

## Chapter 24

“I found the original plans for the palace in some old scrolls in the library,” Bantal said. “That was one advantage to being the royal librarian, though I never thought I would have a need for them at the time. After I became a Christian, the advantages were obvious.”

We were in the same cavern in the catacombs where we had been before I went to the palace. Thanks to Bantal’s knowledge of the secret passageways in the palace, many long forgotten, we made our way outside without difficulty. Some of the brethren were waiting for us there, and took us to the catacombs.

“Have you rescued anyone else from the dungeons that way?” I wondered.

He shook his head, a look of pain passing briefly across his face. “We knew that, after it was done once, the cells would be heavily guarded. They will try to find out how we got inside, and may even find the secret door. Not using the passage to rescue any of the brethren being tortured there has been a source of great sorrow for me, but we all agreed it should be used only in an extreme situation. I left specific instructions that they would not use it to rescue me, but as there were others involved, I can’t really question it. I believe Tacitus has a great role to play in spreading the faith, once he accepts the fact.”

Despite his initial excitement about my revelation of his dream, Tacitus had since lapsed into the same brooding silence he had exhibited after his arrest. He was sitting in a corner of the room, his head down, and his chin on his chest. I didn’t think the time to interrupt him had come yet, so we just left him alone.

At the same time that the steward took me to the secret passage, another of the brethren had gone to warn my mother. She had left with nothing but the clothes on her back, and was spirited into the castle along the same route we used to escape. Her life of relative ease and security had come to an end, along with Bantal’s and Maritsa’s. She seemed almost cheerful about it, as if she were finally free to do something she hadn’t felt she could do before.

Just then, Garris, who had joined us in the cavern, spoke up for the first time. “I am concerned, brethren, that our hiding place here may not be secure much longer, even though it’s served us well for all these years. It’s only by God’s own grace that some patrol hasn’t discovered it, or that the location hasn’t been tortured out of one of the brethren. With Bantal’s arrest, we no longer have someone in high places to warn us of what might be coming against it.”

Bantal nodded. “The same thought has occurred to me, Brother Garris. Most of our leadership is down here now, and if we’re discovered, the results would be disastrous for the church here. What I don’t know is what we can do; no place in Tirezah is safe for us now.”

Something I had read in the Acts of the Apostles came to my mind. “Think of the church at Jerusalem, brethren. When they were persecuted by Saul, they scattered, many of them, and took the Gospel to other places. Beyond Tirezah, so far as we know, no one has carried the Gospel. My friends and I are planning on going on across the mountains to Berith, and we can spread the Good News there, but no one has gone west or to the east

either. Perhaps this is the time the Lord wants us to go share the Word with others who have never heard.”

There was silence for a while; everyone seemed to be lost in thought. My mother was the first to speak. “I’m going to Berith with you. I’ve been thinking and praying about it for years. Perhaps my husband, Lithnor, is still alive. I never actually saw him fall. Even if he has been long in the grave, though, I want to share the Gospel with my people.”

Marcus responded, but not exactly in the way I would have liked. “If we leave soon, we can still get there before the winter solstice. I haven’t given up on Hagath yet.”

I rolled my eyes in exasperation, and my mother’s face took on a pained expression. Bantal just ignored what he had said. “I must agree with what my young sister Lysia has said. There is much wisdom there. It will take more than the few of us here to make that decision, though. As dangerous as it is, we need to call a general assembly of the church. There is as much danger in traveling to those distant lands as there is in dealing with the Truth Police here. You, especially, will have a difficult path, Lysia, and all of those with you. The Parnath is already snowbound in the higher passes, and we are drawing close to winter.

“Let us send out the young men, Garris, and call an assembly of the brethren for tomorrow night. We have much to do, and much to consider.”

While they went about their tasks, I drew Marcus aside from the rest. I was not happy.

“Husband,” I said in an angry whisper, “is there no end to your greed? Can you not be content with what Christ has given you?”

His jaw took on that stubborn set I had come to despise so much. “I’ve waited all my life for an opportunity like this, and I’m not going to pass it up. I’m not doing anything wrong; that treasure doesn’t belong to anyone now, and I can put it to some really good uses.”

“It will do no good if you’re dead,” I replied. “Didn’t you hear what my mother said?”

“Yes, but I know there must be way, because they must have expected to come back at some point. All I need to do is find the way around all of the traps they’ve probably set. I’m not stupid, Lysia; I know there’s danger, but great risks can also bring great rewards.”

I prepared to reply, but just then there was a tug on my sleeve. One of the young men who served the brethren was standing there.

“Pardon, Sister Lysia,” he said apologetically, “but the man Tacitus wishes to speak to you.”

With a glare at my husband, who shrugged, I turned and followed the messenger. Tacitus was still sitting in the same place, but at least his head was raised to a normal angle, and his expression was alert.

“I have been thinking,” he said, “about all of the things those Christians at the palace told me, and what I’ve heard you all say. All of my life I’ve believed in the divinity of the Great Bear. I wanted to be a priest to serve him, and I never doubted the truth of what I was taught. In these past hours, though – it seems like days to me – I’ve realized that the

Bear is, after all, only a man, not the all-seeing deity he claims to be. After all, if he were, he would have long since known about Bantal, and he would have recognized you as a Christian this evening. He knows only what his spies tell him, and what the priests want him to know.

“I know now that this Lord you serve, whom you call Jesus, has been trying to reach me for many years. There have been other dreams besides the one you mentioned, and many times different people have tried to open my eyes to the truth. I want to know this Jesus. Will you tell me how?”

Would I! For the next fifteen minutes, I sat down with him, and went through the plan of salvation, and the story of what Christ did for us. When I finished, and asked Tacitus to bow his head with me to pray, he did so without any hesitation. One look at his glowing face when I finished told me all I wanted to know.

Suddenly I was very, very tired. I had no idea if it were day or night, but it seemed an eternity since the banquet disaster. My mother and Maritsa had already sought out sleeping mats, and I wandered off to my own. Marcus was there beside me when I woke up, but I had no idea of when he joined me.

Bantal told me it was early afternoon, and that preparations were well underway for the meeting that night. It was obvious he had had no rest at all; he looked utterly exhausted. At my insistence, and Maritsa's, he went off for a few hours rest before the brethren began assembling together.

Tacitus had also fallen asleep, but he woke shortly after I did. We spent a long while talking about some of the details of what we believed, and he seemed to grasp quickly concepts I had great difficulty in explaining. Even though he no more had an explanation for the Trinity than I did, he accepted the reality of it without question. It was clear to me that he would have a role in safeguarding true doctrine for years to come; maybe it was for that reason the Lord had called him, along with his being a witness to the other priests of the Bear.

About fifty people appeared for the meeting. They by no means included all Christians in Tirzah, but they did represent all of the various local assemblies in the city. I was glad to see Andreas back again; he had been absent when we first returned from the palace. Some others were familiar to me, but many I had never seen before. Some of them were officers in the Bear's army, and a few were of the nobility. Tacitus was the only priest, and there were no longer any officials of the palace, though there were a number of well-placed servants. Tyria, the banquet steward who led me to the secret passage, was there, and she greeted me warmly.

After everyone was gathered, Andreas, who seemed to be the chief elder, began with a prayer, and immediately turned the meeting over to Bantal. The former librarian shared the story of his arrest and escape, and the story of Tacitus, whom he publicly acknowledged as his son for the first time. Tacitus himself was not yet ready to reciprocate his father's affection, but he did acknowledge his salvation, and his desire to share the Gospel with others of the priests. After he sat down following his brief speech, Bantal shared the main reason for the assembly.

There was some protest, but this came mostly from older brethren who protested, rightly, that they were too old to make long trips to distant lands. Bantal had an answer for them.

“Not all of us can, or will, leave,” he said patiently. “The church here must continue to exist, and it needs leaders. Some of us, though, can no longer serve here without constant danger of arrest and murder. I, for one, will be going north to Berith, but from there I will go either east or west as the Lord directs. Some will go south through the Kore and into the Mardath, and then east toward the barbarian lands. Others who feel called to go must make their own decisions, according to their own leading from God.”

After that the discussion centered on who would be going where, and who would stay. There was no doubt that Tacitus would be one of those remaining, and Andreas felt he could not desert his flock. Garris and Doria decided they would leave with Bantal and the rest of us, even though that would mean giving up their shop and home when they were in no immediate danger. What surprised me was Brutellas’s decision to go back to the Kore, until Mazi shared her own desire to return to her people. They had been talking about it, obviously. They would have to be married before they left, but that would be no problem for them or for us.

After the meeting ended, people began leaving in twos and threes, by different routes. There were many paths through the catacombs, and if some were caught by patrols, the rest could still escape safely.

Most people were gone by the time Mazi and Brutellas took Bantal aside. By his smiling response, I knew what they must have asked him. He called Andreas to join them, and the chief elder nodded and smiled as well. In moments, it was all arranged, and I expected we would be hearing an announcement of the upcoming wedding shortly. It didn’t come as soon as we expected.

One of the lookouts came running up to Andreas at just that moment. He spoke loudly enough, between gasps for breath, that I had no trouble hearing what he had to say.

“They’re coming! The patrols! You must get away now!”