.

I whispered back to Mazi. "Why don't you lead him to Christ? It will mean a great deal to him – and to you."

She hesitated for just an instant, then smiled and nodded. Moving across the cell to where he sat, she sat down beside him, and took each of his huge hands in one of her small ones. He looked up, startled out of his reverie, then smiled that same dreamy smile he used around her.

In halting common speech, the tongue of the Greeks, she asked, "Brutellas, would you like to accept the Christ as your Savior and Lord?"

Tears welled up in his big eyes, and he said, in a voice shaking with emotion, "Oh, yes, I've been waiting for someone to ask."

She led him through the plan of salvation, with a little help from me on the harder words. When the time came to pray, I couldn't resist peeping; tears were streaming down in rivers from Mazi's eyes, as well as those of Brutellas. I wept a little myself, and I suspected the other two did, as well. It was a sweet, beautiful prayer, with Brutellas's deep bass echoing the clear soprano of Mazi. When it was finished, Brutellas gathered the girl in his arms, and she lifted her parted lips to his. Both of them had gained something precious, along with the most precious gift of salvation.

At mid morning, unusually late by the schedule we had come to expect, we were herded out of the cell, and loaded onto our ponies. The Tirzans were as confident as I was, evidently, that the Korei could not break through the walls. It was well after sunset when we reached the outer walls of Tirzah itself. Conflicting emotions washed over me once more, just as they had in days past. Little had changed in the few years since I had left, except the buildings seemed somewhat less grand and a little more time-worn than they seemed through the eyes of childhood.

We rounded a corner near the main square, where the palace stood, headed for the prison. Things happened so quickly then it took a few moments to grasp what was happening. Several men sprang at us out of the darkness, and dragged both the guards and the priest from their horses. The guards put up only token resistance; some of them actually seemed to be helping our attackers. In short order, the guards and the priest were tied up and gagged at the side of the street, and our bonds were cut.

“Quickly,” a familiar voice said. More guards could come at any minute. We’ll take care of the horses; leave them, and come with me.”

Something clicked in my memory; it was Andreas, once more coming to our rescue. He and some others hustled us into a nearby building, then out a side entrance into an alleyway. It was only a short walk from there to a familiar place: one of the entrances to the catacombs. The place still smelled of death, but there was life there, as well.

Once we were all safely inside, to the amazement of everyone but Talitha and I, Andreas dropped back to greet us. “You have grown in these past years, Sister Lysia, as has my dear little sister, Talitha.”

He gave us both a hug and a kiss, and greeted the others in the same friendly way, as brethren. We resumed walking then, and he continued to talk as we walked. “All of us have many questions, I know, but right now just let me tell you how we came to rescue you. The messenger sent to warn the city about the Korei, from the first defenses, is one of us, a follower of the Way. He contacted me, and from his description, based on only a hurried glance, I suspected who you were. Many of the Bear’s soldiers are Christians now, meaning they are always in danger of discovery and arrest. That included some of your guards, which made your rescue that much easier.

“Since Nyla was murdered, and you two and Portius were chased out of Tirzah, the Truth Police have done their best to try to destroy the church, but all they’ve done is make us stronger. Nyla was our first martyr, but there have been many others. We’re near a place where you can rest, but I’ll stop talking right now. I have to run ahead and see that everything is ready for you.”

The place we came to was the same at which Portius, Talitha and I had rested after Nyla’s death. Several people were there waiting for us, including a couple of others whose faces I remembered.

Doria was a bit thinner since I had last seen her, and she had a few more gray hairs, but otherwise she hadn’t changed. She had the same sweet, humble spirit, and the same soft voice. “Lysia, my child, it is such a blessing to know you’re still alive and safe. My, but you’ve grown! And this – must be Talitha, Nyla’s daughter. Such a lovely young woman you’ve become!”

I introduced the others; Marcus instantly attained special status as my husband. All of those in the circle of friends and brethren around us were thrilled to learn that we all were believers. They were fascinated to learn that Mazi was one of the long-feared and hated Korei, but they were awe-struck by Brutellas. He was the biggest man they had ever seen, and his being a brand new Christian was a cause for rejoicing, almost as much as our rescue.

Garris was the next to greet us. He and Doria were now husband and wife; his own wife had died during the first purge of Christians when Nyla died.

Once the round of greetings was over, some of the brethren brought us food and wine, more food than we had had in weeks. I had forgotten, since leaving Kirjath, how sweet the fellowship of the brethren could be. We had communion afterward, my first in Tirzah since the night of my baptism. After the service was finished, it was at last time to sit in the presence of the brethren and share our stories. It took a long time to relate the tale of

our escape from Tirzah, once we were safe outside the walls, and our years among the Korei. Many eyes were wet with tears as I told the story of the last charge of the Horse-Eaters, and the death of Portius. When I recounted the story of my courtship and marriage, smiles replaces the tears, and the attack of Laksu brought gasps of horror.

Once I finished, with the story of our capture by the Tirzan field army and our trip to the plateau, there was a long silence. Someone began singing a hymn of praise, very softly, and the rest joined in. I wasn't familiar with the song, but it was a simple melody with simple words, and I soon picked it up. Brutellas, Marcus and Mazi didn't understand the words, but they hummed the melody. Talitha, who had been serving as their translator, told them what the words meant, then joined the rest of us.

My own questions, including a burning one about my mother, would have to wait, or so I thought, because the hour must be very late. We had arrived at Tirzah after nightfall, and several hours must have passed since our rescue. I, for one, was ready for a good night's rest, my first in a long time in a secure place.

Someone came in at that point, and whispered something in Andreas's ear. He looked at me, back at the messenger, then back at me. A smile crossed his lips.

"Lysia, my sister, I have a surprise for you, one I didn't expect tonight. Someone has come to see you. Wait right there for just a few minutes."

I was puzzled as to whom it might be, and nothing resonated in my spirit. I hoped I knew, but it seemed too good to hope for, in this day of surprises and wonders. As soon as the figure appeared in the room, stepping into the light of the torches, all wondering was gone. I sprang to my feet, and ran across the room, my arms open wide.

"Mother! Mother! Oh, praise be to God, is it really you?"

She met me half way across the room, and gathered me into her arms, sobbing my name over and over. I never wanted to let her go, and she finally had to push away, trembling as if afraid I might suddenly disappear.

Words tumbled out on top of each other, and I said, laughing, "You first, Mother. There's just so much to tell."

Her eyes were bright with love and joy. "We will talk later, my daughter, but first there are two others here to meet you. I wanted to let you know first, to ease the shock of it all."

She turned toward the same dark corridor from which she had come. "It's okay. You can come in now."

When two more people came into the room, I all but fainted in utter astonishment. I recognized both of them instantly; how could I not?

Walking toward me, arms raised in greeting, and faces wreathed in smiles, were the two people I would have expected to see least of all.

One was my old master, Bantal. Walking just behind him was my former mistress, Maritsa.