

Chapter 22

I met Bantal and Maritsa half way across the room as well, but only because I didn't move from where I was. They came to me; I bowed my head, suddenly overcome by shame and remorse. My mother stepped away from me, and I felt a hand fall on my shoulder. I looked up into eyes so kind and forgiving I started crying all over again.

"Oh, Bantal," I said, between sobs, "Can you ever forgive me for what I did to you, in payment for your kindness?"

He just hugged me, and said, "Lysia, my sweet child, I forgave you long ago. Since my Lord Jesus has forgiven me so much, how could I not forgive you? Since Mari led me to the Lord, during the persecution, both you and she have been my sisters in Christ, and I have never ceased to pray for you. Maritsa is at peace as well, and she wants you to embrace you, too."

After I greeted Maritsa, who embraced me as warmly as had Bantal, there was yet another round of introductions. My mother greeted Marcus as if she had borne him in her own womb, and I saw my husband weep openly and publicly for the first time. She remembered Talitha as a child, since she and Nyla often worshipped together in secret.

Marcus and I were permitted to sleep together in private that night for the first time. We knew each as man and wife, but I was a little disappointed. This cold chamber in the catacombs did not fit my dream of a marriage bed, sweet as our time together was. Marcus fell to sleep before I did, and I could not keep myself from crying a little in disappointment.

Some time during the night, I awoke up with an overpowering sense of fear. I opened my eyes, and saw a light across the room, where there should be no light. Looking closer, I saw there were things moving inside the light, and these slowly resolved themselves into a clear vision.

In the middle of the scene was a wall, high and strong. On one side, a horde of foxes was pressing against the wall; on the other, a group of rabbits was trying to hold up the wall, and keep it from falling on top of them. Suddenly, one of the rabbits, with the face of a man, broke away from the others, and ran unnoticed to a gate in a distant part of the wall. He opened the gate, and the foxes streamed through, slaughtering all of the rabbits.

I cried out in terror, knowing at once what the vision meant. Marcus stirred beside me.

"What's wrong, dear one," he asked sleepily. "Did you have a bad dream?"

"Not just a dream, husband; a vision. Someone inside the outer fortress is going to betray us, and let the Korei through. We have to warn them before it's too late!"

"But, Lysia, it's the middle of the night, and the fortifications are miles away. Besides, it may not mean anything at all. Just what did you see?"

I should have known better than to tell him about the foxes and rabbits; he just started laughing.

"Please, Marcus," I said, as he struggled to control himself, "I know what this means. I saw the face of the man who is planning to let the Korei through. I have to tell Andreas."

Ignoring his protests, I got dressed, lit a torch, and went down the narrow corridors to the main chamber, where we had met before. Most of the people who had been there earlier had left for their own homes, but one of the few who stayed behind was Andreas. He remained under a death sentence, and couldn't risk sleeping in the world above. At the first gleam of my torch, when it fell on his face, he was fully awake.

"Who is it? Oh – Lysia, what's wrong?"

I told him of my vision, and what I thought it meant. Unlike Marcus, he did not laugh; his face was grim.

"You say he has a red beard, streaked with gray, and a scar below his eye? That couldn't apply to many men there. I'll send one of our young men to contact one of the Bear's officers, who follows the Way. He can send out a messenger tonight, and perhaps we can stop the treachery before it happens."

He got up, and went to rouse one of the men who stayed there just for such purposes. Knowing I could do no more but pray, I returned to our sleeping chamber. Marcus was already asleep again, which did not improve my opinion of him. I considered awakening Talitha and the others, but decided against it. They deserved their rest, and I had already done what the Lord wanted me to do.

The next day, my mother returned, and we got to spend some time catching up. Bantal had given her freedom after she led him and Maritsa to Christ, but she chose to remain with him. She continued to do what she had done for years before, directing the household slaves in preparing meals, keeping the estate in order, and entertaining guests.

Marcus joined us shortly after we started talking. He waited patiently for a while, but I could tell he was burning to ask my mother about the temple of the Hagath. My mother also knew he wanted to ask something, too, but she let him wait while we caught up on the last several years of our lives. She finally took pity on him, and turned toward him with a smile, taking one of his hands in hers.

"And now, son Marcus, I know there is a burning question you want to ask me. If I can answer it, I will."

"Well, Mari – Mother – I have read a scroll, with Lysia's help, about the treasure of the Hagath. That's why I started north. There's no use in my denying it; she'll tell you if I don't. I was wondering what you can tell me about the legend. The scroll says that, on the winter solstice, at noon, the rays of the sun will reveal the entrance of the sacred temple. Is there any truth to the legend? Is the treasure of the temple real?"

The smile disappeared from my mother's face, which went ashen white. "The Hagath were an evil race, worshippers of devils and demons. Their temple is an accursed place, and none who have entered there have ever returned. Yes, it exists, and its location is well known among the people of Berith. What the rays of the sun reveal is a secret indentation in a great slab that lies over the pit that leads into the temple. The entry key is so cleverly hidden that you can look directly at it, and not see it, until it is revealed by the sun.

"Once the door slides away, it stays open only for a short while, and slides back again. There is supposed to be a legend inside, at the treasure chamber, that tells how to open it

again, but it is written in the priestly script of the Hagath, which no one but a very few still understand. The script covers the slab itself, but none of us know its meaning. Please, don't even think of going there, Marcus, if you love Lysia, and love life."

I could tell by the stubborn set of his jaw that my husband was not convinced. "There must be a way," he muttered, more to himself than to us. When he spoke to my mother directly, though, he said, "I suppose you're right, Mari. I'd still like to visit Berith, though. Maybe I can discover something there. Besides, I'm sure Lysia would like to see the land of her birth once more."

Something flashed in my mind, and I forgot about the Hagath, treasure, and even Berith. I could feel the blood drain from my own face, but not because of the accursed temple. "Oh, God protect us! I know whose face I saw. Crispan – he has red hair; even with the beard, I should have recognized him. The scar – it must have come while he was held captive by Cornelius's men. I must find Talitha."

She wasn't far away. "Talitha, think back – the night we rescued Crispan and Nociar, do you remember if Crispan had a scar on his face, below his right eye?"

"It was very dark, but – yes, I saw him in the light from the fire. I didn't think anything about it then, but he did have a livid scar below his eye, and I believe it was his right eye. Why?"

"That face I saw in my vision; it was Crispan's face. He's going to betray us all. Oh, Talitha, why didn't I just let him die?"

"You were repaying a debt to Nociar, not to him. You did what God led you to do. What Crispan chooses to do is not your fault; it's his."

Nothing more was said, but I passed through what I assumed was the day – I couldn't tell day and night down here – with a heavy sense of foreboding, and more than a little guilt that I might be responsible for, not just one death, but thousands.

When a blood-spattered soldier staggered into our midst, I had no doubt about the kind of news he carried. Andreas and my mother tended to him; he was near exhaustion, but not wounded. The blood on his uniform was not his own, but that of a comrade who didn't make it back.

After he caught his breath, and drank deeply from a water skin, the man told his story. "Lucius, our commander, sent us in the night to warn the garrison of the betrayal. We got there too late to stop the gate from being opened, but a company of our men arrived soon enough to stop the warriors who tried to come through. It was a hard fight, and my friend Aurelius, who went with me, died in my arms. The red-haired man escaped, but I gave a description of him to my captain. He sent me to tell you the news. The Great Bear will reward him for saving us all from disaster, but he knows the credit goes to the Lord. All who follow Christ will know the truth."

So Crispan had escaped again; the man was as slippery as a pig greased for the games. I wondered if Nociar was also alive. He deserved better of life than to be Crispan's lackey.

Later that same evening, Bantal appeared once more, alone this time. He came immediately to me. After greeting me with a holy kiss, in the manner of the Way, he took me aside, out of earshot of the others.

In a quiet voice, he said, "I have a request for you, my sister. It is a dangerous task, and not one I ask lightly, but you are the one the Lord has selected."

He paused, waiting for me to respond. "Bantal, I owe you my very life. How could I refuse you anything, no matter how dangerous it might be?"

Tears brimmed in his eyes. "I knew you would be willing; Maritsa said you would be. This is difficult to confess, but let me just say it. Many years ago, while I was still married to Lydia, I had an affair with a woman in the Bear's court, a lady-in-waiting for one of the Bear's wives. She bore me a son, but I didn't find that out until the boy was seven years old. I don't know how the woman even escaped execution, unless she told everyone the child belonged to some man at the courts. The Bear is very jealous of his wives, but his servants are free to find love where they can, as long as it's inside the palace. If someone in the Bear's service has a child by someone outside the palace, that contaminates the Bear's person, the priests say. Both the child and the parents would be executed.

"As I say, I discovered the child was mine when he was seven; before that, I hadn't even seen him. I saw it in his eyes; it was like looking in a mirror. I managed to confront his mother, and she admitted I was the father. I followed the child as he grew, but I made no attempt to contact him. His mother died last year, refusing with her last breath to accept Christ when one of the brethren tried to share the plan of salvation.

"I have a heavy burden for my son to accept Christ, but he has been as stubborn as his mother. He is now a priest, and is close to those who minister to the Great Bear himself. The Lord has shown me, and Maritsa, that you, and you alone, can reach him. I don't know why this is so, but I know without any doubt that it is. I have enough influence in the palace to get you into the inner circle of those who attend the Bear at all of his meals. Tacitus, my son, is always present as well, as one of the priests who attend to assure that the Bear's every command is carried out.

"What I'm asking you to do is dangerous, not only because Tacitus may have you killed himself, but because someone may recognize you, even after all of these years. Now that you know what it required, do you still want to agree to my request?"

"The Lord's hand is in this," I said, not hesitating. "This may be the opening we need to reach some of the priests of the cult of the Bear for Christ. Just tell me what I need to do to get into the palace."